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# The Good Soil Process: A Strategic Missional Process for American Institutional Churches

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE GOOD SOIL PROCESS:  
A STRATEGIC MISSIONAL PROCESS  
FOR AMERICAN INSTITUTIONAL CHURCHES

A SEMIOTICS AND FUTURE STUDIES  
TRACK 02 DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
KEITH TILLEY

NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

NOVEMBER 1, 2010

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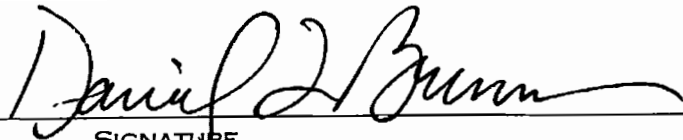
**KEITH TILLEY**

**DATE: NOVEMBER 2, 2010**


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**THE GOOD SOIL PROCESS:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGIC MISSIONAL PROCESS  
FOR AMERICAN INSTITUTIONAL CHURCHES**

***WE THE UNDERSIGNED CERTIFY THAT WE HAVE READ  
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FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY IN  
LEADERSHIP IN THE EMERGING CULTURE DEGREE***

  
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To Deb

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## ABSTRACT

### Audience

#### *Written Statement:*

Audience of Three: Expert dissertation advisor: Dr. Dan Brunner, Secondary advisor: Dr. Cliff Berger, and Tertiary advisor: Dr. Leonard Sweet.

The Primary Readers: Christian laity and clergy who are interested in learning about the increasing institutionalization of American mainstream denominations and the problems associated with maintaining such large corporations. They include those who have a burden for postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> century North America as a mission field and wish to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ effectively. The two project artifacts will specifically be contextualized for smaller to mid-size rural East Texas communities of faith. Much of the history and denominational traditions drawn upon in this written statement will be influenced by United Methodist heritage and experience but provided for a multi-denominational audience.

#### *Artifact:*

Primary Artifact: A self-published book, *The Good Soil Process: A Backyard Missional Field Guide*. It was written to be easy to understand, is approximately 140 pages long, and provides an organic model for a seasonal approach to effective missional disciple making. It follows the annual Christian calendar and leads followers of Jesus towards vibrant, adventurous lives of faith. The basic assumption of the book is that all of God's children are participants in God's amazing mission in the world. The book attempts to help the church reorient itself outward, as

missionaries in our own backyard. The four annual seasons of engagement are Discern, Design, Develop, and Delight.

Secondary Artifact: An informational website, [www.thegoodsoilprocess.com](http://www.thegoodsoilprocess.com). It is a tool for sharing successes and failures, as the Texas East District of the United Methodist Church attempts to bring about a missional paradigm shift among 107 fairly rural congregations spread out over 10,000 square miles. The hope is that the Good Soil Process will assist others beyond our district attempting to foster change in their particular contexts.

## Chapter 1: The Problem

1. Topic: A study of American culture and its relationship to the current decline evidenced in many smaller to mid-size institutional churches.
2. Research Question: What is the relationship between 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural changes in America and the current crisis of decline among many institutional churches?
3. Research Problem: To help readers better understand contemporary cross-cultural barriers that exist between American culture and American institutional churches.
4. Practical Problem: By gaining insight and practical skills my readers will more effectively incarnate and communicate the good news of Jesus Christ cross-culturally in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

## Chapter 2: Other Proposed Solutions

### New Church Starts:

- a. Innovative business church plants
- b. Restoration church plants
- c. Parachute church starts

d. Mother / Daughter church starts

e. Satellite church starts

Church Growth Programs:

a. Transformation

### Chapter 3: Thesis

I claim that American institutional churches need to be oriented around missional, relational, and incarnational practices in order effectively to incarnate and communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One way to accomplish this is by developing a simple, strategic missional process which seeks to foster paradigm change at a grassroots, local level through training which uses language, concepts and images that resonate culturally with a particular region or congregation.

1. The nature of institution tends to be inwardly focused such that maintenance often precedes mission and the goal becomes to ensure the survival of the institution rather than carrying out the mission of the Gospel. (Warrant: the mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be God's reconciling presence in the world. This is the fundamental goal of the church, and its survival is completely dependent upon fulfilling its mission).
2. Because of a rapid increase in multi-culturalism and secular pluralism in the United States many mainstream Christians are at a loss as to how to build relationships across cultural lines which tends to result in separation and division, the opposite of reconciliation. (Warrant: culture plays a fundamental role in the comprehension and communication of the good news of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is often hindered by cross-cultural boundaries)

## Chapter 4: Primary and Secondary Projects

The primary and secondary projects are multi-media tools: a book and a website which assist the implementation of a district-wide initiative, “The Good Soil Process.” The initiative focuses on approximately 107 smaller to mid-size rural congregations in the East District of the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The objective of the initiative is to assist willing local churches to engage in a grassroots movement of imaginative, cross-cultural, missional endeavors in their local communities. The East District “Good Soil” initiative incorporates coaching for local congregations, development of shared ministry models, support for unique ministry outreach, and the development of a Field Guide for small groups.

The primary artifact is *The Good Soil Process: A Backyard Missional Field Guide*, which is written to educate and motivate local small groups to view their immediate contexts with missional eyes, is written contextually for East Texans, and encourages the development of a practical process that leads small groups into cross-cultural relationships with their neighbors. The secondary artifact is an informative website, [www.thegoodsoilprocess.com](http://www.thegoodsoilprocess.com).

### *Rationale:*

Smaller to mid-size rural congregations are currently in a state of shock and fear as they witness the rapid decline of their congregations evidenced by an increase of average age and a decrease of attendance, baptisms and financial giving. Smaller congregations do not have the resources to hire outside consultants. District leadership is providing assistance, training, tools and empowerment at no cost. A primary goal is to free congregations from maintenance issues so that they can refocus on missional outreach in their communities and beyond

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

The church of Jesus Christ, after over 2,000 years of advancement among many of the diverse cultures of the world, has come to a critical juncture. Because of increasing globalization, the rapid advancements of technology and other factors, humanity is at the cusp of possibly the greatest cultural shift in history. Futurist Leonard Sweet says:

We are on the verge of another culture-shaping, value-changing renaissance. Planet Earth is entering one of the most exuberantly creative periods in all of history, a period of artistic and intellectual exploration and discovery. Whether or not we will turn these ‘best years’ into a New Renaissance depends on the choices we make in the next few years.<sup>1</sup>

The church, especially in the west, is experiencing the need for a major paradigm shift in order to survive and hopefully thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> There is a growing consensus among many Christian leaders from diverse traditions that the postmodern global church must come together, learn from one another’s diversity, and diligently work to seek the answers to these questions: What does it mean to be a missional church in a postmodern western context? And what is the theological basis for a missional ecclesiology?<sup>3</sup> The hope behind this written statement is that by rediscovering and pursuing a vision of Jesus’ original calling and mission for His church, contemporary followers will be better equipped to deal with the increasing problems that come

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard I. Sweet, *Soulsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999), 108-109.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Theology for a Missionary Church,” *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 1 (1998): 3.

<sup>3</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “Birthing Missional Faithfulness: Accents in a North American Movement,” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 365 (2003): 145.



with blindingly rapid cultural shifts and burdensome institutionalism within the contemporary western church.<sup>4</sup>

This written statement is a study of American culture and its relationship to the current decline evidenced in many smaller to mid-size institutional churches. In the year 2010, what is the relationship between 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural changes in America and the current crisis of decline among many institutional churches? After a brief explanation of the problem, the reader will explore some recent attempts by institutional churches meant to address this rapid decline and discover why the author believes these efforts have not solved the problem. Next, some current cultural barriers contributing to the steady decline of the 21<sup>st</sup> century American institutional church will be articulated, followed by a proposal of some paradigm shifts necessary for engaging postmodern American culture effectively.

The Good Soil Process as developed in this written statement is an attempt to address the current disconnect between many American institutional churches and contemporary culture. As a pastor in rural East Texas, the decline evidenced in nearly all American institutional congregations and denominations, is glaringly obvious in the smaller to mid-size faith communities. What is the relationship between 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural changes in America and the current crisis of decline among many institutional churches? Recognition of the barriers that exist between culture and church will make it easier for those in rural congregations to identify with their neighbors and to intentionally cross cultural barriers to form genuine relationships. The church is called to effectively incarnate and communicate the good news of Jesus Christ among every people group in every time and place. It is imperative that Christ's church always maintain a missional posture as bearers of the Gospel. Among whatever culture God's children

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<sup>4</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Emergent YS; Zondervan, 2004), 32-35.

may dwell, with the Holy Spirit's supernatural assistance gathering insights and practical skills Christians can and must effectively incarnate and communicate the good news of Jesus Christ cross-culturally.

## CHAPTER 2:

### OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

#### New Church Starts

As problems of numerical and financial decline have begun to plague local denominational churches, the managing institutions, which exist for and are funded by those local churches, are struggling as well. Most certainly the function of the denominational institutions is to manage the assemblies of believers or churches in each particular tradition in a way that provides guidance, support, assistance and structure for the health and good of the body of Christ. As management of current crises loom over the institutions of the church, many proposed solutions have been advanced in order to attempt to slow the tide of decline, and even to turn the ecclesial ship around to create new growth and vibrancy. It is notable that with an eye on the historical horizon of the global church, this is certainly not the first crisis experienced, and likely will not be the last.

Most contemporary efforts of reviving the church have been focused upon reaching out to those distanced from the church or reaching the unchurched in new and creative ways. Church planting is an historical and biblical means of creating new growth and reaching new populations for Christ. Both denominational and non-denominational churches have attempted many variations in recent years, and some have been successful. Ed Stetzer explains in a recent blog,

The past 20 years have produced radical changes in how churches are planted. Success rates are increasing. A 2007 North American Mission Board study assessing multidenominational church-plant survivability rates shows how 99 percent of church plants now survive their first year, 92 percent survive their second year, 81 percent survive their third, and 68 percent survive their fourth. These are encouraging statistics, especially in light of pessimistic reports that '80 percent of church plants fail in the first

year.’<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, it is very common for institutional churches in America to restrict their outreach efforts to manageable and costly programs run by staff and volunteers. The program-driven church works hard to attract outsiders by providing meaningful “church/Christian” activities on site. These “attractional” efforts may take a variety of forms like vibrant, entertaining worship services or exciting youth and children’s activities. The primary goal of the attractional church method is to make others want to come visit and join the church because of the personal benefits. This is how the attractional church grows.

As an example of various attractional attempts, this chapter will highlight recent efforts of the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, which has dedicated large sums of money in recent years for starting new churches and developing church growth programs. An ambitious goal was proposed in 2006 by Bishop Janice Riggle Huie and budgeted by the conference to start ten new congregations per year for ten years. This aim proved to be unrealistic because of a shortage of new church start pastors. During the previous four years, the conference has actually averaged about three to five new church starts per year. According to the conference congregational excellence team, the average cost of starting a new church is about \$450,000. With these funds, training is provided for each church start pastor with intensive assessment of pastoral capability, a board of both laity and clergy are assigned to monitor and benchmark progress, do geographic studies, demographic studies, to purchase land and oversee building construction. Several models have been attempted around the Texas Conference including innovative business church plants such as coffee shops or restaurants, which have sought to reach beyond the mainstream church population. Restoration church plants located in

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Stetzer, “Equipping Church Planters for Success”, accessed August 21, 2010, <http://www.edstetzer.com/2009/08/equipping-church-planters-for.html>.

old movie theatres or even bars also seek to provide unique worship experiences. Parachute church starts which place a pastor in growing neighborhoods in an attempt to reach new communities have proven to be the most difficult to grow, stabilize and charter. Mother/daughter church starts have proven to be most effective, as they draw resources from a larger established congregation and extend ministry to other neighborhoods. Satellite church starts are also becoming more popular with the rise of video technologies that allow a popular pastor to share a common preaching message among a variety of unique worship environments like cowboy style worship, coffee shop worship, and so forth.

While not all of the creative new church starts by the Texas Annual Conference have been successful, many of them have been and they make a notable difference statistically. According to Bishop Janice Riggle Huie, as of June 2010, worship attendance, professions of faith and missions involvement have shown to be considerably higher among the new church starts than among the older, established congregations that generally continue in steady decline.<sup>2</sup> Because of the growth of the new church starts, for now, the influx of new members into the institution is countering the loss of old members who are leaving or dying.

It is important to note that the new church start funds are derived from apportionments drawn annually from declining congregations around the Texas Conference area. And yet, most new churches are planted in the Houston metroplex area, where large quantities of people reside. In the Texas East District, which is primarily rural, church start apportionments have been sent to Houston year after year, but no new churches have been started in east Texas. As of July of 2010, \$150,000 was finally awarded to a church restart in the small town of Douglass, Texas, which is building a new multi-purpose worship center due to growth. Nonetheless, the average

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<sup>2</sup> Heard during the Bishop's address to the Texas Annual Conference, June 1, 2010 at Woodlands United Methodist Church.

new church investment for the annual conference remains around \$450,000. The disproportionate distribution of new church start funds among urban vs. rural church starts is an important issue to acknowledge.

Another issue that needs to be illustrated regarding the Texas Conference new church start policy is the primary understanding that a church must own a building to exist. There are many successful models of church, outside of the United Methodist institution that focus on relational discipleship, meet in homes as small groups or cells, organically reproduce and spend the majority of funds collected on mission and outreach. As a matter of fact, this is very close to what the early Methodist Church of the 1700-1800's looked like, as people worshipped together in homes, barns and even fields. The average investment for starting new churches could be much less than \$450,000. More churches could be started and more people reached if the emphasis was upon networking, quality discipleship, leadership development, and missional outreach rather than developing beautiful buildings and programs to attract consumers. If one of the benchmarks for chartering a new church were not a worship attendance of 200, then churches without buildings would be freed up to network and grow organically rather than striving to gather a large number for a worship service each week. Justification for existence should not be limited to whether a congregation has 200 worshipping each week or not.

Another way of developing new church starts in the Texas Conference with less investment would be to experiment with tent-making ministries where ordained clergy and lay church leaders are encouraged to pursue bi-vocational church starts. This would allow leaders to connect and network in the workplace, rather than setting them up in a location that resembles a business model with the goal of drawing in customers. A tent-making model would fit culturally well in rural areas, should the United Methodist Church seriously consider this approach.

Admittedly, there is a need for church starts that own buildings in some contexts, but it is important that the institutional church not limit itself to a building-centric model of starting churches. Institutional churches tend to work very hard at maintaining standardized, controlled measures for ministry and as a result quite often prove overly inflexible when it comes to innovation.

### Church Growth Programs

New church starts are necessary, but what of the older, “traditional” or even “contemporary” worship style congregations that are rapidly in decline? Because of the emphasis the last thirty or so years upon mega-church growth models, many congregations are finding themselves strapped with large building complexes. Utilities, insurance, debt and routine maintenance prove overwhelming. Without lots of volunteers and healthy giving, maintaining these vast structures is impossible.

Millions of dollars have been spent in the Texas Annual Conference in recent years in efforts to revitalize and revamp existing congregations. *Transformation* is a conference-wide initiative, which provides a church growth program intended to lead congregations toward an increase in fruitfulness. The effort has had some impact, but mostly in the areas of welcoming, hospitality and signage around buildings. In all honesty, the conference has discovered that the money spent on public relations, outside consultants, resource materials, travel, meetings, and so on has not really translated into numerical or qualitative growth. The other downside experienced by the conference regarding *Transformation* was how the local churches interpreted it as a top-down conference mandated program that forced congregations to invest thousands of dollars. Because the model used was drawn directly out of the church growth / mega-church movement of the 1990's, much of what was required of local congregations made them feel guilty if they

were not large churches. The perception was that by *Transformation* standards, a healthy church was measured by numbers, whereas many smaller to mid-size congregations measure fruitfulness much more relationally. An untrue negative perception many smaller congregations assumed was that the conference considered them irrelevant, and was trying to shut them down.

While church starts are certainly vital and core to the Gospel, and while congregational transformation programs are helpful in many cases, one must weigh the costs of investment by church institutions in order to provide these methods and programs. Should the institution be the driving force behind church growth, mission and health, or should local congregations be the ones starting churches, and investing themselves in growth and mission? Does the conference really need to spend millions of dollars to start churches and breathe new life into existing assemblies? Is that the best stewardship of God's assets? This written statement suggests that an overarching governing agency or institution is not necessarily needed to reach the 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture with the good news of Jesus Christ. Perhaps at times, although with the best of intentions, the institution can actually get in the way of local Kingdom outposts and their outreach to their neighbors.



CHAPTER 3  
THESIS: PART 1  
APPRECIATE THE MISSION FIELD FOR GOD'S GLORY

Part 1 Introduction:  
Seven Cultural Barriers

The chapter that follows will develop the claim that American institutional churches need to be oriented around missional, relational and incarnational practices in order to effectively communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in both word and deed. First, an explanation of seven cross-cultural conflicts that currently provide relational barriers between American culture and the institutional church will be provided. Once an appreciation of the cultural barriers is established, then an understanding of four necessary paradigm shifts for the institutional church will be developed. Current ecclesial and practical thinking of the institutional church must change in order to successfully communicate the Gospel cross-culturally in local communities. This chapter will also provide reasoning for the usefulness of a tool that provides a simple, strategic missional process for small groups. The tool will foster paradigm change at a grassroots, local level through biblical training which uses language, concepts and images that resonate culturally with a particular region or congregation.

Because the nature of institution tends to be inwardly focused such that maintenance often precedes mission, there is need today for an outward reorientation and tools that assist Christians in understanding culture shifts taking place in America. When cultural conflict arises, a tendency for institutions is to emphasize differences, justify its position and independently protect itself for survival. Quite often, the goal of institutional churches becomes continued

existence rather than carrying out the mission of the Gospel. The mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be God's reconciling presence in the world. This is the fundamental goal of the church, and its survival and validity are completely dependent upon fulfilling its mission.

A recent rapid increase of multi-culturalism and secular pluralism in the United States has left many institutionalized Christians at a loss as to how to build relationships across cultural lines. The result is separation and division between those within a particular Christian culture and others. This position is the opposite of reconciliation. Culture plays a fundamental role in the comprehension and communication of the good news of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is often hindered by cross-cultural boundaries.

### Barrier 1

#### Western Culture is Postmodern and Pluralistic

Every society has a worldview or culture that rules and governs the way people think, behave, and view the social order around them. A worldview is generally something that is not obvious to those within the social system, not usually recognized or seen, but rather a set of unspoken expectations, rules or ways of thinking which are indoctrinated or taught to all in the society from their earliest days. While every culture maintains a particular worldview, every worldview is rather organic and in constant flux. Over a period of many years, often centuries, the rules change, language changes, society changes. This is what has been happening in western nations like Europe, Australia, and North America. During the life of the church in the west, there have been basically three major eras that we recognize today: the pre-modern era of medieval western Europe, the modern era of Enlightenment thinking, and now the post-modern

era.<sup>1</sup> Each of these worldviews evolved slowly out of the previous one, usually causing quite a disturbance in the social order. Robert Webber notes, “In each of these periods of history, Christianity wrestled with unique sets of philosophical, scientific, and cultural factors. Throughout history Christians have always struggled to incarnate the faith in each particular culture.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Heath White of Georgetown University, the primary cause of the shifting of worldviews is the questioning of authority and tradition.<sup>3</sup> Before the Protestant Reformation in the 1500’s, the pre-modern world was governed by a hierarchical framework, with kings and lords ruling over feudal society, and popes and bishops ruling over Christendom.<sup>4</sup> This was the traditional way of life; since most commoners were uneducated with very little or no rights, this model was rarely questioned until Martin Luther and other reformers took a stand against the authorities of the past. Over time, people like Copernicus, Galileo and Newton questioned the ancient Aristotelian models of the universe, and Descartes and Locke questioned humanity’s philosophical understandings, and came to the conclusion that our deepest questions could be answered with the reasoning power of the human mind.

Scholars refer to the beginning of the modern era as “the Enlightenment,” because of the pervasive belief that all of society’s problems could be solved by using human reason. During this period there was an “increasing emphasis on the rights of the individual,” and with that many profound changes began to take place.<sup>5</sup> “The ultimate goal was a prosperous, happy,

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<sup>1</sup> Heath White, *Post-Modernism 101* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 13.

<sup>3</sup> White, *Post-Modernism 101*, 23-27.

<sup>4</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1 The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984), 222-375.

<sup>5</sup> White, *Post-Modernism 101*, 32.

peaceful society, constructed on the basis of a scientific understanding of humanity.”<sup>6</sup> As a result of the cultural emphasis upon reason and personal happiness, worship services in the church changed profoundly, as the liturgy focused less on the supernatural corporate gathering of the Lord’s Supper as the climactic event, but now emphasized the sermon as the most important element, with an emphasis on teaching and improving individuals through a lecture format. With the rejection of traditional authority a prominence was placed on individual freedoms and the natural ability for the average person to think things through on their own. The increased importance that modernity placed upon the freedom of the individual to reason for him or herself carried with it many ramifications for the church. Heath White defines, “faith in the power of reason (as) the central pillar of the modern worldview.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, over time, modernity changed the locus of faith from placing one’s trust in authority (i.e., God, church, and community) to trusting primarily in one’s personal ability to reason and think as an individual.

Lesslie Newbigin, an internationally respected British theologian, missionary, and apologist, points out that the result of the modern emphasis upon reason led to the general acceptance of science as the final word regarding truth. All reasonable people should accept the facts produced by science, and “the one who does not accept them is the real heretic.”<sup>8</sup> What has happened, according to Newbigin, is that miracles and any supernatural occurrences presented in the Bible or as the personal experience of Christian believers are considered impossible according to the modern scientific method, and thus heretical.<sup>9</sup> The way religion has been dealt with by modern society is to relegate faith to the private realm, and prohibit faith from the public

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986). 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

sector. If one's beliefs do not fall under the category of factual by scientific consensus, then those beliefs are deemed personal and thus permissible if kept to oneself, but must be separated from the rest of realistic society's beliefs.<sup>10</sup> And the modern church has bought into this worldview for the most part, slinking back into the private realm and in many cases accepting the judgments of the scientific community regarding the supernatural. Newbigin goes so far as to suggest that what was once imagined to be a secular society has now actually become a pagan society, "and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the Gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time."<sup>11</sup>

As modern, secular, western cultures have moved through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, another major shift in worldview has been taking place in virtually all areas of social and political life. White describes the shifts this way: "Premoderns placed their trust in authority. Moderns lost their confidence in authority and placed it in human reason instead. Postmoderns kept the modern distrust of authority but lost their trust in reason and have found nothing to replace it with. This is the crux of postmodern thought."<sup>12</sup> Without confidence in authority, nor trust in reason, there appears to be a sense that anything goes, or nothing goes. In his book *Humble Apologetics*, John G. Stackhouse Jr. says that the result is a pluralistic society, and describes several levels of pluralism, most of which are harmless. The author then describes the dangers of radical pluralism as relativism, where "no single option among the available varieties in a pluralistic situation can be judged superior to others."<sup>13</sup> The progression goes like this:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>12</sup> White, *Post-Modernism* 101, 41.

<sup>13</sup> John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: University Press, 2002).

1. Everything is beautiful. (has worth / value)
2. All the good options are good - and we say which ones. (pseudorelativistic)
3. There is no way to tell good from evil. (skepticism)
4. There is no “good” or “evil.” (Nihilism – no universal standard)<sup>14</sup>

If one takes the logic of these arguments to their obvious conclusions, one can see how morals can quickly degrade into non-existence.

Modern Christians are having a very difficult time realizing and accepting that the world around them has changed, and the church in the west now abides in a foreign, post-modern, post-Christendom society. Granted, this is a simplistic explanation of the cultural shifts of pre-modernism, modernism, and post-modernism, but it should be clear that the church cannot exist in a secular vacuum, in some private realm off by itself. A paradigm shift is needed. The good old modern days of logically reasoning the benefits of the Gospel are gone.<sup>15</sup> Today, postmoderns will respond best not to arguments, but to authentic, humble, and incarnational relationships where followers of Jesus come alongside and befriend the unchurched without any preconceived expectations of conversion. Life must be lived fully and openly, and love must be offered without strings attached.

#### Barrier 2:

#### A Complicated Multicultural World

With the advent of Internet technologies the global community has become a local community. Whereas the church was once the center of the social population, today the Internet provides a neighborhood for people who are busier now than any people ever in the history of the world. The amount of knowledge available to anyone with a computer and Internet port is vast and growing at an amazing rate. The world has suddenly become a very complicated place

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5-11.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Grenz and John Frank, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 15-16.

with answers to almost any question only a Google search away. The church is no longer the central source of wisdom and practical advice for living in society today. If anything, the church either appears extremely outdated and out of touch with culture, or as if they are trying way too hard to be relevant. There is a common experience of a seeming lack of authenticity and hypocrisy among churchgoers that taints the opinions of younger generations, and so the church has lost its attraction for many postmoderns.<sup>16</sup>

But there are secular gurus out there beyond the church who are listening to the heartbeat of the culture, and providing advice to those suffering from the effects of a frenetically paced world. There is a rising interest in all things spiritual and growing recognition of a connection between mind and spirit. Language that was traditionally used in the church is now resurfacing and being implemented by authors like C. Otto Scharmer in his book “Theory U, Leading from the Future as it Emerges.” His slogan, “Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will,” sounds as if it was directly borrowed from the United Methodists. The author’s “journey to ‘U’” exhibits many spiritual characteristics, and as he shares the concept of a circle gathering and the presence of a “circle Being” his language sounds very reminiscent of spiritual formation cell groups in the Christian tradition.

Because there are so many today seeking life directions but unwilling to trust the church which seems so culturally disconnected, many authors are filling the niche and helping shape understandings of what it means to be human in a complicated world. Daniel Pink defines six senses that should be developed to live full and happy lives in a conceptual age: design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning.<sup>17</sup> The author takes on the very real threat of corporate

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<sup>16</sup> Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 8-9.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 65-67.

outsourcing, explaining it away as simply a natural element of the development of a major economy, and suggests we embrace the changes rather than react with fear.<sup>18</sup> Why is it that the church seems to be silent on so many of these issues that are very real for people today? Author Howard Gardner also attempts to equip 21<sup>st</sup> century pilgrims for the massive changes taking place by offering suggestions as to how to cultivate one's mind in a holistic way in order to become a full and complete human being with much to offer society.<sup>19</sup>

The church must recognize the negative perceptions that are limiting its attractiveness to postmoderns. Christians are perceived by many as “Left Behinders,” unconcerned about the problems of this world, looking only to a future hope of escapism to heaven. In his book “The Creation,” E.O. Wilson paints a negative picture of Christians as indifferent about “the great challenge of the twenty-first century... to raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life as possible.”<sup>20</sup> And John Gray in “Black Mass” blames ideologies of Christian utopianism for events like the 9/11 terrorist attacks and compares right-wing conservative Christians to religious zealots.<sup>21</sup> If ever there were a time for followers of Jesus to pay attention to their neighbors and how they are perceived by them, this is that time. And yet, modern Christians are having a very difficult experience realizing and accepting that the world around them has changed. Rather than offering a standard set of faith propositions, which can be logically taken for granted, the church must begin to engage the people of the world where they are, relationally rather than propositionally. Unless Christians earn the trust of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), 153-158.

<sup>20</sup> E.O. Wilson, *The Creation, An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 6.

<sup>21</sup> John Gray, *Black Mass, Apocalyptic Religion and The Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 116-120.



postmoderns the message of Jesus will be rejected outright as entirely too limited and restrictive. The language of love will speak louder to postmoderns than a good logical argument or an authoritative colonial offering of cookie-cutter ways to dress and act Christian. The church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can and must incarnate the Gospel of Jesus Christ among those who know Him not, and do so relationally, lovingly, and humbly.<sup>22</sup>

### Barrier 3:

#### Attractional, Propositional, Colonial Modality

As the church steps forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it stands poised at the cusp of a cultural shift unlike any in the previous 2,000 years. The changes that are rapidly occurring everywhere are of global proportions, as technology virtually moves the world's pilgrims into each others' backyards, and cultures and faiths bump and grind against one another seeking to find peace and a place to settle. Many within the church are slowly coming to a realization that the old modernistic institutional ways of interacting with a rapidly changing postmodern world are no longer working. According to futurist Leonard Sweet in his book *So Beautiful*, the church must progress from an APC (Attractional, Propositional, and Colonial) mode of operations to a more organic MRI (Missional, Relational, and Incarnational) existence within the global community.<sup>23</sup> The necessary shift will not be easy for the modern institutionalized western church. As the church loses much of its clout, power and respect in an increasingly secularized world, it is likely that the colonialism that marked the previous century's missional movement will diminish offering a natural shift to a more incarnational approach to ministry. The cultural ramifications of

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<sup>22</sup> Mike Slaughter, *Change the World: Recovering the Mission and Message of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Len Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2009).

postmodern thought are quickly dismantling the old propositional ways of engaging the world demanding necessarily relational humility regarding faith and other important issues.<sup>24</sup> Debating and arguing someone into belief (apologetics) is more likely to build resistance to the Gospel today rather than receptiveness. While moving from propositional/colonial modes to relational/incarnational approaches of engaging the world will not be easy, the most difficult shift for the western institutional church will likely be the move from an attractional position in society to that of sent out servants in mission.

The spark that lit the church on fire was set off by the arrival of the Holy Spirit among a group of Jesus' followers gathered in prayer in a small room in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. Just as the resurrected Jewish teacher and messiah had promised, the Spirit had come: "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have told you about this before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:45). Jesus also explained prior to the day of Pentecost what this sign was all about: "But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). As Abraham was promised by God so many years before, to be blessed in order to be a blessing to all the people groups of the earth, the arrival of the Holy Spirit and empowering of Jesus' disciples was to be understood as the next step in God's mission to bring salvation and restoration through Abraham and his seed Jesus Christ to the whole of creation.

The term "missional" will be used in this written statement to express a unified purpose and motivation of the church to act holistically and intentionally as disciples of Jesus Christ who make other disciples of Jesus Christ. A missional understanding of church stresses the action

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<sup>24</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), 155.

required of every baptized member who is called and sent into the world by Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit for God's redemptive purposes. The earliest gathering of disciples or church of Jesus Christ began as a missional reconciliation movement of God. As mentioned previously, the term "attractional" describes the church's expectation that the people of the world would generally be drawn to a particular location where trained clergy provide an experience to share in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Had the friends of Jesus merely stayed in that upstairs room in the large city of Jerusalem hoping that all the nations of the earth would come to them, the incredible spread of the Christian faith would not have happened at that time, at least not through them. But because the early church saints chose to go into the streets of Jerusalem with the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, and later to take that news to the gentiles, the greatest missional movement of faith in the history of the world occurred over the next 300 years.<sup>25</sup>

The phenomenon of the attractional church, as we know it, did not fully come into being until the last few decades or so. And yet with an eye on western history, there was a progression that helped lead the church towards its recent competitive consumerist mindset. The Roman Emperor Constantine institutionalized the church around 300 A.D., making Christianity the standard religion of Rome and any of its conquests.<sup>26</sup> From that point forward, with a few amazing missional exceptions, the church became united with the state and the standard religion of the Roman world. Roman citizenship and Christianity became synonymous. Pagan basilicas were transformed into places of worship run by an extra-ordinary "ordained" group of professional Christian individuals set apart as clergy.<sup>27</sup> The average second-class Christian

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<sup>25</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books). 54-55.

<sup>26</sup> Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity. Vol. 1*, 124-128.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church, Pursuing The Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 160.

citizen was expected to come regularly to the church building to receive the standard ministries: worship, sacraments, offerings, education, marriage and funerals. The church building and what it represented became the central icon of the social culture among the Christian nations, and the architectural development of towns and cities revealed this reality. Church cathedrals were often the grandest and most ornate structures in town, and located geographically central, usually on the Main Street or town square. Granted, this is an extreme simplification of a much more complex phenomenon; nonetheless, over the period of almost two millennia, the Roman Catholic Church and its constituents have practiced a very centralized religion that focused on services rendered at a place of worship.

Arguably, the independent spirit of the Protestant Church, even as it divided from the Roman Catholic Church, still continued on with the basic model of a professional clergy (Catholic priest - Protestant pastor) and a building-centric structure. Once the Word of God was unprotected by the Catholic hierarchy and in the hands of all Christians, interpretations of the Bible varied and competition between rival doctrines became the norm. This led to the development of church states, and later denominations. The colonial conquering of the New World by “Christian” European nations provided a missional sense of existence for the church that was still wrapped up in the building and clergy centric clothes of the institutional church.<sup>28</sup> In the early years of the United States, both Catholics and Protestants of all traditions entered the race westward to establish attractional churches in every province and city available. Once again, the church organizations and their buildings became the center of the social and geographical construct of these newly formed communities. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was no more room to build churches in America, and so began the worldwide missional push to build churches in

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<sup>28</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 226-230.

every nation and complete the “Great Commission.”<sup>29</sup> Fast forward to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and add to the mix the steady decline of institutional churches over the last 40 years, American consumerism and the mega-church growth movement of the 1980’s and 1990’s, and the result is the phenomenon of “attractional” church. The underlying philosophy is that bigger, better buildings, programs, music and preachers will draw people in so that they will find salvation in Jesus. The church must continue to attract in order to fuel the machine.

The church, although understood theologically as a universal and mysterious connection of brothers and sisters in Christ, became confused over time with an identified central location or building which functioned as “God’s House” and provided religious and social services. In general, Temple worship became integrated into the Christian life and practice and the priesthood of all believers, which the Apostle Peter had spoken of, became a forgotten doctrine.<sup>30</sup> It is important to recognize that a practical, attractional understanding of God and Christ’s Church did not exist during the early missional years of the church. Prior to 300 A.D. and Constantine, followers of Jesus met together in homes, fields and catacombs and trusted that wherever they went Jesus’ Spirit was with them because each member of the Body of Christ was a temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup> The attraction of the early Christian faith was not to the beauty of a building, or services offered by professional clergy, but rather to a powerful counter-cultural relational forgiving love that pointed to the reality of a loving God on a mission to redeem a broken world. By far, the most tempting thing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church to do is hide behind its temple walls and stained glass windows from a complicated global society and its negative perceptions. But church is more than that.

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<sup>29</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1985), 394.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Peter 2:5-10.

<sup>31</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 10-11.

## Barrier 4:

## Modern Institutional Denominationalism

There is a growing consensus among church leaders that one of the primary problems that the western church is experiencing is the modern dilemma of the institutional model of denominations.<sup>32</sup> Although denominationalism is a term used primarily in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe Protestant institutional assemblies, the earliest roots of the idea is traceable to the 1600's when the Westminster Confession of Faith incorporated the idea that several churches, despite disunity, were part of the true church. "Particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and publick worship performed more or less purely in them."<sup>33</sup>

Denominationalism as we know it is a fairly new phenomenon for the Christian church, according to missiologist Craig Van Gelder, and actually arose with the forming and shaping of the United States. Prior to the discovery of the New World, most churches were state churches, which mandated the faith of those who lived within their territory (e.g., Scottish Presbyterians, Roman Catholic, Dutch Reformed, Church of England, and German Lutheran).<sup>34</sup> Many of the immigrants to North America in the 1600's and 1700's were leaving as members of a state church, or were escaping religious persecution from a state church.<sup>35</sup> The New World was quite different from the countries the immigrants had come from, for in most places there were a wide variety of faith traditions worshipping near one another. "The shared experience of religious

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 13-16.

<sup>33</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Westminster Assembly, 1646.

<sup>34</sup> Craig Van Gelder, "Rethinking Denominations and Denominationalism in Light of a Missional Ecclesiology," *Word & World* 25, no. 1 (2005), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2*, 219.

diversity throughout the colonies required a new imagination of how to conceive of the church and how to organize congregations.”<sup>36</sup>

Two main elements were incorporated into the DNA of the newly organized church structures within the United States: a free-church ecclesiology derived from the Anabaptists and “an important feature of the new society in the colonies (which) was the voluntary association.”<sup>37</sup> The First Amendment to the United States Constitution reads “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .” which provided legal protection for the various church assemblies from a ruling state church and ensured the practice of religious freedom.<sup>38</sup> Van Gelder explains that by 1800, most of the newly formed denominations had established an organizational identity, with national, regional and local structures, each with a clear identity and purpose, as any organization must have.<sup>39</sup>

As time went on, the volunteer organizational denominations began to differentiate themselves more and more from their “competitors” through doctrine, practice and theological distinctives and clarified more clearly what their particular goals were. Many set their sights on expanding quickly and building new churches as the frontier moved west. Rapid growth ensued, which brought with it increasing levels of bureaucracy: boards and agencies, and increasing numbers of staff. As the denominational machines grew, business models and theory began to be incorporated into the administration of the institutions. Craig Van Gelder uses consumer language to describe the corporate model churches,

Their identity, based on an organizational self-understanding, was now coming to full expression as the good life of the American dream was packaged and commoditized as

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<sup>36</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “From Corporate Church to Missional Church: The Challenge Facing Congregations Today,” *Review & Expositor* 101, no. 3 (2004), 429.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>38</sup> Van Gelder, “Rethinking Denominations,” 26.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

the suburban ideal. This life was an ideal to which millions aspired, but which was mostly realized by the emerging white middle class.<sup>40</sup>

The cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, brought a loss of loyalty among the boomer generation toward institutions, and this generation left the church in mass, and few have returned.<sup>41</sup> The denominational franchise models began falling apart, and since the 1970s, mainline denominations in particular have experienced a continual downsizing of members, and an increase in average age. There have been attempts at resurrection through “a host of market-driven models of church and renewal movements,” but nothing seems to stem the tide and slow the leaking of the ship.<sup>42</sup> Frost and Hirsh state: “Christendom has moved Christianity into a maintenance mode.”<sup>43</sup>

Now, the western church is facing the need for a tremendous paradigm shift, which will provide guidance and direction for followers of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The burden of institutionalism and a continued modern worldview that permeates the life and ministry of denominations today are limiting the ability of congregations to reach the postmodern cultures surrounding them. Many church leaders agree that what must be done is not going to be easy, and may not even be possible within the structures of current institutional denominationalism. The DNA of these institutions appears to be set: “a functional approach to ecclesiology and polity still undergirds the basic identity of the denominational, organizational church.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>41</sup> Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 48-57.

<sup>42</sup> Van Gelder “Rethinking Denominations,” 29.

<sup>43</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Van Gelder “Rethinking Denominations,” 30.



## Barrier 5:

### Cultural Amnesia and Negative Perceptions

With dramatic cultural shifts happening globally and particularly in the western cultures, the church must come to grips with the reality that things have changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The truth is that not only in Europe and Australia, but also in the United States, those age 35 and below actively involved in church life have become a rarity.<sup>45</sup> It is notable that the worldwide Christian church is no longer dominated by white, Anglo westerners. Studies indicate that in recent years, church attendance in the west has all but crumbled and is diminishing at “an estimated rate of 6,000 church members a day.”<sup>46</sup> Hanciles predicts that if the decline continues with this pattern “60 percent of all existing Christian congregations in America will disappear before the year 2050”.<sup>47</sup>

The common refrain heard in many local congregations is, “Where are all of the young people?” Theologian Viggo Mortensen describes our current culture as post-Christian, as many of the younger generations have lost the collective Christian memory, and actually suffer from a form of “cultural amnesia.”<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, young adults have not given up the spiritual quest and are searching for spiritual fulfillment in other avenues like consumerism, materialism, sports, entertainment and alternative religions. The predominant question of the older, settled, staunchly traditional institutions, as well as the seeker-friendly mega-churches is, “Why don’t they look in the church?” The answer is clearly that the western institutional church has become a foreign culture to the majority of young adults, one that seems out of touch with the reality of the

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<sup>45</sup> Slaughter, *Change the World*, xiv.

<sup>46</sup> Hanciles, “Beyond Christendom,” *Studies in World Christianity* 10, no. 1 (2004): 95.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>48</sup> Viggo Mortensen, “What Is Happening to Global Christianity?”, *Dialog* 43, no. 1 (2004): 24.

contemporary culture and the Christian faith, and has no appeal to them whatsoever.<sup>49</sup> Younger generations will no longer blindly accept the traditions and religion of the past. In a postmodern world, every assumption is challenged, critiqued and deconstructed. When asked the question “why?” it is no longer acceptable to answer, “Because that is the way we have always done it.” It is notable that even the denominational institutions in the west are stricken with cultural amnesia when asked to explain many of the current traditions, budgets, maintenance routines, and rituals and how they relate to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not bode well with emerging young adults.

Although the number of un-churched people has increased, most westerners do see themselves as religious. Recently studies have been conducted and published which seek to discern what the missing “emerging” generations think about the Christian faith. The responses can be startling. In Dan Kimball’s book, *They Like Jesus, But Not the Church*, he chronicles his friendship and conversations with several non-Christians and poses to the western church their blunt opinions about the church and Christians. Kimball points out that in almost every case, when asked what they thought about Jesus, the responses were overwhelmingly positive and even adoring, but when asked what they thought about the church and Christians, the attitudes and responses shifted primarily to negative. What the author found was that most of the negative impressions were cultural and had nothing to do with Jesus or the Gospel. Some of the main thoughts emerging generations had about the church are that “it is organized religion with a political agenda, judgmental and negative, dominated by males and oppresses females, homophobic, arrogantly claims all other religions are wrong, and is full of fundamentalists who

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<sup>49</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2007), 224.

take the whole Bible literally.”<sup>50</sup> Kimball acknowledges that these are in many cases unfair stereotypes, but it is vital that the church: (1) begin to listen with humility about how it is perceived by those in non-Christian cultures; (2) determine whether beliefs and practices communicate clearly the good news of Jesus; and (3) respectfully seek to build relationships that foster authenticity, trust and communication across cultures. In short, the church must take the stance and position of a missionary.

Interestingly, David Kinnaman of the Barna Group and Gabe Lyons of the Fermi Project report similar insights in their book, *Un-Christian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity...and Why it Matters*. The title “Un-Christian” is a reference to how those in the church are perceived by outsiders. Exhaustive statistical research reveals “outsiders” most common reaction to the faith: they think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind; that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be.”<sup>51</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons found that, overwhelmingly, the negative perceptions of those outside the church are “more than superficial image problems,” and are recognized by those within the church quite often as well.<sup>52</sup> Some of the primary issues raised were the fact that church as practiced today seem “hypocritical, with an emphasis only in ‘getting saved,’ anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental.”<sup>53</sup> In his day, Jesus railed on religious leaders for many of the same attitudes.

In light of these perceptions, if the western church is to begin to answer the question, “where are the young people?” the subject must be approached with humility, grace and a willingness to listen to others. American culture has changed. If current practices are

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<sup>50</sup> Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2007), 9.

<sup>51</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

communicating anything other than the good news of Jesus to those the church (and Jesus) seeks to embrace and invite into the reality of the Kingdom of God, then there is a need to reconfigure, or as Len Sweet says, “It is time to de-frag and re-boot.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, it can become disheartening if one simply views the current 21<sup>st</sup> century church from a western perspective. But, a cause to celebrate exists as one broadens one’s perspective and realizes a whole world of amazing things happening within the many cultures and diverse expressions of global Christianity. Vibrant Jesus movements are sweeping across the cultures of the earth, taking many forms, but with one essential, vital characteristic: Jesus is worshipped as Lord.

#### Barrier 6: Cultural Distance

A model developed by missiologist Dr. Ralph Winters for understanding international cross-cultural missions is helpful for comprehending what is happening in western countries today. His concept of “cultural distance” helps describe the cultural boundaries that must be overcome to effectively communicate the Gospel with others.<sup>55</sup> The more dissimilar the cultures from one’s own, the more barriers exist to connect relationally and incarnationally across cultures and thus communicate the Gospel message in a way that makes sense and is attractive. Identification and recognition of these distinctions and barriers can inform the church as we train, commission and send missionaries into reconciling ministries beyond the walls of our existing congregations.<sup>56</sup> Unless there are attempts to cross beyond cultural boundaries, those

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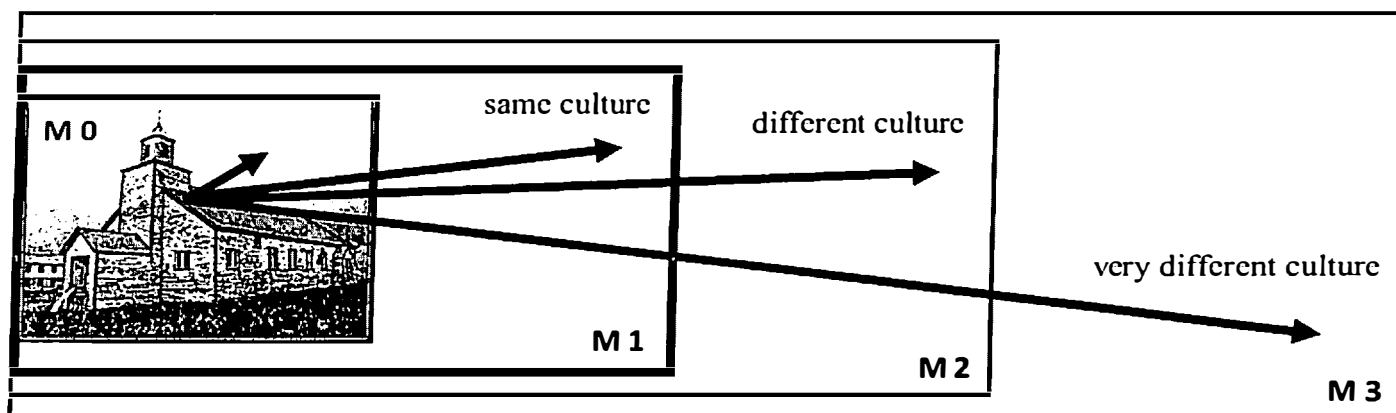
<sup>54</sup> Leonard Sweet, Comment made in class, Spring 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, “Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge,” *Perspective on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library). 510.

<sup>56</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1-11.

who have differing social and cultural values and structures will never learn the fullness of Jesus' message for the world.

\* The diagram below is adapted from the E-Scale/P-Scale presented by Dr. Winters.<sup>57</sup>



A hundred years ago in the United States, the majority of Americans resided in the M 1 category, as Christian biblical values were embraced culturally by the nation for the most part.<sup>58</sup> The American identity was wrapped up politically, socially, and religiously in a common understanding of the values of the 10 commandments, the golden rule, the Bible, Jesus, and the local “church” as the place one went to find God and get serious about things of faith. Granted, there were variations, but religious and political freedom was inextricably understood in a fairly Christian framework. But times have changed radically in the west, and postmodern secular pluralistic values are now the norm.<sup>59</sup> The Christian church population is rapidly becoming a minority in the United States, following on the heels of Europe and Australia.<sup>60</sup> While the church in the southern hemisphere of the world is exploding with growth, mainstream and non-

<sup>57</sup> Winter and Koch, “Finishing the Task,” 510.

<sup>58</sup> George Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 36.

<sup>59</sup> Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost, and John W. Morehead II, *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel), 17-22.

<sup>60</sup> Alan Hirsch, comment during presentation at Q Conference, April 27-29, Austin, TX.

denominational churches in the west are in rapid decline.<sup>61</sup> No longer does Christendom represent the normal values that characterize the western populations.

So, cultural distance, which used to be an overseas issue, solved by sending missionaries to other countries, has become a local issue. A large portion of Americans today are experiencing “cultural amnesia” and no longer understands traditional western Christianity, nor embraces the same values or trusts the institutional church.<sup>62</sup> Frankly, the diversity of cultures and people groups in one community can be overwhelming. The missional question that must be asked is: how will the church reach out in its own backyard to those in the M 2 and M 3 categories, whose cultures are very different? Recognition of the challenges ahead is a good start point, but only the beginning. Jesus met people where they were, he entered their world, got to know them, and through his relationship with them began to challenge and shape their understanding of God and their purpose in the world. Rather than expecting those in the M 2 and M 3 cultures to re-socialize and become M 0’s, Jesus expects the church to enter the cultural world of the other so God’s loving salvation can bring about individual and communal transformation.<sup>63</sup>

#### Barrier 7:

#### Missional Resistance

In every age, there seems to be a cycle of missional resistance where some have a vision for reaching those beyond the current cultural and social boundaries, and others within the institutional church feel threatened by such endeavors. Missional resistance is unfortunate, but a very genuine reality that seems to be played out over and over again in the life of the church. In

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<sup>61</sup> Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19-24.

<sup>62</sup> James Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2004), 18-22.

<sup>63</sup> Alan Hirsch, comment during presentation at Q Conference, April 27-29, Austin, TX.

the May 1, 2009 edition of *The United Methodist Reporter*, the national newspaper for this denomination gave front-page attention to a classic example of 21<sup>st</sup> century missional resistance.<sup>64</sup> On March 1, Bryson Butts, a church plant pastor of Grace Point United Methodist Church in Wichita, Kansas and most of its 700 members left the denomination as well as all of the properties and assets they had acquired for ministry use. Pastor Butts surrendered his credentials and simply walked away from the connection choosing to restart as a non-denominational congregation meeting in a high school gym. By Easter morning they had already increased to about 1,200 worshippers.<sup>65</sup> What happened and why?

Bishop Scott Jones supported the ministries of Grace Point as they reached out in unique ways with multiple sites to share Jesus with “young people who were alienated by the church.”<sup>66</sup> Butts said their goal was “to reach the kind of people other churches were not reaching, ‘the most messed-up, broken, hurting, (and) wounded people.’”<sup>67</sup> As the congregation sought to provide multiple locations and outreach initiatives around the large, diverse city of Wichita, they ran into complaints from many of the 13 established traditional/contemporary United Methodist churches. “At least three times, United Methodist churches that found out about Grace Point’s efforts to expand complained to the bishop.”<sup>68</sup> Even prior to expansion efforts, a retired U.M. clergy brought up pastor Butts on charges for using the word “suck” in an ad campaign: “Church Doesn’t Suck.”<sup>69</sup> Finally, in August of 2008, the district superintendent, Cheryl Jefferson Bell, told pastor Butts to stay out of East Wichita because her strongest churches were there, which

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<sup>64</sup> Robin Russell, “Uprooted, What Happens When New Church Plants Pull Away From UMC” *The United Methodist Reporter*, May 1 (2009): 1b-3b.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 3b.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 2b.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 2b.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 2b.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 2b.

Butts says have been in decline for 10 years.<sup>70</sup> Bryson Butts sums it up well as he defends the Bishop and explains the congregational leadership's decision to move on,

He's got a very difficult job. On one hand, he wants to reach people for Christ. On the other hand, he's got a system that in my estimation is broken. It's an institution and it's broken. Here's the bottom line: Wesley started a movement of God. It ought to be easier to start a church in the United Methodist system. At the end of the day, the rules and the regulations trump the calling of God on somebody's life and their gifting.<sup>71</sup>

John and Charles Wesley became involved in starting a movement of God particularly because the static institutionalism of the Anglican Church would not support and provide the structure for the type of outreach that the Wesleys determined necessary for getting the Gospel to the masses of unchurched in England. There were simply no Anglican categories for preaching in fields, using well-known pub music with deep theological lyrics, gathering in barns, preaching the Word with vigorous and passion, praying out loud, shouting with enthusiasm, making disciples of the common worker through intense Bible study, and eventually sending out lay preachers on horseback to provide leadership for the multiple sights of growing congregations. Wesley and his cohorts went to where the people were, entered their worlds, developed authentic relationships, spoke the language of the common folk, sang the songs of their hearts, and trusted the Holy Spirit to work the grace of Jesus Christ into the culture and people resulting in transformation from the inside out.<sup>72</sup> This is how the Gospel operates. And when church institutions get in the way of this outward missional movement of God's Word and Spirit, like a river at flood stage, God's way and will can and does redirect to find a way into the hearts, minds and lives of those He loves and is not willing to lose.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2b.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 3b.

<sup>72</sup> Laurence W. Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism: Rediscovering John Fletcher as John Wesley's Vindicator and Designated Successor* (Oxford, Scarecrow Press), 163-198.



A review of the New Testament epistles reveal that the apostles Paul, Peter and others dealt with similar issues of missional resistance by the status quo in the early church. A primary example is found in Paul's dealings with the Galatian church over the cultural and ritual issue of circumcision. Paul writes,

It was for freedom that Christ set us free... For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, it makes no difference to God whether we are circumcised or not circumcised [*one can insert almost any extra-New Testament social or cultural tradition or rite here*]. What is important is faith expressing itself in love. You were getting along so well. Who has interfered with you to hold you back from following the truth? It certainly isn't God, for he is the one who called you to freedom. But it takes only one wrong person among you to infect all the others—a little yeast spreads quickly through the whole batch of dough! For you were called to freedom, brethren... through love serve one another... for the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"... But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (Galatians 5:22-26)

Among the sins of the flesh described by Paul, which are in opposition to the fruit of the Spirit are "hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group" (Galatians 5:20-21). The apostle suggests that the characteristics that are apparent in the body of Christ when acting under the impulse of the Holy Spirit are: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control... If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or irritate one another, or be jealous of one another" (Galatians 5:22.25-26).

The early church as well as the early Methodists struggled with the problem of missional resistance among brothers and sisters in Christ, and the dangerous thing is how blinding and difficult to overcome this paradigmatic stronghold can be. The only way to truly see the Kingdom of God is to begin living into it here and now with an eye on the future return of Jesus. The church must remain focused on Jesus Christ and his mission to the whole world, and daily

surrender any Gospel-barrier that may get in the way of loving neighbors and sharing Jesus with other people groups around us. In his lectures and book on *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, the well-known theologian Albert Outler challenged the tendency towards missional resistance, “A church continues to be evangelical only by being constantly and unanxiously reformed – and this means change – constant updating, constant new ventures, as history and human destinies unfold. The People of God are a Pilgrim People.”<sup>73</sup> Unless the church is consistent in its understanding of the mission of God, to make disciples of all the nations, a lack of harmony hurts its witness. But when unified in its diversity, anything is possible with God. What might the 21<sup>st</sup> century church’s unity cry be? In the words of John Wesley, “Offer them Christ!”

#### Part 1 Conclusion:

##### Seven Cultural Barriers

In conclusion, with the ongoing advance of technology, and the growing globalization of the world, followers of Christ live in what must be the most fast-paced time in the history of humankind. This incredibly fast growth is bringing a variety of nations and cultures into each other’s back yards. So far, this chapter has explained how a variety of barriers related to culture have contributed to the current rapid decline of the American institutional church. Humans today must adapt to a multi-cultural life, where worldviews are continually challenged and changed as human cultures clash and conform at amazing rates. Many would say that the church has been slow to adapt. Some would say that the church has been unwilling to adapt. But the reality is that Christ’s Church is still alive and well, albeit a bit behind the times, particularly in the western cultures. The heart-cry of many faithful leaders today is “how do we not only survive the incredible cultural shifts going on around us, but how do we thrive and faithfully accomplish the

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<sup>73</sup> Albert Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), 42.

mission of God, which is to make disciples of all the nations, and bring healing to a broken world?”

The western church in general is in decline. A major barrier many in the west are discovering is that the institutional mainstream model of ministry passed down by previous generations is no longer functioning in a way that could be described as missional. The mainstream church tends to serve within a local community from an “attractional” position, hoping to provide enough advertising, programs and entertainment to draw non-Christians into the buildings so they might become disciples. The idea is along the lines of “build it, open the doors and they will come.” The attractional model is just not very attractive anymore for postmodern, global, technologically driven, younger folks.<sup>74</sup> The average age in most mainstream churches is now somewhere around 50 and above. Frankly, most non-Christians have no desire to attend what church-going Christians would consider a “traditional” or even “contemporary” worship style congregation.

Humanity and the church are at the cusp of one of the most massive cultural shifts in history. Making the changes necessary will prove to be difficult for many. There is much cultural misunderstanding between those labeled as moderns and postmoderns. In short, moderns grew up in an Industrial Age, where science was the final word on truth, attending church was the social norm, and the church building was the center of community fellowship. Postmoderns are growing up in an age of high-tech computers and nano-chips, where no truth is easily trusted, much of the culture is hostile to Christianity, and the Internet is quickly becoming the connecting center of community fellowship.

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<sup>74</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 18-19.

The disconnect between the church and the culture is the crux of what many church leaders are struggling with today. Followers of Jesus are called to be in the world but not of it. In all ages, the church must engage the cultures of the world with the good news of Jesus Christ and allow the Gospel to enter the cultures so that the Holy Spirit can better accomplish His work of reconciliation and re-creation. What does faithful postmodern Christianity look like? Many are saying that it looks like historic Christianity has many times over in many different places among diverse people groups. The Gospel has the amazing ability to adapt and speak God's truth through Jesus in many different ways and contexts. The problem is not the Mission of God and the Gospel, the problem is the institutional ways we organize the church without continually re-imagining our forms with a missional emphasis on engaging the culture and introducing others to Jesus.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century church of Jesus Christ in America must experience a paradigm shift from a maintenance focus to a mission emphasis.<sup>75</sup> There is hope, because our God is a God on a mission. The Father, Son and Spirit has chosen that his broken but redeemed people are to participate with Him as a sent people, serving as signs which point to God's love and ultimate promises of complete healing and restoration in Jesus Christ. To be successful in God's mission, the church must learn from the past, abide in God's Spirit, and move forward creatively, relationally and purposefully in mission into the all the world.

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<sup>75</sup> Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1986), vii.

## CHAPTER 3

### THESIS: PART 2

#### INSTITUTIONAL CHURCHES EXIST FOR AMERICAN CULTURE

##### Part 2 Introduction:

##### Necessary Paradigm Shifts

A paradigm is a mental cultural construct that defines reality for an individual or group of individuals. Paradigms help people make sense of the world around them, and are shaped over time according to the mores, values and practices of a particular society, community, family and/or faith community. A paradigm is a worldview, and paradigms change over time, depending upon whether and how they are challenged by competing worldviews and understandings of reality. Different cultures foster different paradigms, and the more one is in contact with differing paradigms, the easier it becomes to recognize the power of these mental rules and constructs for how we interpret and live our lives. God created humans with the amazing ability to have paradigms shaped within community that foster health and good relations among a society. God also made humans capable of having paradigms challenged and changed when encountering new ideas and cultural realities. Jesus bent his Jewish brothers and sisters paradigms quite a bit when he said things like, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48). Most of them had a very difficult time allowing their paradigms to shift to the point of being able to recognize Christ as the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world, the long-awaited for Messiah. And yet many paradigms did shift and continue to shift in response to the good news of Jesus Christ, the resurrected Savior.

This second section of chapter 3 will develop the idea that contemporary institutional churches exist for American culture, and not for themselves. Due to the existing cultural barriers mentioned above, the institutional church must be challenged with false paradigms that are hurting its understanding and communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ across cultures. There are four major paradigm shifts that the church must make in the power of the Holy Spirit: (1) God has a specific mission for Christ's church, (2) bridging cross-cultural boundaries is not an option, (3) the church must always remain outward oriented, and (4) what is needed is a venturing process, not a fix-it program. It appears that the embrace of these paradigm shifts will increase the likelihood of congregation's successful communication of the Gospel across cultural boundaries. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus explained paradigms and the importance of recognizing them multiple times with his disciples. One example is in chapter 13 of Matthew, where Jesus says,

Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand!... To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But to those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them. That is why I tell these stories, because people see what I do, but they don't really see. They hear what I say, but they don't really hear, and they don't understand. This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, which says: 'You will hear my words, but you will not understand; you will see what I do, but you will not perceive its meaning. For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes-- so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. (Matthew 13:9, 12-16)

## Paradigm Shift 1

### God's Mission for Christ's Church

“Unity with the triune God is the eschatological goal of all creation,” explains theologian Jurgen Moltmann.<sup>76</sup> At the heart of the mission of God is the reconciliation of relationships for all humans with Jesus Christ, others and all of creation in the love, forgiving grace and unifying power of the Spirit. Reconciliation is the healing work of the Holy Spirit in bringing together those who are separated by ideology, evil, oppression, violence, sin, race, culture, worldview, circumstances, and/or simply misunderstanding. The biblical vision of God's work in the world through Jesus Christ is one of restoration and healing among all of creation, particularly among those created in God's image as reflected in the Old Testament text, Genesis 1:26-27.<sup>77</sup> The biblical story reveals a progressive missional movement by God through His people directed to all the people groups of the world culminating in the incarnation, death and resurrection of God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. God Himself has reached out to creation as a suffering servant with a sacrificial unselfish love that has conquered sin and death. As Christ accomplished His mission and ascended to the Father, He sent the Holy Spirit to His disciples, the gathered church, to imagine a brave new creation where the world's diverse people groups were united and reconciled within the healing, glorious model and person of Jesus Christ. The grand finale of the incredible biblical eschatological vision of hope in Christ is summed up beautifully in the revelation of John of Patmos found in the final book of the Bible:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Althouse, *Spirit of the Last Days: Pentecostal Eschatology in Conversation with Jurgen Moltmann* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 130.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006), 421.

heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new. (Revelation 21:1-5)

Moltmann believes that expectation determines present ecclesiology and structure. “Tell me what you hope for, and I will tell you who you are!”<sup>78</sup> In a 21<sup>st</sup> century postmodern, post-Christian world, followers of Jesus must renew their focus on the ministry of reconciliation in order to more effectively and imaginatively reach out to those who are currently alienated from God, Christ’s Body and His creation. American institutional churches by nature tend to be inwardly focused, especially when at risk. In such climates of decline, maintenance of the institution often precedes mission as the goal becomes ensuring the survival of the institution rather than carrying out the mission of the Gospel. Refocusing attention and ministry beyond the walls of the institutionalized church by serving as God’s reconciling presence in the world is vital not only for its survival, but also for its validity as church.

One of John Wesley’s greatest contributions to the missional movement of God among the people called Methodists was an emphasis upon the ongoing process of grace. Wesley attempted generally to systematize an understanding of the progression of the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life from birth to death in order to illustrate more clearly the reconciling work of God. Wesley understood the experience of individuals in the process of reconciliation with God to be unique, and yet sought to identify some markers along the journey, which seemed to be found in most persons’ stories of grace. Wesley’s emphasis upon the sanctifying grace of God as a process provided a developmental model of discipleship for followers of Jesus which moved those open to the work of God’s Spirit toward a destination of what Wesley called “Christian

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<sup>78</sup> Althouse, *Spirit of the Last Days*, vii.



perfection,” where everything was made right in love regarding one’s relationships with God, others and creation.<sup>79</sup>

With John Wesley, in the eighteenth century industrial world, sin was considered a sickness that required healing rather than a broken law requiring daily penance and atonement. Wesley understood the sin-sick sinner to be reliant on God’s grace for healing and liberation, and looked to the Spirit as “awakening new energies” within the believer’s “sinful will.”<sup>80</sup> The goal was absolute submission to the Spirit’s sanctification of life, moving one towards holiness through a “deliberate, voluntary, organized, personal, and social life of faith.”<sup>81</sup> Moltmann points out that this model of discipleship was effective in the 18<sup>th</sup> century industrial age because of the subsequent mechanical clock-like discipline the workers in factories were used to, each person controlling their body much like a machine or instrument. The theologian believes this cultural adaptation explains one reason why “Methodism became the religion of the rising industrial societies.”<sup>82</sup>

In his book, *The Spirit of Life*, Moltmann concludes that “*vita Christiana* is always related to its time and context.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, as a witness to the saving grace of God, the Christian testimony must communicate to a given society the Gospel’s healing of its current sicknesses in the heart language of the culture. The theologian explains that the Reformation responded ‘therapeutically’ to society with a testimony of freedom of faith in response to the sick medieval church, and the Methodists responded ‘therapeutically’ with a message of personal

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<sup>79</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hiss Press of Kansas City, 1966).

<sup>80</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: First Fortress Press, 2001), 164-165.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 171.

sanctification to the sick industrial societies of their day. Now, at the end of the modern/industrial society, *vita Christiana* needs to take a new form to bring healing to the “dehumanized producers, consumers and commuters” of today’s world.<sup>84</sup> The ongoing question for the church to wrestle with appears to be, “What needs to be reconciled today and how can Christianity in the West best respond ‘therapeutically’ to society’s ills?”

God desires healing among His creation and offers the gift of sanctification in His Spirit to the world through Jesus Christ, which involves the responsive call for followers of Christ to engage in the process of reconciliation. The Hebrew word *shalom* is the biblical and prophetic description of “the undoing of all patterns that bind, restrict, and break down the human community, that stand against the reality of communion and reconciliation.”<sup>85</sup> The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 clearly links the Old Testament theme of *shalom* with the sanctifying work of the Spirit which commits followers of Jesus to walk the journey of faith as living reconcilers in Christ.

The Spirit is sent to help believers find assurance that they are indeed reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, and then through the ongoing process of sanctification assist believers to imagine the human community as a sanctified communion reconciled to God and one another and set apart as holy.<sup>86</sup> This imagining of reconciliation is not make-believe by any means, but rather an exercise of the God-provided gift of creativity shaped by the loving grace of the Creator God who is in love with all of His creation. For some reason, it appears that God chooses to use His Christian church as a tool for bringing about the holistic reconciliation of His creation, and allows and expects the church to participate in creating this imagined world. Ian Douglas writes,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 171-174.

<sup>85</sup> Ian T. Douglas, *Waging Reconciliation: God’s Mission in a Time of Globalization* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2002), 7.

<sup>86</sup> Ephesians 2:16.

“The lamb shall lie down with the wolf and a little boy will lead them...” Imagined. “We believe that all men are created equal...” Imagined. “I have a dream, that one day, little white children and little black children will walk hand in hand...” Imagined. Everything is imagined, even the physical world, even us. We are the creation of God’s imagination. When we imagine, we share in the creative life of God.<sup>87</sup>

The Psalmist explains how admiration for the Creator God aligns our imaginations with the Maker’s will: “Take Delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.”<sup>88</sup> The call of God upon the Christian community of faith to the process of imagining reconciliation in the world is not merely a call to ordained clergy, nor just leaders within the church institution. The reconciling call of Christ is the responsibility of every follower of Jesus, regardless of race, class or vocation.<sup>89</sup> All Christians are to pick up and carry the cross of Jesus as both “sufferers” in solidarity with the Crucified, and also as those who “struggle against evil by following the example of the Crucified.”<sup>90</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson argues in *The Real Jesus* that there is singular consistency in the biblical Gospels regarding the “identity and mission of Jesus”:

Their fundamental focus is not on Jesus’ wondrous deeds, nor on his wise words. Their shared focus is on the *character* of his life and death. They all reveal the same *patterns* of radical obedience to God and selfless love toward other people. All four Gospels also agree that discipleship is to follow the same *messianic pattern*. They do not emphasize the performance of certain deeds or the learning of certain doctrines. They insist on living according to the same pattern of life and death shown by Jesus.<sup>91</sup>

There are many issues of importance for people of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: creation care, rapid globalization, postmodernism, digital communication technologies, rapidly advancing biotechnologies, global terrorism, world hunger and thirst, a multiplicity of societal morals and values, and the list can go on and on. Traditions, cultures and opinions will vary. The church

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<sup>87</sup> Douglas, *Waging Reconciliation*, 118-119.

<sup>88</sup> Psalm 37:4.

<sup>89</sup> Viola. *Reimagining Church*, 153.

<sup>90</sup> Miraslav Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), 24.

<sup>91</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 157.

must learn to embrace unity amidst our diversity, forging ahead together in love and grace as full participants in the mission of reconciliation God has entrusted us with. Various tribes will bring various gifts and emphases to the project, but the bride of Christ will be much more radiant to the world as we move forward together, eagerly sharing one Lord, Jesus Christ (Revelation 7:9).

The American institutional church must remember that Jesus promises to always be with those who “go” in His name to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:20). Salvation involves an invitation into a reconciling community with other believers and with God. Jesus intercedes for His disciples in his prayer: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (John 17:21). According to Steve Seamands, “The Trinitarian circle of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is therefore an open, not a closed, circle. Through faith in Christ through baptism into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we enter into the life of the Trinity and are graciously included as partners.”<sup>92</sup> Miraslav Volf is fond of the term “*communio*” which the theologian feels “better expresses the New Testament understanding of the ‘unity of the church’ than the term ‘unity’ itself.”<sup>93</sup> Volf makes his point clear,

Just as professing faith in the one Jesus Christ implies openness on the part of a church to other churches, so also does professing faith in him as universal Savior and Lord imply openness on the part of the church to all human beings. No one who professes faith in Christ should be denied entrance into the church and full participation in it. Just as Peter did not merely behave badly by refusing fellowship to Gentile Christians, but rather betrayed the truth of the Gospel itself (Galatians 2:11-14), so also is a discriminatory church not merely a bad church, but no church at all... Even if such a church were to assemble in the name of Christ and profess faith in him with its lips, it could expect only rejection from its alleged Lord: “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:21-23).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Steven A. Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 12.

<sup>93</sup> Miraslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 158.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

*Perichoresis* (*peri-* circle, *choresis-* dance) was the word the early church leaders used to describe the Trinity; in other words the *Circle Dance*.<sup>95</sup> In this light, the Father, Son and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, happiness, joy and respect are engaged in an eternal cosmic dance. Jesus steps into the lives of sinful humans who are out of step and rhythm, and offers a song of hope, and provides an invitation to *communion*, to join in and participate now and forever in this dance of love. Early Methodists often referred to as the ‘shoutin’ Methodists, were known for their exuberant worship.<sup>96</sup> As one early hymn said approvingly, “They’d stamp and clap & tumble, & roar & cry & scream.”<sup>97</sup> Lester Ruth in his study on worship at early Methodist Quarterly Meetings explains, “Methodist participation was truly a communal work of the whole church. Racial, gender, and age barriers broke down in ways – exuberant ways – that would have appeared unseemly in more established churches. Any, who were so inspired, regardless of their social status, were welcome to speak up, to get up, to get happy.”<sup>98</sup>

Wherever God is moving with power and might, there is a form of church that is submissive to and participating fully in the reconciling mission of God. The whole congregation and every participant are exercising their “own charismata and thrust forward to the total testimony of salvation which leaves no sphere of life without hope, from faith to politics, and from politics to economics.”<sup>99</sup> The mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be God’s reconciling presence in the world. The first major paradigm shift that must occur among the American institutional churches is the elemental understanding that the fundamental goal of the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 208-215.

<sup>96</sup> Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 22.

<sup>97</sup> Hymn entitled “Come All My Tender Brethren” in *Bradford Hymnbook* (Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1811).

<sup>98</sup> Ruth, *Little Heaven Below*, 74.

<sup>99</sup> Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 10.

church, and its survival and validity is completely dependent upon fulfilling its mission. As Moltmann eloquently states, “The real point is not to spread the church but to spread the Kingdom. The goal is not the glorification of the church but the glorification of the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The missionary concept of the church leads to a church that is open to the world in the divine mission.”<sup>100</sup>

## Paradigm Shift 2

### Bridging Cross-cultural Boundaries

With the rise of technologies like air travel, satellite television and the Internet, awareness of the thousands of other cultures around the world, each with its own worldview, has become eye opening to Westerners. Americans are rapidly experiencing globalism in business through outsourcing of jobs, in neighborhoods as foreigners take up residence next door, and through social media and instant world news. The rapid increase in multi-culturalism and secular pluralism in the United States has left many institutionalized Christians at a loss as to how to live out healthy lives of faith. If reconciliation is at the heart of God’s mission for followers of Jesus, then it is vital that Christians learn how to build relationships across cultural lines. A second paradigm shift that the American church must make is recognition that culture plays a fundamental role in the comprehension and communication of the good news of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is often hindered by cross-cultural boundaries. How does the church of Jesus Christ maintain its unique set of beliefs and standards while at the same time welcoming the stranger and embracing diversity? “In a context where both globalization and fragmentation threaten the very search for authentic human community, it is imperative that a central aspect of

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 11.

the church's mission be our witness to God bringing into being a reconciled human community across all that divides us."<sup>101</sup>

A tendency in a contemporary global culture, as worldviews bump up against each other, is to build our walls higher and avoid those who look, act, speak or live in a way that we do not understand. Another tendency is to pluralize everything dismissing or denying any distinctiveness that may exist. Douglas explains that there is a long-held, western cultural tradition either to isolate a community or in a colonial sense to "reduce, absorb, or appropriate" the other into a sameness that devalues what those of diversity may have to offer a relationship.<sup>102</sup> Humans in general tend to resist "otherness or reduce that which is different into more of the same."<sup>103</sup> Robert Schreiter lists seven unhealthy ways of perceiving the other: demonize, romanticize, colonize, generalize, trivialize, homogenize, and vaporize.<sup>104</sup> Schreiter says that the better way to imagine reconciliation with the other is to find common ground, as well as recognize a "fundamental difference, and embrac(e) it."<sup>105</sup> When examining other cultures, finding similarities is great, but identifying differences is okay as well.

The American church can learn much from 20<sup>th</sup> century global missionaries. What the multitudes of western missionaries of the 1900's found as they traveled to foreign lands and sought to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with people of other languages and cultures was that one culture's understanding of Christianity may not translate clearly as "good news" into another culture. Cross-cultural missionaries quickly learned that their biblical instruction among natives

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<sup>101</sup> Douglas, *Waging Reconciliation*, 179.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>104</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation, Mission & Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 52-53.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 54.

was very often polluted with very foreign modern western worldviews. As missionaries became more familiar with the local culture and peoples, they often had to modify the ways they communicated and educated the Jesus story to fit the historic understandings and worldviews of the people group better. Because of the plethora of religious expressions around the world, missionaries had to learn quickly about the various world religions and develop a theology that would help them and their converts “come to grips with the fact that Christianity was but one of the many religions in the world.”<sup>106</sup>

Each incarnation of the good news by missionaries in a foreign setting was unavoidably infused with culture that derived from one’s homeland and home expressions of faith. Western faith has historically been practiced in most instances as a territorial faith, beginning with the Roman Emperor Constantine’s marriage of church and state in the 300’s, exemplified negatively by the Crusades of medieval times, continuing with the Protestant formations of state churches in the reformation era and on into the era of volunteer denominations resulting from the formation of the United States of America. Western Christianity traditionally equates faith with discernable, definable territorial boundaries. According to Chandra Mallampalli of Westmont College, American Protestants tend to define their identity by fusing Christianity with Republican virtues like democracy and nation building.<sup>107</sup> Without realizing it, missionaries can confuse their nationalistic identities with Gospel truths, and thus impose them unwittingly upon those with whom they are attempting to connect. Too often, Mallampalli notes, “the real point of interest is...(not whether) churches elsewhere might present alternative ways of being Christian

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<sup>106</sup> Peter Tze Ming Ng, “The Necessity of the Particular in the Globalisation of Christianity: The Case of China,” *Studies in World Christianity* 12, no. 2 (2006): 167.

<sup>107</sup> Chandra Mallampalli, “World Christianity And ‘Protestant America’: Historical Narratives and the Limits of Christian Pluralism,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 1 (2006): 10.



or of conceiving the mission of the Gospel...but whether those churches are en route to producing citizens of modern democratic states.”<sup>108</sup>

Despite the mistakes of the past, 20<sup>th</sup> century mission endeavors were very successful, not because of the paternalism of the sending nations, institutions or agencies, but often in spite of them. Many missionaries were ready to give up after World War I, as it appeared pointless to continue to export the Gospel overseas from Europe, because one “could no longer assume Europe was the heartland of the Gospel.”<sup>109</sup> As the global ecumenical movement built up speed through World Missionary Conferences in 1910 and again in 1928, attitudes by church leaders influenced by the plethora of world religions and western liberalism communicated the idea that there could be no exclusive claims to salvation through Jesus Christ alone, and that it was better to exist harmoniously by engaging in social mission work.<sup>110</sup> The institutionalization of the World Council of Churches in 1948 effectively “annexed the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism” and eventually abandoned it.<sup>111</sup> Around the same time, on the eve of the Second World War, there was a different movement in global Christianity occurring in India with the International Missionary Council of 1938.<sup>112</sup> This IMC meeting was the biggest gathering to date of indigenous Christian leadership from around the globe, and was happening despite a missionary movement that was at the time ensnared by colonial organizations and mind-sets.

Twentieth-century missionaries in the field struggled against discouragement. Quite often, as missionaries educated natives, de-colonization was an inevitable result. In many cases,

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>109</sup> Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 273.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>112</sup> Dana Robert, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 2 (2000): 50.

a consequence of missionary schools was a rise of educated elite among natives, increasing awareness of freedom in Christ for all peoples, as well as the importance of human rights, perhaps mixed with democratic ideals. These ideals often led to the rejection of colonization. The consequence of de-colonization was often revolution, violent uprisings and control for a time of dictatorships, while power issues were sorted out. After World War II, the cold war and communism effectively caused limitations, persecution and ejection of missionaries and church leaders from nations like China. Secularization appeared to be taking root, as a “relatively small group of very powerful western intelligentsia (mainly Europeans)... maintained that modernization and the inexorable spread of scientific rationality will inevitably cause an irreversible decline in religious belief and practice throughout the world.”<sup>113</sup> The message missionaries heard from overseas was “that religion was a thing of the past.”<sup>114</sup> By the 1970’s the 20<sup>th</sup> century mission strategies appeared to have failed and in 1978 R. Elliot Kendall evaluated his missionary work in Africa and elsewhere in *The End of an Era*, and “urged his fellow western missionaries essentially to concede defeat.”<sup>115</sup>

Many Christian missionaries pulled out of their various contexts, either by giving up, or by being forced out. There were always those who remained where they could, and adapted, reconfigured, and never gave up. As the dust settled in African nations toward the end of the century, many were shocked to find that without the oversight of the western institutional churches and agencies, African indigenous churches had sprung up everywhere, and even denominational expressions of faith had adapted and contextualized under indigenous leadership. Eventually, the curtain was lifted in communist China, and missionaries were carefully and

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<sup>113</sup> Hanciles, “Beyond Christendom,” 93.

<sup>114</sup> Mortensen, “What Is Happening to Global Christianity?” 23.

<sup>115</sup> Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, 274.

under strict controls allowed back in. They were amazed at how, despite intense persecution, an underground church had not only survived, but contextualized, thrived and multiplied. In fact, the discovery of so many followers of Jesus in these nations previously considered non-Christian, shifted the demographic Christian majority from the Northern hemisphere to the Southern, all within about 30 years.<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, it can become disheartening if one simply views the current 21<sup>st</sup> century church from a western perspective. But, a cause to celebrate exists as one broadens one's perspective and realizes a whole world of amazing things happening within the many cultures and diverse expressions of global Christianity. Despite cultural differences and communication barriers, the core message of the Gospel, that Jesus Christ is resurrected and making all things new, has the power to change the world. Vibrant Jesus movements are sweeping across the multitude of cultures of the earth, taking many forms, but with one essential, vital characteristic: Jesus is worshipped as Lord.

Many scholars and church leaders today are clarifying and drawing distinctions between the nature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century western church, and the rest of "World Christianity." As long ago as the 1940's, the first Chinese President of the "Christian" Central China University (Huachung University, now known as Huazhong Normal University), Francis C.M. Wei, was drawing out these distinctions exceptionally articulately. Wei was deliberate about sorting out "World Christianity" from "Western Christianity," which according to him was characterized by a "spirit of denominationalism."<sup>117</sup> Wei explained that both expressions of Christianity, western and Chinese, were each a part of the whole [World Christianity], and to truly be a world religion, the Christian faith must find expression in all cultures. Wei was ahead of his time, as he attempted to

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<sup>116</sup> Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 97.

<sup>117</sup> Ng, "The Necessity of the Particular," 176-177.

reframe missions and evangelism so that the church might come to develop “a global perspective without losing its local characteristics.”<sup>118</sup> Wei wrote in 1980,

It is because the Christian believes that the Christian Church (or World Christianity) needs all people in the world, as much as all people in the world need the Christian faith, that the world-wide Christian missionary movement is supported and kept going. When this is explained and understood...the missionary movement will no longer be regarded as western arrogance and presumptuousness, and the missionary will not be considered as exercising his prerogative of making known what he has in himself and what others lack, but (rather) as doing his duty in seeking for a more adequate expression for the (Christian) Faith which is intended for the whole of mankind.<sup>119</sup>

This shift in mission perspective, according to Wei, allows the “receivers” to feel appreciated and valued as they are invited to join in the worldwide Jesus movement. Peter Tze Ming Ng explains Wei’s shift in perspective this way: “Rather than seeking to conquer the non-Christian world, Christian missionaries should seek help from the non-Christian peoples by inviting them to join as partners in the worldwide Christian movement.” He sums this concept up well: “Globalisation...is more than the spread of one historically existing culture at the expense of all others. It is also the creation of a new global culture.”<sup>120</sup> The new global culture is rich with diversity and yet united in the work and person of Jesus Christ.

As mentioned previously, the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is changing at an unprecedented state, with computer and communication technology that places individuals and nations normally on the other side of the globe within the same room. A new term expressing this new phenomenon is a combination of two words, global and local, or “glocal.” We live in an increasingly glocal world. The potential for glocal Christianity in this day and age is extraordinary and unparalleled in the history of the world. Rather than a predominantly western, territorial, denominational, institutional, and patriarchal organization, the church has the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 178.

opportunity to thrive as the healthy, organic Body of Christ that it was always intended to be. The Apostle Paul used the descriptive natural metaphor of one body with many parts to express the diversity of gifts and characteristics of the Body of Christ all united under one Lord, the Head, Jesus Christ. The 21<sup>st</sup> century church would do well to embrace the global, radical, Scriptural way of Jesus and contextualize that good news within every cultural context and people group around the world.

There is much to learn from 20<sup>th</sup> century missionaries: (1) The Gospel of Jesus Christ is intended for everyone and every culture; (2) each local cultural representation of Christianity adds to the richness of the tapestry of the global Christian faith; (3) the message of Jesus Christ is shared through sincere relationships and God's Word in the vernacular or heart language of the receiver;<sup>121</sup> (4) once God's reconciling message is received as truth, the purest and only way of life, and Jesus is claimed as Lord over all areas of life, the process of instant and life-long conversion begins, both individually and communally; and (5) it is vital that in each local context, the receivers immediately understand that they are now able and expected to participate in God's global mission to share this message of God's grace in Christ with others. When indigenous leadership and the people of God are given freedom to wrestle with the good news of Christ within their own context and culture and respond appropriately under the headship of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, the potential for personal and communal transformation is increased. In reference to the awe-inspiring Jesus movements in Africa, Lamin Sanneh comments, "Once the religion broke loose of its colonial moorings, it underwent

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<sup>121</sup> Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, 286.

spontaneous awakening at the hands of local agents, an awakening surprising for its scope, depth, and resilience.”<sup>122</sup>

The American institutional church must wake up to the new global reality that the majority of followers of Jesus no longer live in the western nations. The church has taken up residence primarily in the southern hemisphere. Thriving indigenous Jesus movements in the South (i.e., Africa, South America, Asia and Oceania) have many notable characteristics. Not only is there strength in numbers, but “the passion with which Christianity is lived out in the global South...is making an impact on world Christianity.”<sup>123</sup> The Pentecostal movement is very strong and growing in these countries, with a following of almost 400 million people in only 100 years of existence.<sup>124</sup> Even the non-Pentecostal churches tend to be characterized by vibrant charismatic worship, a supernatural worldview, and Scriptural conservatism. Philip Jenkins describes the movements of the South as preaching deeply personal faith, communal orthodoxy, mysticism, and Puritanism based on Scriptural authority, which may seem to many in the west a simplistic faith.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, these churches feel right at home with the supernatural faith represented in the New Testament and rely on charismata, visions, prophecy, healing, exorcisms and dream visions.<sup>126</sup> The faith movements in the Southern areas tend to be organized more organically and less institutionally, with emphasis on immediate training of every new convert in sharing the Gospel with others. In many cases, migration due to economic, political and other factors is a major reason for the global spread of Christianity. “Immigrants travel with their

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>123</sup> Henry S. Wilson, “Embracing Global Christianity: A Missiological Challenge,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no. 2 (2006): 162.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>125</sup> Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 8.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 8.

religion. It is central to their way of life and a crucial means of preserving identity as well as homeland connections.”<sup>127</sup> Christianity is described as a “migratory religion” by Jehu J. Hanciles of Fuller Theological Seminary, and he observes that “every missionary is a migrant in some sense... but, even more importantly, every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.” Reclaiming this heritage and practice of every member a missionary is something that the migratory culture of the west could also benefit from.

The church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a sent church, a missional church, a church that is both diverse in its local forms and representations of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and yet at the same time global in its scope and connection through the mystical work of Christ’s Spirit. The culture and forms may change locally, but the global essence of the Christian faith does not – “Jesus Christ is Lord, and calls us to conform our personal and communal lives to that reality.” Jesus promises to lead us on that journey and help us along the way; Jesus also desires that we love and help one another, benefiting the other as we share our diverse perspectives and experiences with the global body of Christ. By humbly embracing the gift of our great diversity and uniting in Jesus’ Lordship, God is glorified and His Kingdom reality is revealed.

Theologian Miraslav Volf in his award-winning book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, addresses the challenges for God’s children to keep “one foot planted in their own culture and the other in God’s future.”<sup>128</sup> Volf points to the importance of ecumenical community to help the church in various cultures remain aware in the battle against evil, especially in one’s own culture.

In order to keep our allegiance to Jesus Christ pure, we need to nurture commitment to the multicultural community of Christian churches. We need to see ourselves and our own understanding of God’s future with the eyes of Christians from other cultures, listen to voices of Christians from other cultures so as to make sure that the voice of our culture has not drowned out the voice of Jesus Christ, ‘the one Word of God.’

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<sup>127</sup> Hanciles, “Beyond Christendom,” 97.

<sup>128</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 53.

Volf suggests a confession-like text that expresses the need for ecumenical community in the struggle against what he calls ‘new tribalism’ or separation and division in the Body of Christ...

You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation’ (Revelation 5:9). ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28).

All the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures, have been redeemed for God by the blood of the Lamb to form one multicultural community of faith. The ‘blood’ that binds them as brothers and sisters is more precious than the ‘blood,’ the language, the customs, political allegiance, or economic interests that may separate them. We reject the false doctrine, as though a church should place allegiance to the culture it inhabits and the nation to which it belongs above the commitment to brothers and sisters from other cultures and nations, servants of the one Jesus Christ, their common Lord, and members of God’s new community.

In an increasingly fragmented global society, the church must find its commonality in the Crucified One and our combined call to the ministry of reconciliation. The patchwork of cultures represented within the global body of Christ is amazingly brilliant, and has much to offer the universal Christian community of faith if followers will embrace the richness of unity in Christ amidst our diversity. As the global church rediscovers its unity in the mission of God the Holy Spirit will provide the courage and strength to embrace the other and venture across cultural borders that previously seemed impervious. The boundaries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are no longer territorial, but rather “boundaries of difference,” notes Douglas, which are “constantly in flux.”<sup>129</sup> The second paradigm shift the American institutional church must make today is to embrace the multi-cultural community of Christian churches and boldly and humbly cross boundaries in order to explore diverse webs of relationships and more effectively share the reconciling good news of Jesus Christ with our neighbors. Rather than sitting within stained glass buildings hoping someone outside will cross the threshold and seek Jesus within, the church is sent venturing out in mission “following a God who continuously shifts our borders...

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<sup>129</sup> Douglas, *Waging Reconciliation*, 196.



called to transgress them as they shift... (and rest assured) there is a crossing over and a returning so that the coordinates of one's identity may now be redrawn in a much richer way due to the gift from the other."<sup>130</sup>

### Paradigm Shift 3

#### Outward Reorientation

Because the denominational tradition of the author is United Methodist, a reflection upon that heritage should be helpful. The early Wesleyan/Methodist movement began as a response to the perceived decline and loss of spiritual vigor of the Anglican state church of Great Britain. John Wesley and others in the mid-1700's recognized a personal and communal need for spiritual renewal and deepening faith. In the opinion of many, the Anglican Church of the day was simply not effectively providing quality discipleship. Interestingly, what began as a profoundly personal pursuit for a deepening life of devotion and discipleship led to one of Christian history's greatest missional religious movements.<sup>131</sup> Cultures, modes of communication and societies all change, but according to the prophet Isaiah, the Word of God remains the same.<sup>132</sup> A third paradigm shift for the institutional church is an intentional focus beyond and acceptance that each generation must adapt the way the message of the good news of Jesus Christ is communicated and expressed in order to reach effectively their particular culture and context.<sup>133</sup>

At no point did the early Methodists intend to start a new institution or denomination, but rather hoped to help enliven and revive the broader Anglican Church by increasing disciple-

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

<sup>131</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *Nothing to Do But to Save Souls* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press), 26-27.

<sup>132</sup> Isaiah 40:8.

<sup>133</sup> Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 4-15.

making and developing a healthy passion for experiencing the transforming grace of Christ among the people of God. The modern industrial revolution created massive cultural changes in both Europe and later America, and Methodists were on the front lines addressing the social issues of the time.<sup>134</sup> According to Frederick A. Norwood, “They got their start in iron mines and coal pits... the People called Methodists were thrown together in one of the greatest revolutions of history, the mechanization of power.”<sup>135</sup> By leaving the safe walls of the Anglican Church buildings, John Wesley stepped into the real world of the average folk of 18<sup>th</sup>-century England and preached a message of hope and good news to hopeless, coal-stained workers. Wesley and his bunch not only proclaimed the good news in fields, but also visited prisons, fed widows, taught orphans and did what they could to share the love of Christ with the hurting and lost.<sup>136</sup> Once Wesley allowed God’s Spirit to lead him to the people who needed and wanted God most, he boldly proclaimed, “The world is my parish.” What resulted was a spirit of revival that swept across Europe, over the Atlantic Ocean and into the new frontier of the American colonies.<sup>137</sup>

Frederick Norwood eloquently describes the young Methodist movement,

It was born in the noisy cradle of the factory and nurtured in the nursery of democracy. Iron, coal, steam power, freedom, individualism, and the rights of man provided a heady brew for the feeding of an infant denomination. No wonder the baby experienced periods of colic and indigestion! Occasionally, it must be honestly admitted, she threw up.<sup>138</sup>

The industrial revolution of the time had created a huge cultural shift, and many of the working lower classes in society were not participating in church primarily because the established institution did not make a priority of reaching out to them. Bluntly, it was not socially

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<sup>134</sup> Paul W. Chilcote, *Wesley Speaks on Christian Vocation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 56.

<sup>135</sup> Fredrick Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 16.

<sup>136</sup> Albert Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, Tidings), 22-23.

<sup>137</sup> Abel Stevens, *A Compendious History of American Methodism* (New York: Phillips & Hunt), 19-22.

<sup>138</sup> Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 16.

acceptable for the working class poor to enter the pristine, gloriously built sanctuaries of the cities. What John Wesley and the early Methodists found was that the Gospel needed to be carried to the people rather than expecting working class people to cross the industrial cultural divide in search of the Gospel. There was a need for restructuring discipleship in more relevant contextual ways.

The western church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century finds itself at another major cultural crossroads. There is once again a chasm that exists between the institutionalized church in the west and the common people.<sup>139</sup> As the early Methodists found themselves unable to make disciples within the paradigms and structures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican Church, they had to step outside of those paradigms in search of the heart language and songs of the common person.<sup>140</sup> The western church is once again finding it difficult to translate the good news of Jesus Christ to a culture that is increasingly hostile to the current institutional models of what has become known as modern “traditional or contemporary church.”

In order to communicate cross-culturally in any given context at any given time, followers of Jesus must first have a grasp of what the Gospel or good news of Jesus Christ is, as well as what the Gospel is not.<sup>141</sup> Because one’s culture is so much a part of who a person is and determines how they understand and view the world, it is very difficult to discover the core elements of what Jesus’ message to the world is, and what are merely cultural forms that have become part of our religious framework within a particular cultural expression of Christianity.<sup>142</sup> Sorting out paradigms that are confusingly intertwined with one’s faith, world view and religion

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<sup>139</sup> Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 28-36.

<sup>140</sup> Coleman, *Nothing to Do But to Save Souls*, 26-29.

<sup>141</sup> Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community: The Posture and Practices of Ancient Church Now* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 9-14.

<sup>142</sup> Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 1-3.

can seem almost impossible. Discerning the core elements of one's faith can be a painful and difficult journey, as John Wesley discovered, and may disturb others who are not able to see through the cultural constructs of their religious worldview.

Against the wishes and approval of the Anglican Church, when John Wesley began commissioning lay and ordained preachers as circuit riders and sending them out to proclaim the Gospel to commoners, he sent them with these instructions:

You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those that want you most. Observe: It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.<sup>143</sup>

Wesley's missional statement echoes that of Jesus' sending of the 12 and 72 disciples two by two to the villages of the Israelites with His message of the arrival of the Kingdom of God.<sup>144</sup> For Wesley, the gist of the Gospel was about "offering Christ." By first of all helping others to become cognizant of "the human flaw, and its bitter fruit in human bondage," he saw thousands upon thousands of people transformed by the grace of God.<sup>145</sup> Once the common dilemma of sin was established, the anguished question Wesley sought to answer was "Who shall deliver us from this bondage?" and his consistent message was, "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." "His whole career was an astonishing demonstration of a Gospel that affected a Christian revolution in his time and society, and for a full century afterwards."<sup>146</sup> In his diaries and writings Wesley consistently speaks of "offering Christ," "preaching Christ," "proclaiming Christ," and

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<sup>143</sup> Coleman, *"Nothing to Do But to Save Souls"*, inner cover.

<sup>144</sup> Matthew 10:5-14, Mark 6:7-11, Luke 9:1-5, Luke 10:1-11.

<sup>145</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources), 45.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

“declaring Christ.”<sup>147</sup> For Wesley’s early Methodists, as well as the first disciples of the early church, the core of the Gospel was Jesus Christ, who died, arose from the dead, and will come again. Jesus Christ is the great Reconciler, bringing life and healing to those who are lost and separated by sin from God and others. The message does not change: there are many tribes, but only one Creator, Savior, Reconciler and Lord, Jesus Christ.

If the Wesleyan mantra was “offer them Christ,” how did that play out in the early Methodist societies practically? What does offering Jesus to the world look like? One of the greatest theological contributions Wesley offered followers of Jesus in his day and ours was a practical understanding of the life of faith in Jesus Christ as a journey worked out over time.<sup>148</sup> As Wesley struggled with what it meant and looked like to be a “Christian” he came to the conclusion that all that we are in Christ is dependent not on our own abilities and strengths, but entirely upon God’s reconciling grace which is at work in all humans from birth by His Holy Spirit.<sup>149</sup> Growth in Christ occurs prior to but primarily after repentance and a conversion experience (i.e. “born again”).<sup>150</sup> As believers submit more and more to the gracious action of God’s healing Spirit they become transformed and perfected in love.<sup>151</sup> Wesley writes in the sermon, “Almost Christian,”

Now whosoever has this faith which ‘purifies the heart’, by the power of God who dwelleth therein, from pride, anger, desire, ‘from all unrighteousness’, from all filthiness

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>148</sup> Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press), 19-37.

<sup>149</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press), 35-38.

<sup>150</sup> John 3.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 35-38.

of flesh and spirit... Whosoever has this faith, thus 'working by love', is not almost only, but altogether a Christian.<sup>152</sup>

Sanctification by grace through faith was understood as the primary way followers of Jesus matured and experienced healing salvation in the here and now. Members of Methodist societies held one another accountable for engaging means of grace like worship, prayer, Scripture study, acts of mercy, and sacraments, so that growth in grace could occur and the body of Christ would be built up.<sup>153</sup> The outworking of growing in love of God and neighbor by God's grace was a desire to serve others, to care for the needy, feed the sick, and visit those in prison. The early Wesleyan's holistic understanding of the Gospel was very evident to those outside the community of faith as the Wesleyans engaged their communities with open, passionate, exuberant worship, hands-on social mercy and justice projects as well as evangelical outreach to those on the margins of society.<sup>154</sup> Although Jesus is the core of the Gospel message, He is always found at the outskirts of society.<sup>155</sup>

The very same lifestyle that Wesley and his Methodist friends engaged in, of compassionate Jesus-centered faith lived out among broken, hurting and lost humanity in the real world, is what will most effectively communicate the good news beyond the walls of the institutionalized church today. As a matter of fact, the early Methodists were not reinventing the wheel; they were just following the example and teachings of Jesus and the early church leaders. The fundamental difference was that the life of radical faith was being lived out in a new time and cultural context, among a different people group. The message of the Creator God's work in

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<sup>152</sup> John Wesley, "Sermon: Almost Christian," *Wesley's 52 Standard Sermons... As He Approved Them: Wesley's Doctrinal Standards* (Salem, Ohio: Schmull Publishing Co.), 16.

<sup>153</sup> William H. Willimon, *Why I Am a United Methodist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 51.

<sup>154</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *The Heritage of American Methodism* (Strasbourg – France: Editions du Signe), 110-111.

<sup>155</sup> Len Sweet, comment in class, George Fox University, Leadership in Emerging Culture, Spring 2009.

the world does not change; only the contextualization of the Jesus' message changes.<sup>156</sup> The Gospel of God's love is cosmic in significance and can be communicated among any tribe of people as significantly "good" news and the love of Christ can infiltrate, reconcile and transform any existing culture from the inside out.

Len Sweet does a wonderful job in his book, *So Beautiful*, developing three basic elements of a healthy Christian lifestyle, which are necessary in any time and place to clearly communicate the message of Jesus. According to Sweet, followers of Jesus must resist the tendency to cloister themselves off from the world, but rather must intentionally engage non-believing neighbors in 3 key ways: (1) missionally, (2) relationally, and (3) incarnationally.<sup>157</sup> First, Christians as a people redeemed by the Living God in Jesus Christ are a "sent people," sent out on a mission of God. Every baptized follower of Jesus is commanded to "go into all the world,"<sup>158</sup> and is empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses for Christ to the "ends of the earth."<sup>159</sup> Unless we recognize the missional (sent) nature of our identity in Christ, we cannot fully live out our kingdom calling as the children of God. Second, we are redeemed into relationships. Salvation is not only individualistic, but is also communal, and thus involves the healing of relationships with God, self and others.<sup>160</sup> Outward acts of love and compassionate care for neighbors and creation draws those with eyes to see into the reality of the Kingdom of God and encourages others to look to Jesus with admiration and longing. The children of God are created to be relational. Finally, followers of Jesus are called to incarnational ministry just as

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<sup>156</sup> Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (New York: Harper), 177-180.

<sup>157</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2009), 17-53.

<sup>158</sup> Matthew 28.

<sup>159</sup> Acts 1.

<sup>160</sup> Matthew 22:35-40.

Jesus was. Jesus came and put on flesh, went directly to the poor, the wealthy, the disenfranchised, the lost, the religious, the irreligious, the sinner and the saint. Those who choose to follow Jesus must do the same, take up His cross, intentionally carry it across cultural and social boundaries, and enter into the lives of those God cares for. Followers of Jesus are commissioned to love fully, to live fully, and to engage the world incarnationally. A third paradigm shift the institutional church must make is an outward re-orientation which always seeks to “offer them Christ” missionally, relationally and incarnationally.

#### Paradigm Shift 4

##### A Venturing Process, Not a Fix-it Program

Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is not a complex scientific art involving formulas and mathematics. And yet there is quite often fear and trepidation among American institutional Christians when challenged to share their faith. In a multi-cultural, secular, pluralistic society there is fear of offending someone, or being misunderstood, or being labeled a kook. Nonetheless, the Christian church in any place or time cannot get around the fact that the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is worth sharing. One way to overcome reservations and encourage institutional Christians to leave the safety of the sanctuary as cross-cultural witnesses is to develop a simple, strategic missional process that is biblical and yet uses concepts, language and images that resonate culturally with a particular region, community or congregation. The best way to foster paradigm change is to do so indigenously, from the bottom up, as a grassroots movement. Top down programs are quite often dismissed as out of touch with local reality and not culturally relevant. And frankly, quite often pre-packaged programs are irrelevant in other contexts. Programs will not help the church, but a missional life process can assist clusters of Christians to reorient themselves with God’s will.



The message that local churches and small groups must begin to grasp is that the ongoing processes of developing organic Jesus relationships are not to be feared or dreaded, but rather are ready-made avenues for sharing the saving truth of Jesus Christ. The basic requirements of missional processes are to intentionally seek the faith, to embrace wholeheartedly the mission of God, to seek friendships intentionally beyond the walls of the local church, and to make oneself available as an ambassador of reconciliation with those who are estranged from God and the Body of Christ.<sup>161</sup> Most Christians already have multiple cross-cultural connections beyond the church. But a secular mindset has made it difficult to recognize the potential of those relationships. A major paradigm shift that must take place is a transfer of a compartmentalized faith on Sunday mornings to a faith immersed in every moment of life. The American institutional church today must venture into uncharted territory, crossing boundaries of secular, pluralistic culture and seeking genuine reconciling relationships with those who either do not know Jesus or have been wounded or turned off by the modern church.

Increased mobilization of careers, extended commutes, constant community transition, extended working hours, information overload and an overall increase in busyness all characterize western society in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many families rarely share a meal together unless in front of the television, divorce and single parenting is at an all time high and most of contemporary culture is suffering from a lack of deep relationships with friends or extended family resulting in a hunger for touch and relationships in an increasingly sterile digital world.<sup>162</sup> Many neighborhoods in America are filled with neighbors drawn up within their own cocoons who rarely speak even though they live only a few yards apart. The church is no longer the central meeting place within the community, and as a matter of fact, the church has become

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<sup>161</sup> Putman and Stetzer, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 170-171.

<sup>162</sup> Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2007).

very foreign and even mistrusted and misunderstood in many instances by those who choose not to venture across the boundaries so amply highlighted by walls and stained glass windows. Society today in the west is decidedly post-Christian, and whether fair or not, the church has a bad rap among many who either have left the church for various reasons or have had bad experiences with Christians. No matter how welcoming Christians make their worship services, no matter how excellent the programs, there is a growing number of citizens living around local church neighborhoods who are simply not attracted to the institutional church as it currently exists.

Despite the current crisis in American institutional churches, there is an underground movement of creative attempts to reach out with the good news of Jesus to those beyond the stained glass windows by crossing borders and simply making friends on the ground of the other. Rather than expecting the other to come to “the church,” the church is going to the other as Jesus did.<sup>163</sup> During Jesus’ three-year ministry, our Lord clearly did not spend all His time in the Temple or synagogue, but rather spent most of His time and energy hanging out with those who needed Him most, the sinners. Jesus knew how to enjoy life as well as how to endure suffering. This confounded and enraged the religious establishment. But it worked, and in so doing, Jesus set the precedent for how his followers are to go about participating with Him in the mission of God, selflessly and sacrificially. Jesus made this call to His followers very clear: “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be” (John 12:26). Peter was convinced that this was the way of the disciple: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2:21). And Paul

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<sup>163</sup> Michael Frost. *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 51.

handed down this teaching as well: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Jesus ventured across borders of politics, religion, race, prejudice, custom and norm, and yet never lost His identity as the Jewish Messiah and Son of God. And Jesus sends His disciples out across borders as well, to the ends of the earth, or often merely to the end of the street. In that light, followers of Jesus could be labeled “advent adventurers”: hope-filled communities of faith moving forth in Jesus’ name into uncharted territories, expectantly leaning towards a coming reality that has not yet fully arrived. When the church abandons the life process of venturing, seeking the other, striving to cross borders, the church ceases to move, and stagnation and apathy begins to settle in. The church of Jesus Christ must venture in order to exist and maintain the privileged status of valid participants in God’s mission. A church engaged in the process of venturing is a church alive.

Bosch explained that “there are essential differences between an institution and a movement: the one is conservative, the other progressive; the one is more or less passive yielding to influences from the outside, the other is active in influencing rather than being influenced; the one looks to the past, the other to the future. In addition the one is anxious, the other is prepared to take risks; the one guards boundaries, the other crosses them.”<sup>164</sup> Venturing involves imagining Jesus’ vision of kingdom reality in the world and seeking to assist in bringing that about. It involves proactive, intentional relationship building. Reconciliation of relationships with God, the other and creation are the impetus for venturing across borders. The mission of God, the commands of Jesus and the promise of the Spirit’s assistance provide the thrust for ventures. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a rapidly globalized, pluralistic society, the church’s slogan should be, “We venture or we die!”

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<sup>164</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 51.

The process of living venturous lives must be communicated locally as a vital element of being church. With missional venturing across cultural boundaries comes the life-giving power of diverse relationships and increasing recognition of the importance of friendship networks. The church must learn to seek out and maintain non-judgmental relationships with “non-church goers,” without expecting them to become card-carrying members. If conversion happens, wonderful! If not, keep praying and loving. The dictums, “Whatever will be, will be,” and “A friend is a friend no matter what” come to mind. Clergy and laity must learn to trust the ongoing process and work of the Holy Spirit through the life and every day friendships of ordinary, dedicated followers of Jesus, without relying on arguing someone to faith or wooing them with programs they cannot refuse. Integrating non-confrontational, intentional Jesus conversations into everyday relationships should become a normal part of socializing with others. Jesus lived in the flesh in real life with real people. The church is called to an incarnational ministry as well.<sup>165</sup> Frost states: “We cannot demonstrate Christlikeness at a distance from those whom we feel called to serve. We need to get close enough to people that our lives rub up against their lives, and that they see the incarnated Christ in our values, beliefs, and practices as expressed in cultural forms that make sense and convey impact.”<sup>166</sup>

The modern dualism of western Christianity must be identified and challenged. It has become tradition in the western secularized church to behave differently on Sunday, when we “dress up” and “play church.” Monday through Saturday is where everyday real life is lived. Followers of Jesus must shed themselves of this duality that is often perceived by others as hypocrisy and seek to behave authentically every day of the week. Another dualism that must be

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<sup>165</sup> Alan Hirsch. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 128-140.

<sup>166</sup> Frost, *Exile*, 55.

challenged, diminished and overcome is the glaring ministry distinctions between professional clergy and non-professional laity. Variation in gifts and ministry function must be differentiated from the general call of all believers to service and witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Biblically, there should be no hierarchy within Christianity. The ordained have no special status among believers apart from recognized leadership skills in a particular area of ministry. The unfinished business of the Reformation is truly the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Followers of Jesus are each incarnational priests in Jesus Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit.<sup>167</sup>

To venture is to go where others are, to their turf. People are much more open to Jesus conversations when they are comfortable in their surroundings, around a campfire, in a coffee shop or bar. Michael Frost explores the idea of “third places” in his book *Exile*. The term “third place” was coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1990 and refers to what other sociologists call “social condensers,” which are those “environments in which people meet to develop friendships, discuss issues, and interact with others.”<sup>168</sup> A person’s first place is their home, a second place would be the workplace, and a third place would be a regular hangout like a café, coffee shop, pub, or community center. These third places are considered important for community development for a number of reasons:

They are distinctive informal gathering places, make the citizen feel at home, nourish relationships and a diversity of human contact, help create a sense of place and community, invoke a sense of civic pride, promote companionship, allow people to relax and unwind after a long day at work, are socially binding, encourage sociability instead of isolation, make life more colorful and enrich public life and democracy.<sup>169</sup>

Frost points to the fact that Jesus was obviously interested in being in third places, often with food and drink around, where people felt free to be themselves. Frost writes: “In today’s

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<sup>167</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19.

<sup>168</sup> Frost, *Exile*, 56.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

society, any attempt to model your life on the life of Christ must include a genuine attempt to hang out regularly in third places. Genuine incarnational living demands it. Missional proximity can best be developed in bars, pubs, gyms, grocery stores, beauty parlors, community groups, and coffee shops.”<sup>170</sup> A simple, strategic missional process can enhance awareness among followers of Jesus that faithful witness to the Gospel must involve regular relationship building at the local hangouts where people are ready to let their guards down. A fourth paradigm shift that must occur among 21<sup>st</sup> century institutional churches is recognition that fix-it programs are not the solution. The institutional church must assist local churches to engage in grassroots processes that encourage missional life and cross-cultural outreach among all members of a community of faith.

#### Thesis: Part 2 Conclusion

#### Appreciate the Mission Field for God’s Glory

This chapter has presented the claim that American institutional churches exist for American culture and need to make a serious ongoing attempt to appreciate the local mission fields of each Kingdom outpost. There are four necessary paradigm shifts that need to happen in order for the American church today to reconnect with and successfully communicate the Gospel cross-culturally in each local community. One way to accomplish this is by developing a simple, strategic missional process, which seeks to foster paradigm change at a grassroots, local level through training which uses language, concepts and images that resonate culturally with a particular region or congregation. In the next chapter, the reader will become familiar with two tools that were developed to assist the Texas East District of the United Methodist Church in assisting small groups to make the four necessary paradigm shifts mentioned above. The two

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 59.

tools developed to assist local institutional churches in East Texas to make the missional transitions previously explained are a book which provides a simple, strategic missional process for small groups, *The Good Soil Process: A Backyard Missional Field Guide*, and an informational website, [www.thegoodsoilprocess.com](http://www.thegoodsoilprocess.com). More will be explained in the next chapter.

The nature of the institutional church tends to be inwardly focused such that maintenance often precedes mission and the goal becomes the survival of the organization rather than taking risks beyond the church community of faith to share the Gospel. The mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be God's reconciling presence in the world. This is the fundamental goal of the church, and its survival and validity is completely dependent upon fulfilling its mission. Because of a rapid increase in multi-culturalism and secular pluralism in the United States many institutionalized Christians are at a loss as to how to build relationships across cultural lines which tends to result in separation and division, the opposite of reconciliation. Culture plays a fundamental role in the comprehension and communication of the good news of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is often hindered by cross-cultural boundaries.

At the essence of the mission of God is the pursuit of healed and reconciled relationships between the Creator God and humans, one another and the rest of creation. What a privilege for those created in the image of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ and empowered by the Spirit, to participate in the creative process of imagining loving perfection into existence. The gift of grace, hope and imagination are vital elements of the sanctifying journey that Jesus leads His followers on as they seek Him and His ways in all things. The result of each faithful step on this journey is a ripple effect of healing, reconciliation, *shalom*. Every generation must study their culture and seek to identify the current primary social sicknesses in order to best witness to the Gospel's healing truth in the heart language of the people. Today's issues may be different from

the multiple times and contexts of the previous 2,000 years, but the message of Jesus' healing love remains the same.

In this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity is experiencing globalization at an extremely rapid rate, and as such, diversity, pluralism and a multiplicity of worldviews are challenging relationships among neighbors. Particularly in institutions, the backlash of such cultural shifting is increased individualization, which can further isolate and intensify misunderstanding and separation. It is of utmost importance during this period of time that the church leads the way in remaining open to the other with genuine hospitality and unconditional friendship. A very real fear among followers of Jesus is the tendency in a pluralistic world to incorporate all faiths into one mushy conglomeration that offends no one. It is vital that the church struggle against such a tendency by joining together with the diverse forms of global Christianity and affirming an unabashed faith in Jesus Christ together with firm conviction in an ecumenical spirit. At the same time, there is value in developing relational networks beyond the church. 21<sup>st</sup> century followers of Jesus must be courageous, loving and willing to cross borders with Christ's love into the unknown. It is possible to venture across boundaries as Jesus often did and still maintain one's identity. The result is often an expanded and enriched perspective by humbly entering into another's world.

Relational networks allow the Holy Spirit to take the truth of Jesus Christ along relational lines in directions never imagined. What is required is a willingness to venture fearlessly into unknown territory seeking friendship with others who seem different and strange. A fragmented postmodern society is hungry for authentic, meaningful, reconciling relationships. Jesus ate, drank and spent quality time with sinners who were considered by the religious elite to be filthy, dirty, ordinary... those who needed Him the most. He went where they were, and didn't expect



them to come to him in the temple or synagogue. Jesus became the temple, he brought God's house of prayer to others. Jesus seemed to enjoy those diverse relationships and made them a priority in His ministry.

Institutional church leadership must learn to loosen its authoritative grip on ministry and trust the Holy Spirit to send average believers into the neighborhood in ministry. Leaders must bless and free people up to venture incarnationally and passionately into the world, to cross boundaries, to imagine reconciliation and to heal relationships with people who are disenfranchised with the modern institutional church. The church must commission all its participants to walk out their call to the priesthood of all believers by empowering them, instructing them and sending them into the world on God's imaginative mission.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

#### Primary Project:

##### *The Good Soil Process: A Backyard Missional Field Guide*

Because a top-down program does not resonate well among the 107 primarily rural congregations in the Texas East District of the United Methodist Church, the primary tool developed was intended to function among small groups in an organic fashion. By developing a fairly short (140 page), manageable, easy to read “Field Guide” for small groups which contains vital paradigm shifting theology, missiology and cultural information, the author hopes to foster renewed missional movement among congregations. Rather than seeking to educate and inspire all of the members of a given congregation, similar to Jesus’ Parable of the Good Soil, *The Field Guide* seeks to encourage and motivate a seasonal life process among those who are most open to hearing and doing the Word of God. Small groups are where grassroots movements begin. Small groups are where discipleship happens best. The intention is to awaken small groups of disciples to the reality of their missionary calling as followers of Jesus and to challenge and assist them in taking relational steps together into their own backyards to share the Gospel of Jesus in both word and deed.

The size of the Field Guide is 8”x5.5” and thin so that it is easy to carry around and not daunting to the reader. The cover is black with bright splashes of color, illustrating the four main seasons of the Process: discern, design, develop and delight. Language is intentionally in line with East Texas dialect and imagery. An emphasis is repeated throughout the book upon PROCESS rather than PROGRAM so that the message will become clear to the reader(s) that

missional evangelism is a lifestyle of discipleship that must be nurtured and lived into. There are no quick-fix programs for witnessing to faith in Jesus Christ in the world. The chapters are fairly short with “field notes” space provided throughout with thought provoking questions. The book specifically addresses many of the cultural barriers described above, as well as encourages the missional paradigm shifts.

Ideally, a group would engage a chapter a week (17 chapters). Individuals would read and meditate on their own during the week and then gather together to discuss thoughts regarding the Scriptures and information. Facilitator questions are available in another document to assist relevant engagement of the material. The book provides a potential method for organizing facilitation of the process among a small group. The book guides readers through the seasons of the Christian calendar in order to emphasize the importance of developing a seasonal lifestyle of discerning God’s will together, allowing God to help a group design an outreach plan, getting out and developing the missional plan in the community, and later celebrating together what God has done. Season One: Discern could be engaged during Epiphany (January 6 to Ash Wednesday), Season Two: Design during Lent (40 days plus Sundays), Season Three: Develop during Ordinary Time (Easter to November 1), and Season Four: Delight after All Saints Day (November to December). The suggestion is merely that, as The Good Soil Process is intended to be organic and adaptable to any context. Small groups may use the tool as they wish, as the goal is that it would communicate clearly among a group of disciples, be helpful, and paradigm challenging.

### Secondary Project:

*[www.thegoodsoilprocess.com](http://www.thegoodsoilprocess.com)*

A website was developed to provide information regarding the broader Good Soil movement among the Texas East District. The website is very visually driven and celebratory in nature. Information regarding the brief history and vision behind the East District's Good Soil Process is included, a link to purchase the Field Guide is provided, and information is available regarding successes and failures in our district-wide initiative to encourage a Spirit-led missional movement. By utilizing the Internet, a hope is to model for rural congregations the importance of embracing new technologies that will provide cultural connections with neighbors.

## CHAPTER 5

### PROJECT SPECIFICATION

#### The Good Soil Process

- By Keith Tilley
- Dr. Dan Brunner, Project Advisor

#### Project Descriptions

- Write and self-publish a user-friendly book for small groups titled *The Good Soil Process: A Backyard Missional Field Guide*, which will provide a seasonal approach to effective missional disciple making.
- Develop and maintain a website that will serve as an information depot for the East District Good Soil Process as well as others beyond the district who are interested in learning from our experiences. [www.thegoodsoilprocess.com](http://www.thegoodsoilprocess.com)

#### Audience

- The congregations and particularly small groups of the Texas East District of the United Methodist Church.
- Clergy and laity alike who are interested in learning about the endeavors we are attempting in our district's Good Soil Process.
- Church leaders seeking information regarding the current crisis in the American institutional church as well as ideas as to how to address these issues.

#### Goals and Strategies

- The Field Guide will seek to inform readers of the current state of the church in America, and to provide a process that leads small groups in prayer, discussion and outreach action

with emphasis upon reorienting the church outward as missionaries in our own backyards. The four annual seasons of engagement are Discern, Design, Develop and Delight. The book will be self-published on Lulu.com free of charge and editing assistance will be by unpaid volunteers. When published it will be available for purchase in both book form and e-book. It will be promoted by Lulu on Amazon and other major book distributor sites.

- The website will primarily be attractive, informational and promotional. To keep costs down, the website will be on Yola.com, and will be completely free of charge.

#### Project Scope and Content

- The Field Guide will be written in down to earth language using images and examples that will communicate well with average East Texas folk. The book will remain under 150 pages and be presented in a manageable format. There will be space provided for insights and thoughts to be written down.
- The Good Soil Process website will be visually stimulating, humorous at times and above all informative.

#### Project Skill-set Assessment

- For the book, I will need the assistance of experienced editors. The primary editor will be Dr. Ron Claunch, a retired professor of political science and a neighbor. Other assistance will come from Dr. Tom Franks, a retired professor of education and my wife's uncle.
- I will provide all of the illustrations and the basic design for the book.
- I will need to learn how to use Lulu.com, as I have never self-published before.
- I have the basic skills needed for simple web design on Yola.com.

### Standards of Publication

- For the book, I will follow the format standards put forth on Lulu.com for promotion with Amazon and other book sellers. My primary editor, Dr. Claunch has published some books previously, and his standards are high.
- The website will need to be managed regularly, and updated as needed.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: POSTSCRIPT

In conclusion, the journey of this project has been a long and fruitful one. Out of seminary and into my second full-time, two church appointment in rural East Texas, four years ago, I found myself frustrated with the status quo expectations of my pastoral ministry. Unsure how to articulate what I knew to be wrong with the current ecclesial praxis of the local churches I served among, I had literal dreams and visions that challenged me to seek out answers to my dissatisfaction. Upon entering the DMin program at George Fox I experienced immediate relief as I simply joined in conversation with brothers and sisters from all walks of American Christianity, each struggling as I in their own ways. Something was wrong with the American institutional church, and we set out together to discover what that might be.

My journey led me to study culture, and particularly 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture. I also studied the history of the church, and most specifically the rich history of my particular denomination, the Methodists. Each new piece of information I uncovered seemed to fit right into the puzzle God was leading me to construct. I learned that culture is a vital element to consider when sharing the good news of Jesus with others. Culture can open hearts and minds to the saving message, and culture can also slam the door before any word of grace regarding the Creator God can be shared. Culture can blind one from a broader reality, and can even warp and diminish one's recognition of the truth and the mission given to the church by Christ. Here is truth; the church exists for the sake of the world, and not the other way around. The Kingdom of God is to be the church's supernatural culture, and yet the church is intended to engage and function within all cultures. In the world, but not of the world; this is the dynamic and at times confusing state of the church. The church is people engaged in loving action towards God, self



and neighbor, united in the Spirit of Christ, not traditions, buildings or even institutional organizations. My worst suspicions were proven correct, American institutional Christianity is harming the witness of the Church of Jesus Christ today in the United States. Consumerism has crept into and consumed in many cases the mission of the American church. Something must change, or institutional decline will continue until there is nothing left. God will find and use those willing to move fluidly and obediently in His ways, because He is not willing that any would be lost.

During the development of this project, I came very close to cancelling my upcoming ordination, taking leave of the United Methodist denomination, and going back to public school teaching so that I could start a new organic church focused upon discipleship and missions. I felt certain that the type of healthy body of Christ I imagined possible and felt called to lead would never be accepted within the institutional model of United Methodism. So I went to my new District Superintendent, Dr. Jerry Pennington, in September of 2008 to explain my dilemma and alert him of my decision. I was shocked to find Dr. Pennington completely empathetic to my concerns. He asked if I would help him work at a district level to raise awareness among local congregations and empower and equip a grassroots missional movement. I agreed to stay in for a couple of years and try to do what we could. We developed *The Good Soil Process for East Texas*, and have been using trial and error, feeling our way along as we seek to encourage smaller to mid-size rural congregations to make a paradigm shift from maintenance to mission.

We have found the effort of reshaping an entire culture of 107 congregations (there were 114 when we began) to be not only difficult but downright daunting. One thing we have discovered is that many of the local congregations have become so institutionalized that they practically avoid at all costs any new ventures unless mandated from the hierarchy (conference

leadership). Pastors come and go every couple of years or less in the itinerant Methodist system which unintentionally discourages any continuity of vision and influence by a leader.

Discouragement reigns in smaller congregations. Participants are very aware of the decrease in attendance and giving as well as the increase in the average ages. Something is obviously not right, but within the institutional paradigm it is almost impossible to figure out. One hears over and over again, “It must be the preacher’s fault. That conference over in the big city doesn’t even know us. They don’t even know what kind of preacher we need. If we could just choose our own preacher, people would come back. We would grow if we only had a good pastor who went to the football games, was part of the community, would visit homes regularly and could preach well.” In reality, the conference cabinet, which appoints the pastors, really doesn’t know anything about the rural local churches except for the declining vital statistics turned in each week (worship attendance, professions of faith and mission participation). The conference faults the local church. Blame in the institutional church is passed around, and it becomes easiest for participants to simply give up, attend worship on Sunday morning and not invest too much more.

And yet in every congregation, there are those who want more, who have a deep desire to win souls for Christ, and aren’t willing to just keep “playing church.” These are the folks Good Soil is trying to reach out to. We want to connect them with one another, get them dreaming, learning, discussing and acting missionally together. The ones who want more are the ones I am targeting in my book, *The Good Soil Process: A Backyard Missional Field Guide*. We want to assist pastors and laity in local congregations by helping them shift to a missional paradigm which is necessary to reach out cross-culturally. We want to bring key lay leaders along for the journey with the clergy. The idea is that leadership together must embrace missional evangelism in order for the rest of the congregation to take notice and eventually join in. If the pastor is

reappointed from that local outpost, that should not impact the lay leadership's commitment to the ongoing process of witnessing for Jesus in word and deed in that community.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the Field Guide, which became available in March of 2010, I am offering 5 Field Guide Seminars around the district in September and October of 2010. I have chosen five congregations to host the seminars that are distributed geographically around the district and are intentionally small venues, in order to highlight the significance of the smaller church. Each three hour seminar will assist small groups and facilitators with development of a customized working plan to use the Field Guide for guiding prayer, discussion, creative visioning and missional action in their small group. The seasons of the process follow the church calendar and help guide a group to discern, design, develop and delight in how God has touched neighbor's lives through them.

Finally, an unexpected outcome of The Good Soil Process has been the attention and receptiveness it has received from the Texas Annual Conference cabinet of Bishop and District Superintendents. Other districts have now hired a person to do the equivalent of what I do as Good Soil director. Some of our outside consultants are now being utilized by other districts. I have had opportunities to share ideas with the cabinet about things like tent-making ministries, bi-vocational ministries and shared ministries. Recently an out-of-the-box ministry proposal I submitted has been approved and encouraged. Beginning in October of 2010, if all works out as planned, I will be forming a shared ministry parish among six rural congregations, and starting a unique missional church without real estate in the Nacogdoches area. I will oversee and administrate a team of certified lay preachers/ministers to preach and serve the 6 existing congregations, and at the same time begin meeting in my home on weeknights to develop an

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<sup>1</sup> To review what has worked and what has not worked with The Good Soil Process please read the documents in the Appendix.

organic missional church. Because of the dramatic crisis the United Methodist institution is experiencing, suddenly the hierarchy (particularly in the Texas Conference) has realized that it is vital that they relinquish some control in order to allow freedom for God's Spirit to move in new ways. This is exciting and an answer to prayer. Halleluiah! May God receive glory and praise!

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## APPENDICES

\*Currently Attached as PDF files.

1. field guide front cover.PDF
2. thegoodsoilprocess field guide.PDF
3. field guide back cover.PDF
4. good soil update july 28 2010.PDF
5. proposal north nac rural parish.PDF

\*Link to website.

6. [www.thegoodsoilprocess.com](http://www.thegoodsoilprocess.com)

## the good soil process: a backyard missional field guide



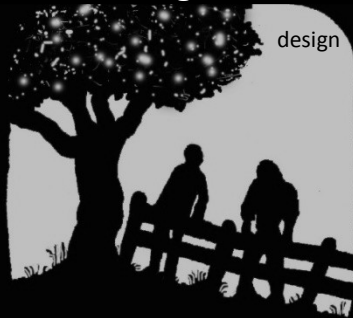
Jesus explained, "But the good soil represents honest, good-hearted people who hear God's message, cling to it, and steadily produce a huge harvest."

-Luke 8:15



keith tilley

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*For the church of Jesus Christ  
to the glory of God the Father,  
in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.*

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## How to Use This Field Guide

How many times have we sat in committee meetings (sorry to start out with a dirty word), pondering the problems of our local church (generally, lack of members and finances) with frustration and a sense of helplessness? By the way, FYI: a “*committee*” is the term used to refer to a crowd of buzzards or vultures, just as a “*gaggle*” is a group of geese. Go figure. Nonetheless, everyone on the committee gives freely of their time and gifts because they truly want to be good stewards of God’s provision and genuinely want to be a part of something much bigger and grander than themselves.

So the representative leaders are gathered together to discuss the business of the church when someone points out that we really need to focus on reaching out to new people in fresh and creative ways. A light begins to glow on the faces of the group as the discussion turns outward. Our neighbors, whom everyone knows don’t go to any church, are named. Children living down the road in squalor are identified. Single parents struggling to make ends meet, a family who recently lost their home to fire, and the young, noisy college age kids who live next door to the church are mentioned as well. “*These people need Jesus. What can we do to reach out to them?*”

Everyone agrees there is certainly a need. It begins to feel like a holy moment as the group gathers in an impromptu circle, locked in unity, hand in hand. As prayer is offered up for our neighbors and our church, there is an awareness that the Holy Spirit is tangibly present in our midst. Then just as suddenly, the moment fades. We look at the clock and realize we have already surpassed the allotted hour for the meeting and agree that it is time to go home. We all feel a little better after the discussion and sense that we were certainly praying God’s heart and will for our neighbors. But what happens next? Most often...nothing, nada, zip, zero.

And so the cycle continues, over and over and over again, meeting after meeting, generation after generation. We discuss

and pray with truly good intentions but never really seem to get unstuck enough to go beyond the feel good moment and actually do anything different. I have spoken to enough well-intentioned leaders and served on enough “committees” to know firsthand that this is a common problem faced in the local church today.

This field guide is intended to provide a simple method for getting ourselves unstuck. In all humility, we all need help. As God’s children and Christ’s Church, we must intentionally follow through with God’s will and plans for the community that surrounds our local church outpost. This field guide can be used in any number of ways. How anyone chooses to implement these materials is an individual choice. Please notice that this is a Good Soil *PROCESS*, not a *program*. Missional information and suggestions are provided here to help you and your communities of faith engage in innovative and creative ministry together in your own backyards.

**Here are some suggestions in no particular order:**

1. Write in this field guide.
2. There are field note spaces for personal thoughts and reflection spread throughout.
3. There are group action suggestions at the end of each seasonal chapter.
4. Notice that the amount of resource material for each season becomes less as you move through the seasonal process together (in order to allow for more field time in the last two seasons).
5. Study, discuss together and apply information learned in practical ways (a weekly discussion may work well, or you may wish to disperse meetings throughout the year).
6. Pray, pray, pray (be sure to read from chapter 13 first, “Pest Control for Good Soil: Spiritual Warfare”). Not a subject for missionaries to take lightly – bathe the entire process in prayer!
7. Study Scripture together (don’t just read the Word, allow the Word to read you).
8. Develop clear expectations together.
9. Serve others beyond your congregation together.
10. Become more community minded together.
11. Build genuine relationships with non-church people.
12. Customize for unique mission fields – don’t try to duplicate.

# A Group Facilitator's Overview

DATES COVERED	CHAPTER	SECTION	PAGES	ACTION RESPONSE (at end of chapter)
(fill in group meeting dates)	Introduction			
	1	Life	9-15	n/a
	2	Seasons	16-22	n/a
Epiphany Jan. 6 to Ash Wed.	Season One DISCERN			
	3	Groundwork	23-31	†
	4	Forecast	32-38	†
	5	Wisdom	39-46	†
	6	Fruit	47-55	†
	7	Fields	56-61	†
Lent 40 days plus Sundays	Season Two DESIGN			
	8	Seeds of Love	62-69	†
	9	Love God	70-74	†
	10	Love Others	75-78	†
	11	Be Genuine	79-80	†
	12	Be Generous	91-105	†
Easter to Nov. 1	Season Three DEVELOP			
	13	Get Out	107-113	†
	14	Walk the Walk	114-122	†
Nov. & Dec.	Season Four DELIGHT			
	15	Gather	123-128	†
Conclusion				
	16	Life	129-135	n/a
	17	Seasons	136-143	n/a

**\*NOTE:** The first two seasons of the field guide require more group processing than the final two which are more practical and involve more hands-on action in the field.

# **PROCESS:**

## ***SEASONS OF ABUNDANT LIFE***

### **~ CHAPTER 1: LIFE ~**

*So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us.*

*He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.*

*-John 1:14<sup>1</sup>*

### **THE ABUNDANT LIFE OF CHRIST**

Jesus' abundant lifestyle sets the bar for how we should live. He experienced various seasons during his life on earth, just like the rest of us. The various seasons of Jesus' life were many: the common changes of spring to summer to winter to fall; the deep heritage, faith, festivals and rites of His Jewish upbringing; and the discouraging experience of a people group oppressed by foreign invaders.

Some of the diverse seasons Jesus experienced are recorded in the four Gospel accounts which focus primarily on His three years of ministry. He knew the discipline required of the skilled trade of carpentry, the satisfaction of hard work, the ache of hunger, the struggle of temptation, the love of family, the pain of loss, the joy of weddings, the deep sense of call, and the love of God and neighbor. He experienced friendship, compassion, anger, success, difficulty, pain, sorrow, joy, power, and misunderstanding. If anyone ever lived a full and complete life full of ups and downs, disappointments and triumphs, Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Note: all biblical passages are taken from the New Living Translation unless otherwise specified.

did. If anyone ever loved God and neighbor without holding anything back, it was our Lord.

Jesus knew his Jewish brothers and sisters well. He had grown up among them in a fairly average, rural, poverty-stricken Greco-Hebrew outpost in Northern Israel. Jesus was a good Jew, a Rabbi or religious teacher, also skilled in the trade of wood-working. This man in His 30s walked over Roman occupied Israel for three years, meeting the locals, eating in their homes, sharing, learning, teaching and healing mind, body, and spirit in the name of God the Father.

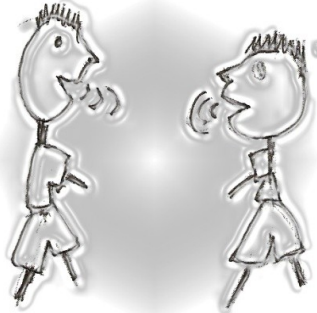
The oppressed Jewish peoples' seasons were Jesus' seasons. He was a master of the newest technological forms of communication of the time - reading and writing. As far as is known, we find none of His writings preserved. What we do have over 2,000 years later are testimonies of the incredible things Jesus did and said. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they were written down by disciples to be shared with multiple generations.

*FIELD NOTES: What about Jesus do you admire most?*

## ABUNDANT LIFE LESSONS

You have heard it said, “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” Those weathered by life can maintain a positive outlook, gain wisdom and strength. Most of the people Jesus encountered in the 1<sup>st</sup> century did not read or write, but they did speak multiple languages and were well-seasoned. The primary tradition was oral, and so the common person was highly skilled at memorization and probably more able to listen, remember, and recount than we are today. Stories were the primary means of communication and learning. The world-wide web of that day was very much relational, and exchanges of information often took place around a camp fire or a common meal rather than through emails or video networking from an isolated computer in someone’s office.

Jesus told stories to anyone who would listen (quite often large crowds of interested followers). His lessons taught the common person about God and His ways, and they were communicated in the heart language of His audience. Jesus spoke Aramaic, Greek, Farmer, Fisherman, Legalese... (whatever language was needed). Society in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was primarily agrarian, and so Jesus often taught using images of farming. Farming images made sense to Jesus’ friends whereas images of electronic gadgets, sports, travel and automotive technology were non-existent. Communication only works when we speak the language of and relate to the experiences of those who listen and process our words and images. Jesus was a master communicator and knew this very well.



“Conversation”  
-L.T.

*FIELD NOTES: Consider Jesus' ministry. What are some of the abundant life lessons we can learn?*

*What did Jesus do when He faced difficulties?*

*What was most important to Jesus?*

*If reading and writing was the newest world-changing technology in Jesus' day, what is considered new today?*

*What are some heart languages spoken in your neighborhood?*

*Should our ministry be relational in nature?*

*Should we expect everyone to respond positively?*

*Why do you think Jesus traveled all over Israel, and sent His disciples out as well?*

## **GOOD SOIL PRODUCES ABUNDANT LIFE**

A memorable and profound parable was told, probably more than once, about a farmer who went out to sow seed (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 7:5-15). Most likely, the process of seed sowing was very familiar to the audiences of Jesus as each family participated in growing food for themselves and for others to buy. The farmer in Jesus' story scattered seed everywhere, as most folks did, hoping that something would take root and grow. Rather than carefully dropping each seed in a specially dug hole, the farmer just slung it all over.



When tiny little seeds are tossed around indiscriminately and blown by the wind, the sower lacks control as to where each seed lands. So, the scattered seeds fell on different types of soil, which Jesus used to describe the various responses of those who hear the Word of God. The footpath was so hard that the seeds that fell on it were quickly eaten by the birds. The shallow soil with rock just below the surface did not allow enough moisture, and the immature plants withered and died. Thorns choked out some of the tender young plants. As they began to form roots, they did not develop and mature because they were sharing space with thorny weeds.

So far, this farmer had not been very successful. One wonders if any of the seeds hit pay dirt (so to speak). But sure enough, some of the seeds did land on fertile soil, and the results were a plant that grew to maturity and produced one hundred times the amount sown. Of all the seeds tossed indiscriminately out by the farmer, one seed which landed on fertile soil brought forth so much fruit that the investment paid great dividends. One of Jesus' points seems clear: not everyone who hears the Word of God will mature and produce, but a small minority will, and that makes all the effort worthwhile. Lesson: don't expect all to respond, but do anticipate some good soil.

*FIELD NOTES: Read the Good Soil Parable on your own and jot down any insights (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 7:5-15).*

## ROCKS, BIRDS & THORNS, OH MY!

Ever hear of the 80 – 20 rule? There appears to be in almost every church organization an average of about 20 percent of the folks who are deeply involved and intentionally growing in their faith while 80 percent seem to stay on the periphery of the community. Now, this is not a hard and fast rule. It is important to note that we are all at different places in our journeys and grace should be offered to all, regardless of our level of participation.

Nonetheless, Jesus seems to be saying to us: *“Don’t spend too much time worrying about pleasing and entertaining the 80 percent. Sow seeds of love and God’s Word indiscriminately to all but pay most attention to the fertile soil which produces fruit. This is where the best investment of time is spent.”* It is easy to be distracted from cultivating the good soil. A spark of criticism or dissent can cause us to frantically function as extinguishers, constantly putting out fires among the 80 percent. This is neither healthy nor fair to the 20 percent who are there to grow.

Jesus intentionally modeled the 80-20 rule by choosing only 12 disciples to walk with Him for three years. He spoke to huge crowds and healed many who were brought to Him, but it was his 12 closest friends who *Jesus* spent time equipping and empowering to sow seeds in the world. And history reveals that even though only 11 disciples proved to be good soil, those 11 followers allowed God’s Word to take root in their lives. Blown by the wind of God’s Spirit, they grew to maturity, produced an abundance of fruit, and released seeds of God’s Word throughout most of the known world. Lesson: invest heavily in the 20 percent (good soil).

*But the good soil represents honest, good-hearted people who hear God's message, cling to it, and steadily produce a huge harvest. No one would light a lamp and then cover it up or put it under a bed. No, lamps are mounted in the open, where they can be seen by those entering the house. For everything that is hidden or secret will eventually be brought to light and made plain to all. So be sure to pay attention to what you hear. To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But to those who are not listening, even what they think they have will be taken away from them.*

*-Jesus, Luke 8:15-18*

*FIELD NOTES: Imagine what might happen if we spent most of our time and assets (gifts, talents, service, attention) on developing those “who hear God's message, cling to it, and steadily produce a huge harvest” rather than maintaining property and programs to keep others on the periphery pleased.*

*Name some ways your church focuses time, assets, and energy on developing good soil.*

*Name some ways your church gets distracted from investing appropriate time, assets and energy on developing the good soil.*

## ~ CHAPTER 2: SEASONS ~

### A SEASONAL PROCESS FOR ABUNDANT LIFE

Farming is hard work, and good farmers understand the rhythms of the seasons. They utilize the technology at hand and are very familiar with their fields and the soils they contain. Farmers know when to work, when to pray, when to rest, when to play, and when to rejoice in the harvest.

The Good Soil Process, as described below, is a recognition that we can work hard and plant the seeds, but ultimately it is up to God the Creator and Sustainer to grow anything of value. We are merely participants in a grand mission that originates with our Maker. We followers of Jesus are privileged to sow seeds and live as witnesses to the joyous life of grace and purpose available to every person on the face of this globe.

The life of grace in Jesus Christ involves seasons of growth and participation with God's Spirit in the rhythmic patterns of life. Followers of Jesus for over 2,000 years have taken their cue from our ancestors in the faith, the Israelites, and have ordered our calendars according to holy days. These set apart days aid the community of faith to move through the seasons of life together with purpose and cadence as we not only tell the story of Jesus our Savior but enact it as well in prayer, worship, witness, and service. Living together in community as faithful followers involves rehearsing who we are and whose we are, recognizing our united missional nature (we are sent servants), and finding creative ways to live deliberate, seasonal, productive lives of witness in the world.



*FIELD NOTES: Consider the seasons your local church celebrates: weekly worship, Christmas, Easter, summer break... How does your participation in the seasonal life of the church help develop and influence your family's rhythmic patterns of life?*

## **THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY MAINTENANCE DELIMMA**

### **Are we sowing seeds of mission or maintenance?**

The western church is experiencing a serious season of decline. To borrow from the Good Soil Parable once more, although the maintenance of crops is important, if the farmer fails to go out into the fields and sow seeds, there will be no crops to tend. The western church has become so inwardly maintenance focused that we have forgotten how to GO and SOW. The field guide below is intended to assist the local community of faith in making the paradigm shift from maintenance to mission and to provide a model for following through with Jesus relationships beyond the local church.

The neighborhoods around us have changed. America is now a multi-cultural society without a common bonding identity. Like it or not, the Christian church is no longer at the center of the social structure in most communities. We are having trouble making disciples. We are having trouble keeping disciples. The frank and unspoken reality is that the majority of Christians in the United States attend smaller to mid-size congregations. And yet many of us in those congregations are stricken with big-church envy.

The unspoken reality is that most church growth is simply “sheep-shifting” as consumer-Christians church shop for the best programs for their particular needs. Our Western, competitive, independent spirit whispers into our communal ear that we are neither worthy, nor successful unless we are BIG. And so we continue to try to become what we are not. Music style, worship style, venue style, children and youth programs, grand mega-buildings, star-studded clergy, and multiple specialized staff members... will not solve our current maintenance/mission dilemma. As a matter of fact, it likely is making things worse.

It is time each clergy and lay leader stop for a moment and ask the important and revealing question: where are most of our time, effort, and assets going? Is it towards maintaining our buildings and programs or helping get the Good News of Jesus into all of the world? For most average local congregations, all of this “BIG church stuff” is simply distracting fluff. With every new program, NBA size gym, entry way coffee bar, and high salaried staff member, we are just digging the “maintenance” hole deeper and deeper.

As will be discussed later, “attractional” is the antithesis of “missional”. The first treats the church as a magnetic location (building), the latter as sent out servants (people). It is time to get



back to basics. The underlying ministry goal for the Western church in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century became undeniably attractional: to get people to come to our location by providing the best and most entertaining

show in town. Maintaining that level of production is tiresome and very often distracts us from our true mission: to craft disciples of Jesus among all people groups.

*FIELD NOTES: Where is your community of faith investing most of its time, assets, and effort? Is it toward maintaining programs and property or towards fulfilling its mission in the world? Explain.*

*Where have you personally been investing most of your church time: providing programming, consuming programming or missionally reaching out to others for God?*

### **GO FOR IT! (ABUNDANT LIFE)**

How can we as a community of believers intentionally refresh our lives of faith and mission with expectancy, creativity, and imagination? How can we connect anew with our neighbors and communicate the Good News cross-culturally in a post-modern, post-Christendom, post-everything society? The answer, I believe, is that we must intentionally engage in communal practices that allow God's Holy Spirit the freedom to instruct and speak to us about the Gospel and the cultural contexts around us in new and profound ways. We must nurture our faith and practice together, intentionally engaging in seasonal

missional tasks. The Good Soil Process will provide a seasonal rhythm of DISCERN, DESIGN, DEVELOP and DELIGHT. As you proceed through this Field Guide, more will be explained about each season. At the most basic level, we must re-position ourselves missionally so we can *GO*.

God's mission is that the Good News of Jesus Christ will be spread to every people group in His world. Our participation in the mission of God must become our true priority as a community of faith. Posting vague platitudes around our beautiful facilities as catchy mission statements does not necessarily translate into a missional priority. Where we spend our time and assets does define who we are and reveals our true mission. Unfortunately, for many Western congregations today, time and assets are used more for maintenance rather than mission, for consumption more than salvation.

*FIELD NOTES: Can you name and describe the GO ministries of your local church, those that impact your community and the world for Jesus?*

*Can you name someone you know who clearly has a call to reach out to your community or beyond? Seek them out and ask them their thoughts.*



## **ABUNDANT LIFESTYLE**

### **Warning: Not a Program!**

The Good Soil Process is a simple, intentional model of life for small groups of any type. The intention is to develop rhythms and habits which allow God's Spirit to speak to and direct the faithful in mission beyond the walls of the local congregation. This book is a field guide with ideas that will hopefully spark the imaginations of its users and encourage good news activity in our local communities.

The goal is to encourage a movement, not to develop a program. The Good Soil Process seeks to encourage a group of followers of Jesus to gather together regularly to pray, discuss God's Word, and seek to remain open to God's ways and will for His church's ministry in the world. It is intended to be a practical tool for guiding followers of Jesus into the world in mission.

This field guide is based on the premise that Jesus is already in the world preparing the soil of people's hearts. Our call (as field hands of His church) is to go where He already is. With the seed of His love, we are called to faithfully sow in the lives of others for Him.

There is partnership implied in the Good Soil Process: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the community of faith. The fields belong to the Master Farmer and cover the entire earth. The Good Soil Process suggests that each local outpost of God's advancing Kingdom is called and equipped to serve in the surrounding mission fields with which we have been entrusted. Each of us is called and equipped to serve as missionaries of God's love in our own backyards.

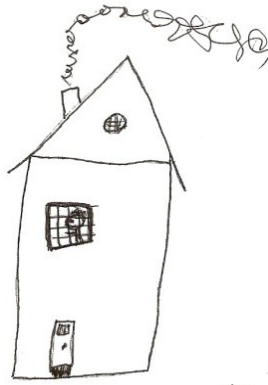
*If you are too lazy to plow in the right season,  
you will have no food at the harvest.*

- Proverbs 20:4

God is listening – are we?



“Man Praying”  
-L.T.



“Backyard Window”  
-L.T.

*FIELD NOTES: Will you accept your calling as a local missionary, a sent out servant of God?  
Write a prayer of commitment to the Lord.  
Ask for guidance, insight, and courage for God’s mission.*

# SEASON ONE:

## *DISCERN*



### ~ CHAPTER 3: GROUNDWORK ~

#### **EPIPHANY (January 6 to Ash Wednesday)<sup>i</sup>**

As mentioned above, there is no clear program to follow. A simple outline of important characteristics of a seasonal approach to backyard missions is what I have set out to provide. So, an example has been laid out of how *The Good Soil Process* may be integrated into a faith community's annual Christian calendar. How each community chooses to develop these missional ideas and apply them is strictly up to the personality and character of each group as lived out in their particular context.

I like the idea of tying the Good Soil Process into the already existing seasons of our church lives together. This way, the Process becomes an enhancement to who we are and what we do and not just some new appendage or program. An important part of the Process is finding ways to meld and simplify our motives and actions, rather than adding more things to our already busy lives.

The season of Epiphany, beginning on January 6 (also called "Three Kings Day") is the climax of the Christmas season for Protestants - a season of light and hope. What better time to begin our season of Discernment than at the beginning of a new year, during a traditional period of recognition of the miraculous love of God illuminated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Epiphany is a revealing of the presence of God. It is the light of God radiating outward and inward as well as a gift or a reminder that God is here.

The time after Christmas is often a letdown within a secular, consumer-focused culture. But our story is different. The light of God in Jesus Christ expands into dark places. Newness appears in the midst of routine. Abundant life bursts out of the expected deadness in the natural world. Where are the epiphanies that are awaiting our attention? As we discipline ourselves to watch, wait, and listen, we will discover the fresh voice of God calling us into the world. The Good Soil Process encourages us to take a prolonged period of discernment so that we may pause and pay closer attention to Jesus in the world.

*FIELD NOTES: In your own words write a brief personal definition of discernment:*

*A complete explanation of what is meant by "discern" will be provided as you read further.*

## DIG IN!

Groundwork is vital for good soil. Preparation involves digging around in the dirt, making sure there are plenty of nutrients and oxygen, and removing weeds and obstacles like rocks, branches, and pesky pests. The turned over soil must set for an extended period of time so a few refreshing rains can settle upon it and so the compost can provide plenty of nourishment.

Care, attention, and rest help prepare the soil for the important work to come of receiving and growing the seed that will be entrusted to it. The soil willingly (and submissively) accepts the help of the gardener in these matters. The gardener's role is to cultivate while the soil is expected to simply be still and receive. In this first season of the Good Soil Process, we dig in by waiting on the Lord. We open our spirits to the Master Gardner, the Holy Spirit, who is skilled in these matters.

*Be still in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for him to act.*

-David, Psalm 37:7

*FIELD NOTES: Review the story of the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-13). Thoughts?*

## BEYOND COMMON SENSE

It has been said that we need a season in our lives together where we just “hit the reset button, defrag, and reboot”.<sup>ii</sup> A fresh start, a new perspective is imperative for imaginative Spirit-led momentum. Perhaps, that is common sense. But we must go further. We cannot freeze up and just stop everything, but we must build into our lives of ministry a period of rest, to wait and listen to the voice of God. If we wait and listen, perhaps, we won’t move too timidly or too blindly.

Sometimes our ministries have so little momentum that it seems all we do is step forward cautiously, never really acting. At other times, we can so blindly rush forward in our service that we fail to pay attention to God’s agenda and the actual needs of those around us. Like a “crash” of rhinos, at some point we need to stop and examine the swath of torn trees and brush we have left in our wake.

## WHAT DISCERNMENT IS

According to the Encarta Dictionary, ***discern*** is 1. *To see or notice something that is not very clear*, 2. *To understand something not immediately obvious*, 3. *To be able to tell the difference between two or more things*.<sup>iii</sup>

Biblically speaking, prophets were used by God in a couple of ways: 1. Foretelling the future (primarily Old Testament), and 2. Speaking the truth boldly (primarily New Testament). Prophets are those whom God has given particular insight or clarity into God’s will and ways. A prophet sees the big picture and can’t help but boldly proclaim God’s intentions, motives, and desires for the community of faith. My guess is that true prophets took plenty of time to make sure that a word from the Lord was really just that. Quite often, at least in the Old

Testament, God's prophets who spoke out and even foretold the future truthfully found themselves in prison, tortured or killed. In these cases, discernment was deadly serious.

*I assure you, the Son can do nothing by Himself.  
He only does what He sees the Father doing.*  
-Jesus, John 5:19

We who follow Jesus today are called to live out a prophetic, discerning ministry as well. We are to discern God's truth and proclaim it. We are to look to Jesus who looks to the Father, and we are to act as Jesus who acts as the Father. In Matthew 10:16-20, it is recorded that Jesus said that He was sending His disciples out as "*sheep among wolves*," and when arrested, they would have opportunity to share their witness to the world. Although they may not know what to say yet, Jesus affirms:

*You will be given the right words at the right time. For it won't be you doing the talking. It will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*  
-Jesus, Matthew 10:19b-20

To discern is to distinguish between our own thoughts and desires and the Lord's, to differentiate God's will from our own, and to determine with fresh eyes of faith which words are from the Spirit of our Father and which are not. Discernment only happens as a work and grace of the Holy Spirit as God's children make themselves available. The Gardener enables the soil to receive. Therefore, discernment is our first season and our groundwork for *The Good Soil Process*. Discernment helps us refocus our attentions on the One who is leading us and

empowering us in ministry. It is important to learn to pause and remember that God is the Gardener, not us. During this groundbreaking season, good soil remains primarily open and available.

When it comes to discernment, it is crucial that we do not take just a fleeting moment, as we often do before committee meetings, to shoot a prayer to the Lord and ask His guidance as we proceed with the business of the church. Rather, we must condition ourselves in community to wait upon the Lord, to seek Him and listen, even when we aren't sure whether we are hearing or not. Learning a posture of discernment is a mandatory characteristic of a disciple. This can be an uncomfortable time for us 21<sup>st</sup> century speed freaks. Silence is scary for most of us today, and we would rather replace silence with noise, energy, and verbiage. We live in a culture of background static and sound. Quietude is a valuable discipline for God's church in any age.

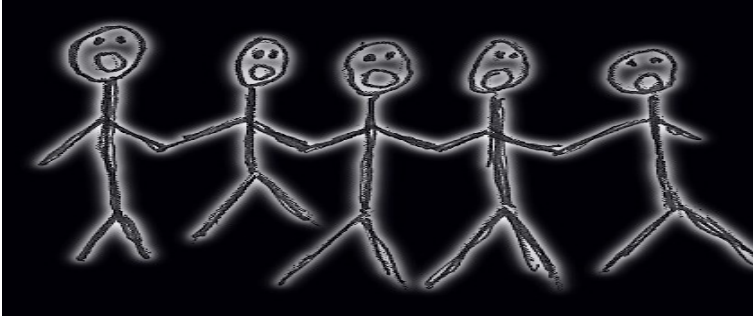
*FIELD NOTES: When have you felt it necessary in your personal life to discern the will of God?*

*How did that impact your decision making?*



*I also tell you this: If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them.*

-Jesus, Matthew 18:19-20



“Friends Singing Together” - L.T.

## **COMMUNITY SENSE**

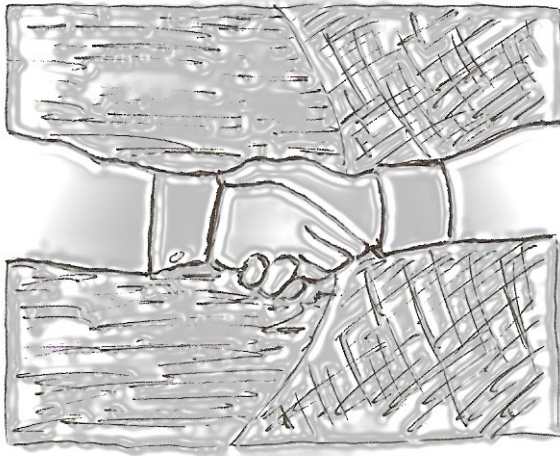
We honor God by giving Him our precious and hard earned time. We grow in grace and maturity as we learn to pay attention to the Spirit’s nudges and promptings. Often the Spirit can only be experienced fully in the depth of silence. Out of the silence we must return to our brothers and sisters in the faith to share what we have heard. An important part of the discernment process is listening to what others have heard as well and allowing the group to challenge our observations with their own.

Discernment, at its best, is a community event. Seeking a communal sense of God’s will always involves humility and selflessness. We must train ourselves to take the time to listen and really hear one another. Trust the Spirit of God to impart His truth and ways among the team. Each person receives an important piece of the missional puzzle. Sharing time together is critical when it comes to discerning the voice and will of God.

*Two people can accomplish more than twice as much as one; they get a better return for their labor. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help.*

*But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble. And on a cold night, two under the same blanket can gain warmth from each other. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*

-Solomon, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12



*FIELD NOTES: Is it easier to engage in discernment individually or as a group?*

*How and why?*

*Who do you feel good about working with in a group environment when it comes to seeking God's will?*

*How have you worked with others in the past to discern God's will?*

~ *Action Response* ~

**The Contemplative Way:  
Spiritual Detoxification**

For the next week, find a contemplative exercise that feels right for you and practice as often as you can. Let God help you let go of the junk that may be clogging your soul. As you participate in these disciplines, be sure to expect a subtle or even dramatic experience of the mysterious, healing, living God. Here are some prayer examples:

1. Choose a one syllable word (*peace, love, strength, Lord, etc.*), get comfortable in a location where you will not be disturbed, and practice sitting in God's presence as a worshipper. When your mind begins to wander, repeat silently or aloud the word you have chosen to redirect your thoughts.
2. Another option for more visual people is to focus on a mental image or icon (*Jesus, waterfall, cross, garden, etc.*).
3. Light a candle in a dark room and pray something like: "*Let your light shine, Jesus.*"
4. The Jesus Prayer, or something like it can be repeated to refocus as well: "*Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.*"
5. Choose a short Scripture to emblazen in your heart like: "*to be filled with all the fullness of God*" (*Ephesians 3:19*), "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control*" (*Galatians 5:22*), *etc.*

Write or draw any thoughts or images below or in a journal:

## ~ CHAPTER 3: FORECAST ~

### GOD THE FARMER

In order to discern what God is up to in the world, it is important to know God's character and the history of God's story among His creation as revealed in the Bible. There is no doubt about it – God is a farmer. And God's field is a big (from our perspective) blue and green ball spinning around a massive orb of fire in a galaxy we call the Milky Way. This field of the Maker's imaginings is set in the midst of a universe so massive that we cannot even begin to fathom the complexity and size of it all. A biosphere of complete perfection has been provided for the growth and sustenance of an incredibly diverse and complicated system of life.

From beginning to end, the Scriptures use imagery of a garden filled with abundant life and good things. According to the biblical story, everything is perfect around God's farm in the beginning (Genesis) and then restored again in the end (Revelation). But between Genesis and Revelation, there was an occurrence that polluted God's original intentions. The Master Farmer's created friends, the humans, breached the original partnership by conscious choice, harvesting fruit that was off limits. The consequences of that decision to "become like God", in spite of the clear warnings by the Farmer, impacted all of creation negatively. Everything became skewed and slightly impure because of a selfish, disobedient decision by humanity.

*The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and care for it. But the LORD God gave him this warning: "You may freely eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die."*

-Genesis 2:15-17

“God the  
Farmer”  
-J.T.



*FIELD NOTES: See if you can identify some images in the Bible where God is viewed as a farmer? Hint: The prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel & Isaiah used these images quite a bit. Oh yeah, and Jesus too.*

## THE STORM

To discern God's mission for His church, we must understand the current situation in the world. As a result of the contamination of creation, relationships have become uneasy and homeostasis is out of kilter due to an egotistical violation of God given, healthy, established boundaries (sin). This blemished in-between season has cycles of weather that we could describe in scientific, agricultural terms as "good", "bad", and "ugly"...  
*"That was an ugly storm that moved across the western fields yesterday"...*  
*"Looks like good weather today in the southern fields, as the sun rises and a cool front blows through"...*  
*"A bad storm is brewing over in the middle eastern fields today"...* The forecasts and reflections go on, a seemingly endless cycle of ethical confusion, relational disturbances, and occasional scattered showers of peace, hope, and love.

But we, who know the Farmer and follow the Farmer's Son, are certain that these weather disturbances are only temporary. We know this because the Farmer has told us so.

*My thoughts are completely different from yours, says the LORD. And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it. You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands! Where once there were thorns, cypress trees will grow. Where briars grew, myrtles will sprout up. This miracle will bring great honor to the LORD's name; it will be an everlasting sign of his power and love. -The Prophet, Isaiah 55:8-13*

*FIELD NOTES: Write a personal message to the Lord in response to the section and scripture above.*

### **PLANTING WITH PURPOSE**

God has a mission for all followers of Jesus. In spite of the dark clouds, seeds of hope are being planted and watered; workers are being called into the fields to prepare for the harvest. Our toil, tilling and sweat is not in vain; the Farmer knows His land, He knows its cycles, He sees the broader picture and He has the patience to bring about an incredible, plentiful crop that will produce abundant life and fullness in this earthly field. The Farmer is not far off, distant and remote. He walks among his crops, testing the soil, adding fertilizer where needed, pruning so as to produce much fruit, and caring, tending, and enriching the fields as much as is required, exactly as is necessary. The Farmer is with us, we are not alone, thanks be to God!

*Toward evening they heard the LORD God walking about in the garden.*

*-Genesis 3:8*

*In the beginning the Word already existed. He (the Farmer) was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. Life itself was in Him, and this life gives light to everyone. But although the world was made through Him, the world didn't recognize Him when he came. So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and*

*faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the (Farmer)<sup>iv</sup>. -John 1:1-4, 10, 14*

Discernment of the Farmer's mission depends upon careful attentiveness to His Son, who began a good work in His fields. The Farmer is near, and His technique and timing is perfect. This accomplished grower knows the seasons and does not waste one bit of soul, (excuse me) soil; He scatters seed everywhere with loving care, especially in the marginal zones, in places one would not think to plant. He is a creative master, a botanist of the highest order, and knows how to grow anything, anywhere. He sends His ever-growing family out to tend, to water with loving care, and to distribute the nourishment of His Word of Life, especially in those places that seem desolate and unproductive. For the Farmer has a green thumb; He can create life out of emptiness simply with a song, for *in the beginning, God the Farmer sang the heavens and earth into existence* (Genesis 1:1, *my interpretation*).

*FIELD NOTES: Ask the Lord of the Harvest to show you where He is at work in the world and particularly in your community planting with purpose. Jot anything that comes to mind down here.*



## KNOW THE SEASONS

The Farmer's attention and awareness, for all times, is focused upon this spinning ball of life. He lingers among His fields, both day and night, and not one little detail misses His careful and precise attendance. The season of Harvest is coming, and all of creation awaits that day with longing and expectation! The Maker's Way is the most excellent arrangement for growth and productivity, and our hope is in the Farmer's loving care and marvelous wisdom.

*Then an angel came from the Temple and called out in a loud voice to the one sitting on the cloud, "Use the sickle, for the time has come for you to harvest; the crop is ripe on the earth." -Revelation 14:15*

*And the angel showed me a pure river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, coursing down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations. No longer will anything be cursed. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there-- no need for lamps or sun-- for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever. -Revelation 22:1-5*

*FIELD NOTES: What kind of "crop" do you think God is ripening on the earth? Ask for understanding and direction. Offer yourself for God's good purposes.*

*~ Action Response ~*

**The Way of Fasting:  
Spiritual Refocusing**

To fast is to do without something for a limited period of time that normally occupies a large quantity of our attention and resources. The goal is to replace that time and effort with refocused emphasis upon deepening ones relationship with God. Jesus fasted from food for 40 days, which has been a common spiritual discipline for ages.

What can you fast from for the next week? Below are a few ideas, but you need to be sure to choose something that will be significant for you, yet not dangerous to your health. Whenever you think about whatever it is you are fasting from, turn your thoughts instead to God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Ask God to help you maintain your fast, strengthen your resolve, and grow your relationship with Him. At that moment of temptation – turn your thoughts to your Lord and Savior, and offer the gift of all of your attention in that area of your life.

1. If you fast from all food, be sure to research how to do this safely (drink juices, etc.).
2. Perhaps you can set aside a particular food, like sweets, chocolate, meat, or you may choose to fast between certain hours like 12 pm to 6 pm.
3. Electronics consume much of our lives today, like television, cell phones, or computers. Why not turn them off for a period of time?
4. Get creative: do without caffeine, tobacco, shopping, alcohol, romance novels, etc.

Whatever you do, use it as an opportunity to give glory and your attention to God. Fill in the blank below:

*I/we commit to fast for one week from:\_\_\_\_\_.*

## ~ CHAPTER 5: WISDOM ~

*For wisdom will enter your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.*

—Solomon, Proverbs 2:10

### ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

So often we ask the wrong questions. Much of wisdom is discovered by simply learning to ask better questions and then taking time to really listen with our souls rather than our minds. Jesus, following in the Hebrew tradition, made it clear over and over again that to truly hear and see God one must learn to listen with one's heart. We Westerners find it difficult to fathom that there is another way of perceiving other than the scientifically measurable means of brain activity. But Jesus points out otherwise:

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

—Jesus, Matthew 5:8

Phyllis Tickle reflects on Jesus' words in this matter:

Jesus says,

*The reason I speak in parables to those outside is that 'seeing, they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their hearts and turn —  
and I would heal them'.*

And Tickle writes,

*'The heart, it would seem, has its own consciousness and knowledge and ways that can be experienced just as the brain's consciousness and knowledge and ways are experienced. They are just not as scientifically measurable at the*

*moment and may never be... We (do) know that mystical experiences and such more-or-less common things as near-death episodes involve the brain's 'shutting down' or 'turning off' part of its normal, routine function. Yet specific, conscious recall – often even heightened cognition – is almost unfailingly present after such events."*

In other words, our brains can actually get in the way (at times) of really hearing and understanding deeper realities and truths. Does that mean that God does not want us to think or use common sense? No. But it does point to a deeper authenticity than simply our physical senses. Orthodox Christianity recognizes the role of God's Spirit in elevating our reasoning capabilities to heights we could not even begin to fathom resulting in what the ancients called *sophia*, divine wisdom or insight. This happens by dwelling on the Word of God in prayer and releasing our thoughts and perceptions to the Holy Spirit with trust and expectation.

God promises over and over again that those who seek Him with all of their hearts will find Him and His ways will become clear and make sense (see Jeremiah 29:11-14). This process we call discernment necessarily involves a positive relationship with God, study and contemplation, conversation and questioning, meditation and listening. Eventually discernment leads to a point of decision, "Do we implement what God has shown us, or do we continue to do things our own way?" When God's Spirit reveals His truth and His will, we are always left with a choice, to respond willingly or not. But as Leonard Sweet writes, "A fool is one who skips contemplation and moves directly to action."<sup>vi</sup>

*You were shown these things  
so that you might know  
that the LORD is God;  
besides Him there is no other.*  
-Moses, Deuteronomy 4:35

*FIELD NOTES: There are many ways to fast and pray. Whenever you sense a desire for or think about the thing you are fasting from, use that moment as an opportunity to thank Jesus for His grace and offer yourself to His mission in the world. Be sure to keep a journal handy to write down prayers, questions, observations, etc. Listen carefully for the voice of God, pay attention to the signs of the Holy Spirit around you and write down any thoughts or nudges you feel come from the Lord.*

*Use this special time as an opportunity to reject any desire that may get in the way of your relationship with God. Speak words of blessing over yourself, your family, your friends, and even your enemies. Like Jesus (Matthew 4, Mark 1:13, Luke 4), turn from your temptation and stand on the Word of God.*

## **WHY JESUS?**

In order to faithfully discern God's will, we must know God's story. Once we know God's story, then we must allow the Holy Spirit to show us where we fit into God's story. It is undeniable (from my point of view) that the Farmer sent His Son into the world so we might know that the Farmer is our only God and that He loves and tends to His creation. It is equally undeniable that we are to follow in the footsteps of the Son of the Farmer. We are to sow seeds of hope, healing, and wholeness among the Farmer's sin-sick fields.

The Son fertilized the soil of creation with His own witness and blood. By sacrificing Himself, one grain of wheat placed in the ground, He has been raised to life and provides the seed of unconditional love and forgiveness for everyone. The seed of the Son is bringing about an abundant harvest and is recreating and making right all things. Amazing as it is, one seed can produce a million times over the offspring of life necessary to feed and nourish the entire population of our world, past, present and future. One seed must die that many may live.

*FIELD NOTES: If Jesus is the original seed of life, and we are products of that seed, what characteristics should be evident in our lives? What kind of seed are you? What kind of seed do you want to be?*

*"Peace be with you. As the (Farmer)<sup>viii</sup> has sent me, so I send you"*  
-Jesus, John 20:21

## WHY ME?

The Son has empowered those who follow Him to tend and till His fields. The Spirit of the Son has been sent to breathe new life into His cultivator friends. New life, abundant life is gained through discernment. During this season, the Spirit guides and instructs us so we can carry on the Farmer's work in the Farmer's fields. Just as the Son of the Farmer was sent to sow seeds of reconciliation, compassion, hope and recreation, so the Spirit of the Farmer equips us so we can go into all the fields of the world as He does.

We followers of Jesus are sent out servants, plain and simple. Our journeys into the world as cultivators of abundant life must incorporate time for discernment. We listen to the Spirit with our hearts and souls in order to discover the Son in the world. Ultimately, under the Spirit's leadership, we join the Son in healing creation by conceiving and conserving, tending, and tilling abundant life everywhere we can. This is God's story for His church. This is our story. God the Farmer allows His children to participate with His sent Son in this amazing cosmic mission of love and life.

*FIELD NOTES: God does not use us because of our abilities, but quite often because of our lack of experience. God is glorified when the ordinary are used in extra-ordinary ways. We grow and become better servant leaders as we humble ourselves and step up to accept new challenges. Quite often those ministries we feel unequipped for and just plain nervous about are exactly what God knows we need to experience most. How might God want to stretch you NOW?*

## WHY? (NOT HOW?)

Our help comes from the Lord, from the Holy Spirit sent to the church. But here is the uniqueness of the provision of the sent Spirit: we are instructed *as we go*; the Way is revealed *as we go*. There is no clear formula for our work, only organic maneuvering and discovering while we journey forth. The *how* is revealed during the adventure, not prior to. Cultural diversity and situational adversity prevent a one-size fits all solution for reconciliation and growth in all the fields. There are numerous varieties of soil situations, weather conditions, elevations, etc. So we are not given a clear answer to the “*HOW?*” question at the start. No easy to follow blueprints are handed out. We are primarily provided with the “*WHY?*”: “*For God so loves the World...*”.

Discernment is a set apart time where we work diligently with the Holy Spirit to maintain our focus on the *missional why*. During discernment, it is premature to worry about the *how*. The

*why* will get us out into the fields where the Son is waiting.

Discernment will provide us opportunity to meet up with the Son in the world. Once we have discovered the work site, then the unique farming techniques and tools needed in each context will be provided and made clear on an “as needed” basis. Each season, each day, each moment brings renewed challenges, and each mission field is distinctive in its own way.



“For God So Loves the World”

-L.T.



*FIELD NOTES: Visualize Jesus waiting out in your community for you somewhere with someone. He wants you to join Him and serve as His translator, a physical representative of His love. Where is He and who is He with?*

## ~ Action Response ~

### The Community Way: Spiritual Tuning

According to Brian McLaren, writing about the ancient practices of our faith, “*The way of community is about the inward journey, not the journey into me but the journey into we.*”<sup>viii</sup> Our relational God has provided His children a community of faith to journey forward with so that our spiritual lives can become tuned in and tuned up. McLaren points out that many elements of our gathering together help shape our faith in ways that we seldom recognize or notice.

By God’s grace, in community we must choose to make room for one another, which shapes us as we are pressed to put others first, a mandatory characteristic for becoming more loving. In community we grow to be more spiritually tuned in through the inconveniences of community, such as the disciplines of self-preparation, hospitality, stillness, singing, attentiveness, interpretation, discernment, confession, assurance of pardon, and simply offering care, encouragement, and compassion for others. Lone followers of Jesus miss out on the blessing of community with others who grow together as we wrestle, struggle, and celebrate along the Way.

1. This week pay special attention each day to all of the ways you are being shaped by your participation in the community of faith.
2. How are you challenged, humbled, encouraged, sustained, and stimulated to love and good deeds?
3. How have you helped others in your community of faith to grow on this journey?
4. How have you been a stumbling block?
5. List your involvement over the last few months and look for lessons learned through each encounter with other followers.
6. Think about the elements of worship and how you are changed for the better by your participation.

## ~ CHAPTER 6: FRUIT ~

### WHAT IS GOOD SOIL?

In light of the Good Soil Parable that Jesus shared with His disciples, we can safely conclude that the *good soil* Jesus referred to was people who were characterized by their receptiveness, openness, and willingness to allow the seed of God's gracious love to dwell within their hearts and grow to maturity in their lives.

When we talk about a Good Soil Process, we are referring to an ongoing way of life which assists the Farmer's children to become all that He intends for them to become. Thus, we must ask questions and seek discernment regarding what kind of folks God the Farmer created us to be. What kind of man/woman can I become so that I will best reflect God's image, character, and purposes to a hurt, lost, confused world? What we become depends on how willing we are to commit ourselves to the discernment processes of study, contemplation, prayer, conversation, and questioning.



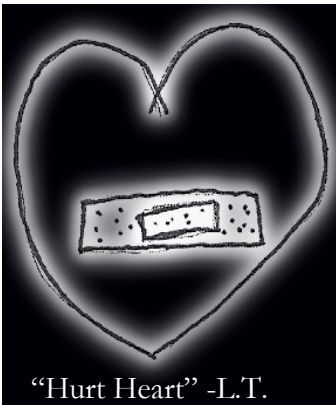
*FIELD NOTES: Jot down some character traits God wants to develop in you so you can best help others recognize and desire abundant life in Christ. Check out Galatians 5:22 and ask the Holy Spirit to make you aware of weak areas in your personality. Ask the Lord to grow you up and make you whole for God's mission.*

*What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun! All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others. We are Christ's ambassadors, and God is using us to speak to you. We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you, "Be reconciled to God!" For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. -Paul, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21*

## GOOD SOIL IS RECONCILIATION

The Apostle Paul made it very clear in his letter to the church in Corinth that we followers of Jesus are called to a ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the repair of broken ties or relationships. Our discernment must necessarily involve recognition of broken relationships in our communities and the world. God the Farmer is all about relationships and His healing work in the world is entirely relational. We are created for community; community with God our Maker, community with our neighbors, and community with all of creation. The Spirit will help us discern where Jesus is at work reconciling broken relationships in our neighborhoods.

We currently dwell in a season of preparation for the harvest. It is a season where seeds of victorious healing grace are actively being planted in good soil and in hearts that have been plowed, prepared ahead of time, and made ready and open to receive. That season is full of hope and expectation that the kingdom will fully appear soon and that God's will shall be done. The preparation for the harvest is a season of forgiveness and reconciliation between God, self, and neighbor as well as a season of symbolic acts of healing mercy and unconditional love, revealing the harvest soon to come. And to the glory of God, it is



"Hurt Heart" -L.T.

a season of conviction and yearning for the promised advancing kingdom to arrive with its King, in all of its glorious fullness. May God help us to discern His reconciling work in the world, and give us compassion and boldness so we might join Him in the power of the Spirit as agents of restoration.

*FIELD NOTES: How have you experienced God's reconciliation or healing of relationships in your life?*

## **GOOD SOIL IS SENT OUT**

To discern our unique mission in the world, each of us must first recognize our corporate call as missionaries. Christ's church is not a country club, but a sending agency. All adopted children of the Farmer are sent out into the fields to sow kingdom seeds of reconciliation here and now with passion and expectation. Rather than cry and bemoan fearfully, "*Beware, the end is near!*"... our family shouts with keen and joyful perception, "*Behold, the new beginning is here! Join us in preparing the way of the Lord! Make way, plow the fields, clear away obstacles, invite the neighbors, plant the seed! He is coming for the harvest! He is coming!*"

We are not called to cloister ourselves away in our barns and storm shelters fearfully protective of being contaminated or wiped out by the unpredictable weather of this world. Rather, we

are sent out into the fields, blown by the radical winds of the Spirit of God, to pray for and implore reconciliation with everyone in every situation we can, in the name of the Farmer. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this motivation as essential to our being:

*And God has given us the task of reconciling people to Him.*

-Paul, 2 Corinthians 5:18

*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news,  
who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation.*

-The Prophet, Isaiah 52:7

*FIELD NOTES: What relationships need healing in your community?*

*How can you serve as Jesus' ambassador of reconciliation and offer others tangible acts of His healing mercy?*

## GOOD SOIL IS GROWING IN GRACE

The people who choose to let go and simply receive the free gift of God's redeeming grace in all its healing fullness will necessarily experience an ongoing growing relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When living with and for Jesus Christ becomes the central tenet of abundant life, all good things (blessing in the midst of any circumstance) follow. Good soil grows in grace and moves on towards becoming the man or woman of character God created one to be. It is vital that we discern this restorative work of God's grace in ourselves and in others.

Grace is meant to be shared. As we experience a healed relationship with our Creator, grace begins to overflow in our lives and we discover the gift of others. The church is another gift of God's grace where we find others to share the adventure. The *Lone Ranger Christian* is a Western myth that simply cannot truly exist. Good soil needs still more good soil with which to share, grow, serve and encourage. If relationships are at the heart of our Creator God's purpose and character, we simply cannot abide and grow on our own. Followers of Jesus are nourished, and at the same time, challenged through our connections and shared lives with others. By God's grace we need each other.





*FIELD NOTES: Pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ. God's reconciliation must start at home before it can be carried into the world. Forgive those who have hurt you. Go to them and let them know that you love them in Jesus' name no matter what. Ask for forgiveness from those you may have hurt. Do whatever it takes to strengthen your relationships with those God places on your journey. Ask the Lord for new friends to partner with you on your spiritual adventure. Write down three things you like most about the folks in your faith community.*

~ *Action Response* ~

**The Missional Way:  
Spiritual Imprinting**

The missional way is similar to the community way, with the added emphasis upon our shared call to make disciples of all the people groups of the world. Brian McLaren writes, “*We meet together... to encourage one another and ‘provoke one another to love and good deeds’ (Hebrews 10:24 NRSV). In other words, when the community of faith gathers, its purpose is to equip its members for a life of love and good deeds when the community scatters.*”<sup>x</sup>

Where do we spend the majority of our time each week? Is it at the church building assembled with our brothers and sisters in Christ, or is it at our home, the workplace, a school, the drug store, some restaurant, the supermarket, etc.? Jesus calls us together as disciples to learn so that He can send us out to be servants of the Living God. Each of us are called to go into all the world in the name of Jesus to proclaim and demonstrate the Good News. We are shaped and refined as we engage others of different cultures, social status and generations along the Way. Like goslings following their mama goose, as we follow Jesus into the world among the lost and the least, we are imprinted and take on His characteristics.

Take time this week to review and reflect on the following list of missional practices (next page), borrowed from McLaren’s book, *Finding Our Way Again*.<sup>x</sup>

How have these practices shaped you in the past?

How can you make more room in your life for the missional Way?

Write down any thoughts or ideas that come to you...

(next page)

## **The Missional Way...**

Forgiving those who wrong us

Showing hospitality to strangers or “the other”

Praying for the sick

Not judging but showing mercy and compassion

Confronting evil, seeking to overcome it with good

Serving

Listening

Associating with (and advocating for) the lowly

Speaking truth in love

Practicing neighborliness, even towards enemies

Preferring the poor rather than showing favoritism to the rich

Speaking and working for justice

Proclaiming the Good News in word and deed

Giving to the poor

Throwing parties for the poor and the forgotten

Walking to the other side of the street to serve those in need

Showing empathy

## ~ CHAPTER 7: FIELDS ~

### GOOD SOIL IS MISSIONAL

During the season of discernment, we get to know our Maker better through prayer, as we assemble together, when we study His Word, and as we deepen our relationships. We also get to know better God's mission for us. We are sent out servants. We are privileged to participate in God's redemptive plan of healing creation. We are to model our lives after Jesus and become sacrificial givers of life and love to everyone and everything. This is our purpose, our mission, our identity. As we realize more fully who we are (adopted children of the Living God), and whose we are (the relational God's), we face the choice of either living into our skin as good soil or merely playing church. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to *GO* and become healing, reconciling agents of God in the world.

*FIELD NOTES: Pray about God's GO for you and your congregation. Jot down any thoughts.*

## **GOOD SOIL IS RELATIONAL**

The way to bring reconciliation into the lives of others is to first build relationships with people from whom we are distanced. How often do we look the other way or cross to the other side of the street when those with which we don't feel comfortable are near? God's Spirit nudges us to go into the world to face the realities of our discriminating tendencies. Once the can of worms is opened, we start to see ourselves as we really are. We are not as good and kind as we would like to believe. We discover that we neglect, fear and avoid relationships with those who are different from us. The Spirit of God in us convicts our heart and brings pain. Now, that is real heart burn!

Discerning these relational tendencies in ourselves and our faith community is the first step towards recovery and restoration. Brokenness of heart moves us closer to being healed and strengthens our character. As our wounds are lanced, poison is released, so the ointment of Christ can be applied to battle the infection.

If we are truly built for relationships, then we must allow the Holy Spirit to prepare the soil of our hearts by revealing the hidden ugliness that we have allowed to distort our vision of the world and its people. We all harbor blind spots. Whether we realize it or not, our local cultures and worldviews have trained us to think and see in certain limited ways. God the Farmer intends to prune our favoritism so that we can produce new growth and become relationally loving towards all, just like Jesus.

Often, discernment provides us with God's view of our relationships. The Holy Spirit may lead us into certain areas of our community or even directly to an individual whom we have avoided. Reconciliation happens as we engage the other with authenticity, openness and acceptance. Relationships from God's

perspective must offer compassionate love, no matter what. The only way folks will be receptive to the Good News today is if we have first taken the time and effort to establish a real relationship with them on their turf.

*FIELD NOTES: Discern the relationships beyond the stained glass of the church that God wants you to develop.*

*Who will likely never wander into the doors of the local church looking for Jesus?*

*Who do you tend to avoid?*

## **GOOD SOIL IS INCARNATIONAL**

Quite often, discernment happens as we draw near to others. Consider our Lord. Jesus came near. As a helpless infant born to a poor family in an oppressed nation in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, the Farmer's Son moved into the neighborhood. Sent by the

Farmer on a mission to reconcile creation's relationships with God and others, the Son became one of us and loved others unconditionally.

Around age thirty, Jesus left the comfort of home, family and friends and actually entered the lives of the poor, the filthy, the outcast, the wealthy, the powerful, the sinner, the lepers and the lame; no one was beyond the touch of our Lord. Jesus did not simply work among the aristocracy and the elites to make legislative changes for the poor and outcast, removed and at a distance. No, Jesus avoided those routes of earthly power intentionally. Instead He chose to *GO*, in the flesh, to listen, to pray, to touch, to heal, to laugh, to cry, to restore, to reconcile every facet of the human being (social, physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological). As Jesus went, he took time to discern the Father's will. It was discovered while fasting 40 days in the wilderness, during time alone on a mountain, and at prayer in the garden. The closer Jesus got to the people, the greater His discernment of His Father's will. Or is it the opposite? As Jesus discerned the Father's will, He drew closer to the people.

In our isolated, secluded, cocooned 21<sup>st</sup> century lives, Good Soil must be intentional about shutting down the computer, leaving the confines of our big screen televisions and our sealed off electric garages, and find ways to engage others, just as the Son of the Father does. Although a step in the right direction, genuine relationships do not flourish in chat rooms, on cell phones, or even with Skype (video conferencing) alone.

Time must be taken for discernment as we seek ways to spend time with one another face to face, incarnationally. Jesus is already there with the outcast on the fringes of society. He is waiting for His good soil representatives to arrive in the flesh, with a smiling embrace, good news, and innovative and practical

hope for life change. Good soil does not grow buildings; good soil grows people. This is the incarnational way of Jesus.

*I went there because God revealed to me that I should go.*

-Paul, Galatians 2:2

*FIELD NOTES: Discern who in your backyard community you can draw near. How can you enter their turf and get to know them better? No agenda necessary...*



~ *Action Response* ~

**The Incarnational Way:  
Spiritual Zoning**

This week, reflect upon the following Scriptures:

- *“Only ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance, the ends of the earth as your possession.”* (The LORD, Psalm 2:8 nlt)
- *“But all your feverish plans are to no avail because you never ask God for help. He is the one who planned this long ago.”* (The Prophet, Isaiah 22:11b nlt)
- *“O my God, listen to me and hear my request. Open your eyes and see our wretchedness. See how your city lies in ruins-- for everyone knows that it is yours. We do not ask because we deserve help, but because you are so merciful. O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act! For your own sake, O my God, do not delay, for your people and your city bear your name.”* (The Prophet, Daniel 9:18-19 nlt)
- *“Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks. You parents-- if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him. Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.”* (Jesus, Matthew 7:7-12 nlt)
- *“So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send out more workers for his fields.”* (Jesus, Matthew 9:38 nlt)

Individually, or as a group, engage in a prayer walk and/or drive-by prayer in some areas of your community. Ask God for the salvation and healing of the people living there. Claim this inheritance for Jesus. Pray however you feel led by the Holy Spirit. Pray with authority and hope. Pray for favor and reconciliation. Pray for help. Ask, Seek, Knock, Pray...

## SEASON TWO: *DESIGN*



### ~ CHAPTER 8: SEEDS OF LOVE ~

#### LENT (40 Days + Sundays)

*For I am about to do a brand-new thing.  
See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?*  
-The Prophet, Isaiah 43:19a

We have journeyed together through the season of Epiphany (see endnote *ii*), and according to the church liturgical calendar, corporately, we now move into the season of Lent. Our prayer is that as we have spent extended time being still before the Lord. We have asked for His guidance and direction, and celebrated the manifestation of Jesus Christ in the world. The ears and eyes of our soul have listened carefully to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and we have recognized God calling to us from the neighborhoods surrounding our local church! Perhaps you have asked: What is God up to, and how can I join Jesus in caring and carrying the Good News to my neighbors? What is my epiphany regarding God's mission? How has your community of faith come to a consensus about your local mission field?

The season of Lent begins with a simple but profound sign act in which ashes are smeared on the forehead in the sign of the cross. This marker moment is an opportunity for the community of faith to come together to confront our own mortality and to confess our sins before God. We all have personal sins to confess. We also all have corporate sins to repent of as well. We should have become aware of some of those sins toward our neighbors and each other during our previous season of discernment. The sign of the cross on the forehead, although a somber expression of our weakness and need for forgiveness, is also a representation of the Good News that Jesus Christ has cleansed us of our sin and given us hope for the future. The cross is a symbol of the pain and suffering our Savior, Jesus Christ was willing to endure on our behalf so that we would be redeemed and restored. The Roman cross, intended to be an instrument of torture and cruelty was transformed into a tool of hope and salvation by our loving God. Transformational beauty is our God's M.O. (mode of operation).

The Christian season of Lent is comprised of 40 days plus Sundays. The first Sunday remembers Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness. The final Sunday of Lent is called Passion/Palm Sunday and is a remembrance of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by His passion, and death on Good Friday. Lent is a season of preparation for the resurrection. The Lenten spirit of looking inward and responding with repentance should be tempered with the joyful expectation of Easter morning to come.

During this season, the community journeys with Jesus. We recall His three years of ministry leading up to His crucifixion on that hill of the skull, "Golgotha", outside of Jerusalem. Looking back on Christ's ministry, it becomes clear that Jesus wanted everyone to know that He only did what He saw His Father doing...

*"I assure you, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the*

*Father loves the Son and tells him everything he is doing, and the Son will do far greater things than healing this (paralyzed) man. You will be astonished at what he does.” - Jesus, John 5:19-20*

Jesus, being God, laid down all of His heavenly power and glory to become like us, completely human. Examine what He was able to accomplish in three short years. He functioned as a man, but was empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus during His baptism, just like those of us who follow Him. He showed courage, expressed wisdom, performed miracles, the proclaimed God’s way, and taught. He loved and emptied Himself with compassion beyond measure. Everything He did was done because He was filled with, empowered, and led by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit showed the human Jesus what the Father was doing and helped Jesus join in. That same Holy Spirit instructs, strengthens, and guides Christ’s church today. Though incomprehensible, Jesus said that we who follow Him would do even greater things than He was able to accomplish...

*"The truth is, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, because the work of the Son brings glory to the Father. Yes, ask anything in my name, and I will do it!"*  
-Jesus, John 14:12-14

How can that be? How can we (the church) possibly do greater things than Jesus? If we compare His three years to the church’s 2,000+ years, and if we compare one man filled with God’s Spirit to millions of followers filled with God’s Spirit, we can begin to get a clearer sense of what Jesus proclaimed. Through love, compassion and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Jesus turned the world upside down. So did the early church. The global church today continues to thrive in unlikely places as it also demonstrates love and compassion.

Lent is a season set aside to prepare us to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Good Soil Process encourages

your team to pay close attention to what designs God has for your mission context. Some questions you will undoubtedly be considering at this point are:

*- How will we put into action that which God is calling us to do? How will we intentionally reach out to our neighbors and build Jesus relationships with them? What can we do? What is realistic? What miraculous potential is there? How can we sow seeds of love for God in our own backyards?*

These are good questions, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

*FIELD NOTES: Do you believe Jesus' words above in John 14:12-14?*

*What do you think Jesus means by "greater things"?*

*Who are some people who immediately come to mind as accomplishing great things for God (in the Bible and since)?*

*Do you have a difficult time imagining yourself doing great things like Jesus and our ancestors in the faith?*

*If so... good. Humility is vital for serving the Lord. God sized tasks always require a very close relationship with God. And yet, if God calls someone to a task, and they respond obediently, He most certainly will equip. Often this takes time. One can be humble and yet be full of courage in the Lord.*

*Does God usually accomplish big things through people immediately, or is there most often a process? Why do you think that is?*

## SOW WHAT?

*You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail.*  
-Solomon, Proverbs 19:21

In order to discover God's design for our outreach efforts, we must first compile our insights from the previous season of Discernment. How each Good Soil Team presents their initial thoughts will depend upon the personalities and talents of the team members. It is recommended that some form of written report be created each season that will help the team to maintain clarity of purpose regarding God's current call upon the local church. The K.I.S.S. principle is very important at every stage of the Good Soil Process: *Keep It Simple Senior(a)*. A "Discernment Page" should be just that: a one-page report of the group's intuitions, burdens, and inclinations that developed through the extended process of Discernment. The Discernment Page can be written in narrative form or be tabled or charted. Do what makes most sense to your group, but by all means, keep it simple!

Once the Discernment Page has been created and distributed among members of the team, it is important to consider how to share the information with the rest of the congregation. Once again, each community setting will be different. Some may choose to share through a newsletter. Others may produce a video, conduct a church-wide meeting, or deliberate during a worship setting. The important thing is that pastor and laity share God's discerned will together, with a prayerful show of unity. The congregation must see the combined efforts of every member of the team in action and must be invited into the process themselves.

The Good Soil Process is a grass-roots movement led by lay people who have decided to allow God to lead them as missionaries into the surrounding neighborhoods with the good news of Jesus. God loves to use ordinary people and equip them to do EXTRA-ordinary things. The pastor may choose to

incorporate the Process through his/her preaching, Bible Study, etc. Laity may want to share stories about the Process and how God is at work. The important thing is to share with the broader congregation each season (Discern, Design, Develop, and Delight). Allow for feedback from non-participants, perhaps through a question/answer or talk-back format. Listen carefully and integrate that which the team feels is Spirit-led input. Seek prayer assistance for the Good Soil Team from the rest of the congregation, particularly for the identified mission field. Help the rest of the congregation feel a part of the Good Soil Process and build excitement about what God is doing among your congregation.

During our first Good Soil season's discernment process, we have taken time to allow God's Spirit opportunity and freedom to focus our thoughts and intentions on those beyond the walls of the local church. We now have some clarity about *WHO* God is calling us to reach to in our backyard. We understand the *WHY* to mean that we are to be the relational representative of His healing, compassion, and grace. God has revealed to us the *WHO* and *WHY* in season one.

During season two (DESIGN), God's love for the world designs our response. God's *WHAT* and *HOW* will now come into focus.

*What* can we do to join God in the world and act as the Body of Christ for our neighbors? *What* gifts, assets, and abilities do we have that God wants us to share? *What* can we not do? *What* does God want to empower us to do for others in miraculous ways?

*How* do we reach out to others for Jesus? *How* can we develop relationships rather than programs? *How* will we be received? *How* will we react when things don't work out as we expect or hope? *How* determined are we to participate in God's mission of love? *How* do missionaries do what they do?

These are some of the questions we hope to deal with as we process through season two and discover God's designs for our outreach. As this second season progresses, we will take time to seek to develop a clearer awareness of God's missional designs and intentions for us as a community of faith. We must realize that the Creator God is the designer of His mission in the world, and our task is to allow Him to reveal those designs to us for fruitful ministry.

At the end of Lent, once again your team will write out a simple Design page. Until then, study, pray, discuss, and simply allow the process to unfold. Remember, the missional design for each local outpost of God's advancing kingdom is God's, not ours. Each Devine design is unique, and we are asking the Lord to reveal to us how we can participate in what He is already doing.

*Many will see what he has done and be astounded. They will put their trust in the LORD. O LORD my God, you have done many miracles for us. Your plans for us are too numerous to list. If I tried to recite all your wonderful deeds, I would never come to the end of them.*

-David, Psalm 40:3b, 5

*FIELD NOTES: There is a Jewish saying, "People make plans, and God laughs." What are your thoughts about that? Do you have any experiences where you have learned that lesson the hard way?*



*~ Action Response ~*

In the highly recommended study, Experiencing God by Henry Blackaby,<sup>xi</sup> the author shares seven Scriptural realities pertaining to knowing God's work that is always going on around you. This week, review daily (if possible) the seven realities listed below and ask the Lord to help you understand and apply these ways of relating to Him in your personal journey.

You may have already been aware of these seven realities in your relationship with God. Or you may have never experienced clearly God speaking and leading in these ways. Consider people in the Bible like Moses, Abraham, David, the twelve disciples, as well as others. They were all ordinary people led by God to do the extra-ordinary. See if you recognize these seven realities in their recorded experiences. Allow God's Spirit to instruct you this week to reveal Himself more clearly.

1. GOD'S WORK: God is always at work around you.
2. RELATIONSHIP: God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.
3. INVITATION: God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.
4. GOD SPEAKS: God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.
5. CRISIS OF BELIEF: God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.
6. ADJUST: You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.
7. OBEY & EXPERIENCE: You come to know God by experience as you obey Him, and He accomplishes His work through you.

\* This week pay close attention to God's process for getting His people in alignment with what He is already doing in the world.

## ~ CHAPTER 9: LOVE GOD ~

### **PLOWING DEEP IS GOOD SOIL: INTENTIONAL JESUS CONVERSATIONS**

*Evangelism is trusting that the chemistry between every human and Jesus is combustible.*<sup>xii</sup> -Leonard Sweet

Evangelism has somehow become a scary word for many American Christians today. Ask someone in your church about their willingness to help with a Saturday neighborhood evangelism effort, and watch them uncomfortably squirm. “Well, I don’t have that spiritual gift. I keep my faith private. I can’t really talk about religion.”

Biblically, the term *evangelist* can be translated from the Greek as “gospel” or “bringer of good tidings.” It refers to a person who announces the gospel to others. In that light, some well known evangelists who announced the good news to others were Jesus (Luke 20:1), Paul the apostle (Romans 1:15), Philip the deacon (Acts 21:8), Timothy the pastor (2 Timothy 4:5), and certainly all of the early disciples who were driven out of Jerusalem and “went everywhere preaching the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:4). All of those just mentioned were certainly not ordained “evangelists.” So in a very real sense, every baptized follower of Jesus is called and equipped to serve as an evangelist for Jesus.

In case you did not catch that, let me repeat:

**“EVERY BAPTIZED  
FOLLOWER OF JESUS  
IS CALLED AND EQUIPPED TO SERVE  
AS AN EVANGELIST FOR JESUS!”**

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesian church, says there is also a special order of ministry for certain individuals whom God calls. This order is a first step in a team *process* for church establishment and development. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul points out that Jesus “*is the one who gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.*” The evangelist travels around and announces the gospel, the apostle comes in and gathers an assembly of new believers, the prophet helps make sure God’s truth is put forth or foretold, and the pastors and teachers help develop the disciples by proclaiming and interpreting the Word of God. In this case, Billy Graham would certainly qualify as one called by God to serve among His children within the order of evangelists. In addition to Graham, there have been many other gifted evangelists over the last 2,000+ years of the Christian faith from many regions and traditions. Evangelists have been, and continue to be, vital in the body of Christ, as are all witnesses to Jesus.

The mission of God necessarily involves the



announcement everywhere to everyone of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. We are not intended to be keepers and maintainers of a glorious spiritual secret but rather announcers and demonstrators of an alternative kingdom reality, the Kingdom of God. Once we enter into the promise of resurrection life, we become spokesmen and women of the good news. Keep in mind, the Gospel is **GOOD NEWS!**

Proclaiming the good news of a new covenant is not a requirement for our

salvation. But the reality is that we talk about what excites us. When we discover a gas station with really great prices, we tell everyone we can. It should be that way with the sharing of the Good News. Don't keep it a secret.

The question becomes, how do I go about telling everyone? Rent a stadium. Go door to door. Do kind things and explain why if someone asks. Honestly, there is no one size fits all formula for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. Every context, culture, time, and place is different. Only the message stays the same: "Jesus is Lord!"

*Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

-Paul, Romans 7:25

There are some things the average follower of Jesus might want to keep in mind though when it comes to evangelism, or witnessing, or being missional, or whatever you want to call it. The mission is God's. We are merely privileged participants, willing tools, and available instruments. The Holy Spirit is at work to some degree or another in every person, from the womb to the tomb, wooing them into a relationship with their Maker. As my evangelism teacher in seminary, Bob Tuttle says, the average person will have any number of faith conversations before they decide to accept the grace gift God offers them.

Whatever our approach to sharing the gospel with non-believers, we can and should be intentional about generating Jesus conversations with others, but there is never a need to be pushy. God's timing is always best. Generally, a person is most likely to engage in a deep conversation about faith if they already know and trust the other person. This is where genuine relationships are invaluable. If we are not in the process of cultivating deep relationships with non-believers, then the likelihood of God using us to help someone move closer to faith in the Lord is unlikely. However, God will use us under whatever circumstances He chooses.

A random conversation on an airplane might be that turning point moment for a seeker. But more often than not, it is an ongoing discussion of the deeper things of God and life that at times turn into life changing moments of decision. Pray, listen, develop deep relationships, be present, and be available. God will do the rest. Whether we refer to this as “relational evangelism” or a “missional stance,” just do it!

*FIELD NOTES: Write out a prayer of commitment to the Lord.*

~ *Action Response* ~

**A MISSIONAL STANCE**

Think back over the last year and ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind some missed opportunities for sharing about your faith in Jesus with someone else.

Ask the Spirit to bring to mind some times when you found yourself responding to an opportunity to discuss your faith with someone else.

**\*Pair off with someone else, or as a group  
and practice sharing your faith story.**

When did you first become aware of God's presence in your life?

When and how did you respond with faith in Jesus Christ?

How has that made a difference in your life?

How has God changed you?

How do you work at growing your relationship with God?

How do you enjoy serving God?

What is your favorite aspect of the journey of faith with Jesus?

What are your struggles?

**\*Practice being bold, authentic, humble,  
transparent and vulnerable in your witness.**

## ~ CHAPTER 10: LOVE OTHERS ~

### **NO STRINGS IS GOOD SOIL: FRIENDS NO MATTER WHAT**

*And Jonathan made a special vow to be David's friend,  
and he sealed the pact by giving him his robe, tunic, sword, bow, and belt.*

-1 Samuel 18:3-4

It is said that most Americans today consider themselves extremely blessed if they can name two very deep friendships they have developed and maintained over the years. Just two deep friendships?!? Is that the best we can do? The truth is that as we have become more mobile (i.e., cars, airplanes, trains, ships), our culture has adapted, and our people have become roamers. Staying in one location for an extended period of time and putting down roots has become a very rare phenomenon in American culture today.

In addition to our increased mobility, we tend to cocoon ourselves off from our neighbors. Like worker bees determined to get to our destination as deliberately as possible, we pursue life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness without even a thought about our neighbors.

When we do make time for relationships, it is usually scheduled, planned, and programmed by a professional whose job it is to meet our needs. Many look to the church to provide this relational programming. We tithe a portion of our paychecks expecting well-trained and well-intentioned clergy to feed us our spiritual and relational nourishment so that we can go about our busy daily lives as healthy and well-balanced as possible. Much like a physical trainer, the staff at the church organizes our spiritual workout each week. Once we put in our scheduled hour or two, we must enter our mobile cocoon and zoom off to the next appointment.

The regimented scheduling of our lives removes much of the spontaneity and unexpected vibrancy that true relationships require. Often we spend the most time with our closest friends at the biggest events: weddings, birthdays, hospitalization and funerals. Our disconnected culture contributes to loneliness, depression, and isolation. We lack the energy and time to invest in those who are hungry for deep and meaningful relationships. Programmed ministry leaves little time for the natural development of friendships.

In fact, more spontaneity is needed. Folks today long for friendships that offer what author Dr. Will Miller refers to as “refrigerator rights.”<sup>xiii</sup> Refrigerator rights relationships are authentic, relaxed, home-style friendships where persons are so comfortable with one another that they can go grab a beverage out of the fridge without having to ask. Genuine relationships don’t necessarily have to be agenda driven. Our smart phones don’t know everything, and today it is vital that we learn to set them aside from time to time and make space in our lives for others, without relying on a calendar or program to bring us together.

We need to open our homes to relationally hungry and thirsty friends. Home is where true friendships are fostered and nurtured. Home is where we are most real, where we let down our hair, put on some warm ups and simply hang out, bare-foot with our feet on the coffee table. Folks in our society today are hungry for those refrigerator rights relationships that lead to deep friendship.

*In an instruction manual recovered from the personal belongings of one of the (9-11) hijackers, terrorists were taught to move into relatively new neighborhoods because these were places where people didn’t know each other and would be less suspicious of newcomers... if the terrorists knew anything about American culture, they knew how ‘atomistic,’ isolated, and detached we were as a people – and they set out to exploit that weakness for their own ends.<sup>xiv</sup>*

-Will Miller



If the extent of our Christian outreach in building relationships is simply to lead someone to Christ, then we are missing the point. We are called to love our neighbors, no matter what, with no strings attached. Assuredly, God is at work in their lives, and although things may get messy from time to time, God is wooing them, and it is not our job to save them. It is our job to befriend them and be witnesses to the good news of Jesus in our lives. If they notice and decide to follow Jesus too, bonus! But Jesus loves them all, and so should we, no strings attached.

The worst witness we can offer another is to condition our friendship with them upon their following Jesus or attending our local church. We are digging pretty shallow in the soil if the extent of our friendship with someone is our invitation to attend a church program with us. To dig deep, invite them over to your home to watch the game or share a meal. Spend time talking in the driveway after work. Be real and available. We never know when the Spirit of God will convince another of their need for salvation in Jesus Christ. Be available to pray, speak or act as the Holy Spirit prompts, and simply trust that God will do the rest. Jesus is the Savior, not us, thank goodness. This is a missional stance, no strings attached.

*FIELD NOTES: Make a list of all your refrigerator rights friends. How many are family members? How many are Christians? How many are not yet Christians?*

*List names of some acquaintances God may be leading you to pray for and reach out to in deeper ways. Pray for eyes to see and recognize those God brings across your path in days to come.*

**~ Action Response ~**

Followers of Jesus have inherited an abundantly rich Jewish heritage in the ancient practices of hospitality, particularly to the stranger. We have added to that the challenging teachings of Jesus. It was medieval Christians responding in faith to the needs of the poor, the sick and the stranger, who developed the concepts so familiar today: hostels, hotels, and hospitals. The teachings of Jesus found in Luke 14 and Matthew 25 have shaped the Christian tradition regarding hospitality.

*"When you put on a luncheon or a dinner," he said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will repay you by inviting you back. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the godly, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you." -Jesus, Luke 14:12-14*

*"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me." "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'"*

-Jesus, Matthew 25:34-40

Take some time to study, pray and meditate on these texts:

1. Luke 14:12-24
2. Matthew 25:31-46

Consider God's DESIGN for His children and His Kingdom.

Who is invited to the feast of the Kingdom of God?

Who is excluded?

Describe the character of God's hospitality.

*"I was a stranger and you welcomed me"* - How does that challenge us?

## ~ CHAPTER 11: BE GENUINE ~

### SHOOTIN' STRAIGHT IS GOOD SOIL: GET REAL

God's design is for His children to shoot straight, to be honest, to face the realities of life, and even the realities of our own sinful nature. The Christian faith today is viewed negatively and is misunderstood by many of our neighbors. Most of us do not understand how this could be happening. It is time that we begin shooting straight with ourselves and others.

Jesus gave us the command to "*Go and craft disciples of all the people groups of the world*" (Matthew 28:19, *my interpretation*). If each culture speaks a different language and views the world in unique ways, is it not our duty and responsibility to make sure that each nation/society/people group/tribe has every opportunity to truly hear and see the Kingdom of God that Jesus claimed "is near!" The mission of God requires that followers of Jesus share the Good News in a way that hearers around the world can understand.

To shoot straight is to get real with those who don't understand us, and find ways to communicate effectively the love of God in Jesus Christ to our neighbors. Otherwise, we will fail miserably at God's mission for us.

*If YHWH alone is the one true living God  
who made himself known in Israel  
and who wills to be known to the ends of the earth,  
then our mission can contemplate no lesser goal.<sup>3v</sup>*  
-Christopher Wright

We in the Church must look around on Sunday morning or whenever we assemble together and face the present reality honestly. The current outlook for Western Christianity is not good. With dramatic cultural shifts happening globally and particularly in the western cultures, the church must come to

grips with the fact that things have changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As I heard Julia Kuhn Wallace recently say, “Shift Happens!”

Many denominational studies, scholars and theologians agree that in Europe, Australia, and in the United States, the church is in rapid decline. Those ages 35 and below actively involved in western church life have become rarities.

It is also notable that the world-wide Christian church is no longer dominated by white-Anglo westerners. Today, the majority of global Christians now live on continents like Asia, Africa and South America. Studies indicate that in recent years, church attendance in North America and Europe has all but crumbled and is diminishing at “an estimated rate of 6,000 church members a day.”<sup>xvi</sup> In his book Beyond Christendom, Jehu Hanciles predicts that if the decline continues with this pattern “60 percent of all existing Christian congregations in America will disappear before the year 2050”.<sup>xvii</sup>

The common refrain heard in many local congregations today is, “Where are all of the young people?” Viggo Mortensen (the theologian, not the actor) describes our current culture as shockingly post-Christian. Younger generations have actually lost the collective Christian memory and suffer from a form of “cultural amnesia.”<sup>xviii</sup> For the first time in our formerly Judeo-Christian nation’s history, the majority of Americans have no memory of what it means to be Christian or to participate in the church. Nonetheless, young adults have not given up the spiritual quest and continue searching for spiritual fulfillment in other avenues like consumerism, materialism, sports, entertainment and alternative religions.

The predominant question of the older, settled, staunchly traditional institutions (1940s to 1970s), as well as the seeker-friendly mega-churches (1980s to present) is, “why don’t they look in the church?” The answer is clearly that the western institutional church has become a foreign culture to the majority of young adults. Christians and the church seem to have lost touch with the reality and pulse of the contemporary culture. For

this reason, the Christian faith has no appeal whatsoever to many younger Americans.

Emerging generations will no longer blindly accept the traditions and religion of the past. In the postmodern world in which we now live, every assumption is challenged, critiqued and deconstructed. When asked the question “why?” it is no longer acceptable to answer, “Because that is the way we have always done it.” It is important to note that even most of the denominational institutions in the west are stricken with cultural amnesia when asked to explain many of the current traditions, budgets, maintenance routines, and rituals and how they relate to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not bode well with emerging young adults.

Although the number of un-churched people has increased lately, most westerners do see themselves as religious. Recently studies have been conducted and published which seek to discern what the missing “emerging” generations think about the Christian faith. The responses can be startling. In Dan Kimball’s book, *They Like Jesus, But Not the Church*, he chronicles his friendship and conversations with several non-Christians and offers their blunt opinions about the church and Christians in general. Here is the good news: Kimball points out that in almost every case, when asked what they thought about Jesus, the responses were overwhelmingly positive and even adoring. Now for the bad news: when asked what they thought about the church and Christians, the attitudes and responses shifted primarily to the negative. What the author found was that most of the negative impressions were cultural and had nothing to do with Jesus or the Gospel. Cultural issues can be overcome.

Some of the main thoughts emerging generations had about the church are that “it is organized religion with a political agenda, judgmental and negative, dominated by males and oppresses females, homophobic, arrogantly claims all other religions are wrong, and is full of fundamentalists who take the whole Bible literally.”<sup>xix</sup> Kimball acknowledges that these are in many cases unfair stereotypes, but it is vital that we in the

church: (1) begin to listen with humility about how we are perceived by those in non-Christian cultures; (2) determine whether our beliefs and practices communicate clearly the good news of Jesus; and (3) respectfully seek to build relationships that foster authenticity, trust and communication across cultures. In short, the church today must take the stance and position of a missionary working in a foreign culture.

*I believe Jesus cares for those who like him but don't like the church. He wants them to know him more fully and to trust in him and believe he rose from the dead. He wants them to understand that the kingdom of God is now on this earth, not just coming in heaven after we die (Mark 1:15).*

*I believe Jesus wants them to understand what the church really is and not just make assumptions about it.<sup>xx</sup>*

-Dan Kimball

Interestingly, David Kinnaman of the Barna Group and Gabe Lyons of the Fermi Project report similar insights in their book, Un-Christian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity...and Why it Matters. The title “Un-Christian” is actually a reference to how those in the church are perceived by outsiders. Exhaustive statistical research reveals “outsiders” most common reaction to the faith: they think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind and that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be.<sup>xxi</sup> Could there be some truth to these perceptions?

Kinnaman and Lyons found that, overwhelmingly, the negative perceptions of those outside the church are “more than superficial image problems” and are recognized by those within the church quite often as well.<sup>xxii</sup> Some of the primary issues raised were the fact that church as practiced in America today seems “hypocritical, with an emphasis only in ‘getting saved,’ anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In His day, didn’t Jesus rail on religious leaders for some of the same attitudes?

*It comes down to this: we must become Christlike again...  
We must commit to doing the hard work of recapturing  
Christianity's essence in our own lives.<sup>xix</sup>*  
-David Kinnaman

How does the church need to get real? If we in the church are going to be successful missionaries in our own backyards, we must approach our vocation with humility and love. We should admit mistakes as we identify them.

One of our biggest mistakes is to acknowledge that we have been approaching non-believers the wrong way. When Jesus sent his disciples out two by two to proclaim the Kingdom of God and heal people, He instructed them to go to a home and if invited in, share their blessing with the household. He also instructed them that if they were rejected, they were to shake the dust off of their feet and move on to the next village. The American church has been dusting off its feet off before ever even walking down the streets of our neighbors. Maybe our beautiful stained glass windows actually prevent us from being real as we expect people to come to our churches rather than reaching out to those outside the church.

Let's shoot straight with each other. Name your non-Christian friends. Do we even take time and make the effort to enter the lives of others beyond our fellowship? Do we expect them to enter ours first? Are we genuinely seeking to engage in authentic communication with those around us who don't know Jesus? Do we strive to understand them or to use a language they will understand? Are we expecting them to learn our language and culture? Is this shooting straight? Yes.

We should help our neighbors to discover their God-given image and celebrate our unity/diversity in Jesus Christ rather than forcing them into our western cultural image.

*Then God said, "Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves..."  
So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself;  
male and female he created them. -Genesis 1:26-27*

It is time to get real. Take time to build authentic relationships. Get to know them *on their turf*. Abandon attractive buildings, advertising, and creative programs to attract our neighbors. Accept their dress and their lingo when we interact with them, wherever that is. Go to them relationally and earn the right to expose them to the fullness of the Good News.

## **COMMON GROUND IS GOOD SOIL: RELATIONAL NETWORKS**

*Our new post-everything context is going to require that we belong with people as dear friends for quite a while before they'll feel comfortable belonging with us.*<sup>xxxv</sup> —Hugh Halter

With the rapid progression of internet technology, sociologists are discovering how hungry people today are for relationships. Facebook, Second Life, Twitter, and MySpace are extremely popular social networking websites that connect people together in a virtual world, despite where they may live or what they may do for a living. A daily flow of information can be passed between two people with computers on opposite sides of the world, as well as two people with cell phones sitting next to each other in bed. These social networking sites provide a means for people to formulate new friendship connections, reconnect with old acquaintances, and maintain a flow of information updates between friends via computer or cell phone. We live in an era where relational networks are expanding across vast geographic distances in realms never dreamed of before. A relational network is a reference to the complex web of connectional relationships that exist within a society.

Ever since I fully committed as an adult to follow Jesus and participate in Christ's church, I have to admit, I have struggled with the people I left behind. I continue to maintain occasional contact by phone, internet and/or drive-by visits with a few friends from the old party scene, but by far, the vast majority of my previous non-Christian relationships have



basically disappeared from my life. I do pray for them as they come to my mind, and I have had a few deep and meaningful conversations with a couple of my college buddies over the years.

And yet, when it was time to get serious about my faith, it seemed like the Christian culture I identify with encouraged me to replace all of my old contacts and routines with new Christian friends and church programs. It was time to replace the old relational networks with new ones. Now, no one told me that this was what I must do. It really was just an unspoken expectation that the way to grow in one's faith as a disciple is to naturally fill one's life with sacred activities and acquaintances. I had to go through a complete reorienting of my lifestyle in order to fully serve the Lord and be all I can be for Jesus. In many ways, this worked well for me.

As I have accepted God's call upon my life to serve as a pastor/teacher, I have sought to understand why I had to leave my former friends (relational networks) behind in order to move ahead as a disciple of Jesus Christ. In no way was I rejected by my non-Christian friends; I just became so involved in a completely different culture, the "church culture," that I no longer had time for them anymore. Dan Kimball refers to this as the "Christian bubble".

Now some of this growing apart is a natural phenomenon that occurs as adults grow older and life changes happen. But what really bothers me, is that increasingly, my friends and acquaintances tend to be predominantly brothers and sisters of the Christian faith. My relational networks have become primarily Christian. This at first glance does not sound like a bad thing. But understand this. I am convinced that God's deep desire is that those who do not know of the Maker's unconditional love in Jesus Christ would learn of that love and experience fully His healing grace. It is frankly disconcerting to know there is a major disconnect between me and those who don't know God's love. How can the church share the Gospel with those who don't know Jesus if we spend all our time with those who do?

*We meet in homes, pubs, and rented facilities. Our goal isn't to attract Christian people to our worship service but to be the faithful church in small pockets throughout our city. We are creating places of inclusive belonging where God's alternative Kingdom can be experienced.*<sup>xxvii</sup> –Hugh Halter and Matt Smay describing *Adullum*, their Denver mission alliance.

The lack of relationships with non-believers is aggravated by the church's reliance on a professional clergyperson or staff serving a group of clientele, the congregation. This professional's job security and family's happiness quite often depends upon whether the "members" of the country club-ish organization feel satisfied with how the pastor is *meeting their needs*. The ministry is inward, not outward. Misguided parishioners expect to be served, rather than serving others. The church has become consumed by consumerism.

*"You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become your slave. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many."*

–Jesus, Matthew 20:25-28

Furthermore, we become dogmatic and believe only our tradition or group of believers have the key to truth when that is not the case. We must evaluate ourselves according to the quality of our fellowship and not just the quantity of our constituents. Others must see Jesus in our acts of kindness, love, and compassion. We should exist for God and others and not turn inward. We should grow as disciples and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We must allow the Word of God and the Holy Spirit to make Christianity as attractive and beautiful as we try to make our buildings and dress be.

*Your church exists to love the world and to commission you for a mission of expanding beauty, truth, and goodness upon the earth.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

–Leonard Sweet

Unfortunately, the 21<sup>st</sup> century church does not contribute to the development of authentic relationships with those outside of our church buildings. Quite often, it doesn't even allow time for genuine relationships within the fellowship. If outsiders don't wander into our buildings, pastors, simply lack the time or opportunity to get to know them. Now that is a shame. Most lay persons experience the same thing. When not at church, lay persons are at work, and it is a rare work environment today that allows for much faith discussion and interaction among employees. To make matters worse, the church schedules every free moment away from work in a great variety of activities so as to meet every possible need people may have. This does not seem biblical.

What do we do on the rare occasion that someone accepts Jesus as Savior of their life and commits to follow Him as Lord? We lead them in a formulistic prayer, baptize them, sign them up for a denominational 101 course and give them a church schedule of events. Then, supposedly by osmosis, our Christianity rubs off on them. What really happens is that we acculturate them into the Christianity club. We replace their old pagan friendships with new Christian friendships. We replace their old pagan schedules with new Christian schedules. We erase the old culture and replace it with a completely new one with the stamp of "Christian" on it. And we do this in the name of discipleship. Eventually, after the new believer becomes accustomed to their new Christian culture, they feel guilty when they are confronted with the Word of God in sermons and scriptures that encourage them to "GO and MAKE DISCIPLES!" How? When? They don't have any time! Unfortunately the organized church contributes to the problem.

Consider relational networking. Because of the technological age in which we live, the American church must learn how to create community all over again in new and imaginative ways. The church should be providing healthy solutions and freeing people up for genuine relationships, not merely importing the busyness of the culture into the church

calendar. Counter-cultural today should look different from counter-cultural twenty years ago.

Furthermore, tribalism is now a current phenomenon among emerging adults in America. We group ourselves in small clusters around common interests, hobbies, jobs, taverns, web sites, or whatever we can find that connects us with someone else. We do the same thing in our denominations and in our isolated congregations without even realizing it. We become very clique-ish within our fellowships and through our doctrines and traditions.

Rather than isolating ourselves in our individual Christian tribes, we should seek ways to relate with others outside the walls of our local church. We should leave our buildings and create community in the real world where others could belong first and then come to know Jesus over time. Rock climbing clubs can become church on a mountain top. Hunters and fishermen can do church in the woods. A coffee house can become a gathering place where Bible study is open and welcome to friends who do not yet know Jesus. We don't have to throw the baby out with the bath water and quit 20<sup>th</sup> century church models, but we do need to empower, encourage and commission imaginative missional ministries and unique forms of church as well.

How did Jesus and the earliest disciples connect with those who had not yet experienced Jesus? They went wherever the Holy Spirit led them and lived their lives openly among those who were unfamiliar with the faith and hope within them. Eventually, many decided they wanted what Jesus had to offer. Living and loving openly among others in the world is what the early church referred to as witnessing to the Gospel.

*You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But you must do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. -Peter, 1 Peter 3:15-16*

Consider this. When someone accepts Jesus, we should encourage them to maintain ties with their non-Christian network of friends, but not participate in ungodly, non-biblical behavior. A new believer has a great influence on their network of non-Christian friends when they are fresh in their faith, excited, growing, learning and vibrant. We can trust the Holy Spirit enough to disciple followers of Jesus in any culture even when they are away from our sanctified church buildings, in the real world. New believers bring with them a connection to a diverse network of relationships. Discipleship involves helping new followers of Jesus to become strong witnesses within their culture to their friends.

One of the biggest mistakes cross-cultural missionaries made during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was removing new converts from their tribal connections and acculturating them into becoming Western Christians. When missionary success has happened around the world, it has been when missionaries share Jesus and the Word of God with people groups and unleash the Holy Spirit to do His thing among them from within their culture. Like a love virus, the Good News spreads through networks of relationships and transforms entire societies. This is the way the mission of God has worked for two millennia. It will work in America, again. We must offer Jesus to non-believers on their turf, not ours.

*To be alive is to be gifted with a mission... a magical, engrossing mission that leads to adventure, sacrifice, frustration, fulfillment, and holiness.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

-Leonard Sweet



*~ Action Response ~*

The following chart was presented by Carol Davis in her *DAWN Report* (June 2000)<sup>xxix</sup>. The left column represents the way most attractional models of church work: the local church extracts single converts, one at a time, from their world and incorporates them into the church. An alternative missional focus is represented by the right column. Spend some time comparing the two approaches and prayerfully discuss with other leaders in your team the differences. What can we learn from the two approaches? How can we modify our approach to be most effective?

<b>EXTRACTION MODEL</b>	<b>INCARNATIONAL MODEL</b>
<b>Church Culture</b>	<b>Missional Culture</b>
<b>Focus is on...</b>	<b>Focus is on...</b>
Individual converts	Group conversions (households, networks)
Believer's turf (church services)	Unbelievers' turf
Finding Christians to come	Finding persons of peace (open, but not yet committed)
Begin in church facilities	Begin in people's homes
Large group meeting – celebration	Small groups – cell fellowship
Scripture taught primarily as academic information	Scripture taught for application to life
Build programs and buildings	Build leaders
<b>Leadership...</b>	<b>Leadership...</b>
Pastor or professional staff	Apostolic team (bi-vocational, laity and clergy)
Imported professional clergy	Indigenous new Christians become leaders
Leader of participatory audience (consumer model)	Equipper of emerging leaders and reproducers
<b>Finances...</b>	<b>Finances...</b>
Funded church planter/pastor	Bi-vocational church planter
Heavy financial investment	Minimal financial investment
<b>Structure...</b>	<b>Structure...</b>
Needs of the church members	Needs of the community
Clergy-centered	Lay-centered
For slow growth (leads to stagnation)	For rapid reproduction (leads to health and vitality)

## ~ CHAPTER 12: BE GENEROUS ~

### GOOD FOOD IS GOOD SOIL: HOSPITALITY

*So why does giving become part of our new selves? (1) because the God whom we worship and the Christ who dwells in us are neither takers nor getters, but givers; (2) because God has given to us so that we would share with others... we are not just the intended recipients of God's gifts; we are also their channels.<sup>xxx</sup> -Miroslav Volf*

Memories of both of my dearly departed grandmothers tend to be centered in the kitchen. While facing the counter, engaged in wonderful culinary pursuits, my Nanny would talk endlessly on and on to anyone within earshot or even when no one was near. She would cook all day long, preparing a special dish for everyone in the family. It might be homemade pies, cakes, fresh cooked fish we cousins had just caught on our most recent trip to the bay, or a vegetable that each person would eat. If you didn't get full and feel special at Nanny's house, something was wrong. And at each meal, my father fussed at his mother and strongly encouraged her to sit down at the table and eat with the rest of us. But she continued to hover over us, adding more of our favorite dish to each plate, serving with a smile. My father got nowhere!

On the other side of the family, my Mimi and her three grown daughters would gather in her smallish kitchen and talk and laugh out loud. It was an unmistakable family trait--boisterous sounds. I remember most the tamales every Christmas, along with an overabundance of accompaniments. Rather than a community table, everyone would fill their plates and sit on lawn chairs in the closed-in porch, talking, joking, and simply enjoying one another



and the season. Food stayed on the table throughout the afternoon and evening, and quite often, little boys would over-indulge in sweets and experience the internal ramifications of such actions.

These memories centered around food, tables and relationships helped shape my identity, and continue to contribute to the man I am becoming today. How important is hospitality and good food? If we look to Jesus, it becomes clear that these are vital elements to a healthy and vibrant life. Much of Jesus' ministry as recorded in the four Gospel accounts happened around a common table and food. Jesus knew that relationships and people are formed and developed around meals.

Arguably, one of the Lord's most important gifts to the gathered "church" who would follow Him, other than the Holy Spirit, is the sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus said that just as He had gathered around food during the Passover with His disciples, we should continue to do so as often as we eat bread and drink wine, in remembrance of Him. The community of faith is formed and shaped around the table of communion as we continue to gather, worship, remember, experience Christ's unrelenting grace, and are sent out nourished by His presence and love for the world.

*"The table is a place where you connect and belong. It is a place where the past remains alive in the memory of the very old, and the future sparkles with possibility. It is enchanted. We lean close together, we share a glass, we tell a story. Through this simple human relating, the universe feels as though it is right again."*<sup>xxx1</sup>—Father Daniel Homan

The 20<sup>th</sup> century in America has created some major challenges to the ancient practice of "preparing a table". Our contemporary culture has changed in so many ways due to technology and legislation over the last 50 years or so. Besides a steady increase in average weekly work hours, both men and women now spend the majority of their time in careers outside



of the home. Most children are schooled all day, and then participate in a dizzying amount of extra-curricular exploits usually late into the evening. By the time everyone makes it home, exhausted and needing to unwind, individual televisions, computers and smart phones provide ready-made custom programming and solitary entertainment. TV trays and fast food have certainly lessened the table time most families spend together at home. Often, an occasional restaurant meal is the closest many families get to share a common table today in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Whereas neighbors used to know each other well and had meals and barbecues together regularly, most of us today settle for an occasional phone call or simply “friend” each other on Facebook. What have we lost in our rapid paced society? We seem to have lost the art of authentic relationships. The truth is that virtual relationships can never really replace the real thing. Face to face meals around a common table provide food for our souls that social media and Hollywood programming will never be able to substitute.

Our Creator made us in His image for relationships. Our culture must rediscover the art of table fellowship and hospitality, and Christ’s church must lead the way. What does reconciliation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century look like? With whom do we need to be reconciled, besides our Creator God? Let’s start with those in our own households and make time for one another at the table.

From there we can move outward towards our neighbors, friends, and even our enemies. Hospitality is one of the primary means humans have of healing and strengthening relationships.



To share food with another is a fundamental way of communicating connection and acceptance. Food is such a basic element of life. When we offer food to others, we offer them life and blessing, not only physically, but spiritually and psychologically as well. The word *companion* is Latin, meaning to “break bread” together. Jesus is our ultimate *companion*. The breaking of the bread in the Eucharist meal is a powerful sign act that comforts our souls and reminds us that we belong to Christ and those Christ gives to us. In the breaking of the bread we experience companionship and are reminded that we are not alone in the world.

*“When we offer hospitality to strangers, we welcome them into a place to which we are somehow connected – a space that has meaning and value to us. In hospitality, the stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal, and comfortable place, a place of respect and acceptance and friendship.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>*

-Christine Pohl

### **GOOD TIME IS GOOD SOIL: THE LOST ART OF PORCH SITTING**

In our fast-paced society, taking time to just hang out with others is difficult to do. So often, making time to provide hospitality and a meal for a group of friends feels like herding cats. Most local churches today set a date for a potluck meal, perhaps every fifth Sunday. This is a step in the right direction, but the best hospitality happens in intimate, personal space with small numbers of people. Relationships are best crafted during informal, warm, friendly gatherings. Frankly, you can’t really program the organic development of friendships; you can merely set apart time and let life happen.

Due to my beautiful wife, I have learned the value of making time for others and letting life happen. Before I met Deb, I was all about the party. I lived for the party. Life was a party and I wasn’t going to miss any of the fun. Friendships happened and were generally organized around the common goal of becoming inebriated. Well, once I became serious about my faith

walk and stopped gathering around the beer keg (idolatry?), most of those relationships I had developed over the years just faded away. The problem was that I still cared about those folks and wanted them to find what I had found in Jesus Christ.

I knew that my friends needed to discover the open secret to abundant life as well. But instead of maintaining those former relationships and providing first hand evidence to the changes in my life, I began spending my time immersing myself deeper and deeper into the church culture. I stopped hanging out and immersed myself in church activities like worship, teaching, leading youth, Bible study, potlucks, participating in passion plays, attending men's retreats, etc., etc. How I spent my time shifted from parties to church. Now that was a good thing for me as it allowed my focus to remain on the Lord. I rapidly learned and grew in my faith, but what about all those I left behind in my previous life?

My wife, Deb, is a self-proclaimed extrovert. She loves people and never shows restraint in getting close to others. In ten years of marriage, we have lived in six different towns, two states, and participated in the life of 13 faith communities. I have watched Deb build deep relationships everywhere we have lived and observed her grief each time the Lord has moved us to a new place. Although she has left behind deep abiding relationships, somehow she maintains many of those friendships from a distance. And yet at the same time, she never fails to build new relationships that go deeper than the run-of-the-mill acquaintance. Having observed how she does this has challenged and humbled me over and over again. Much of what I share in this field guide comes from readings or experiences in our travels. But the Lord has expanded my horizons and taught me immensely through a loving wife with a gift of hospitality.

Listening to a reel to reel sound recording my mother-in-law recently transferred to a digital format revealed much about why my wife relishes relationships the way she does. This soundtrack memorialized one of many experiences my wife had growing up, sitting on the porch of her grandparent's home in

rural East Texas. Her family loved to just spend time together. There was generally no agenda, just a porch, musical instruments and smiles all around. Family members, young and old, would take turns telling stories, praying, singing songs, cracking jokes, and trading instruments around (fiddles and guitars). Sometimes they gathered around a task like cracking pecans or shucking peas; other times they just watched the sun set and listened to the sounds of the night critters waking up to the rising moon. The key ingredient that seems so elusive to us today was time. They made time for one another. Everything else just fell in to place.

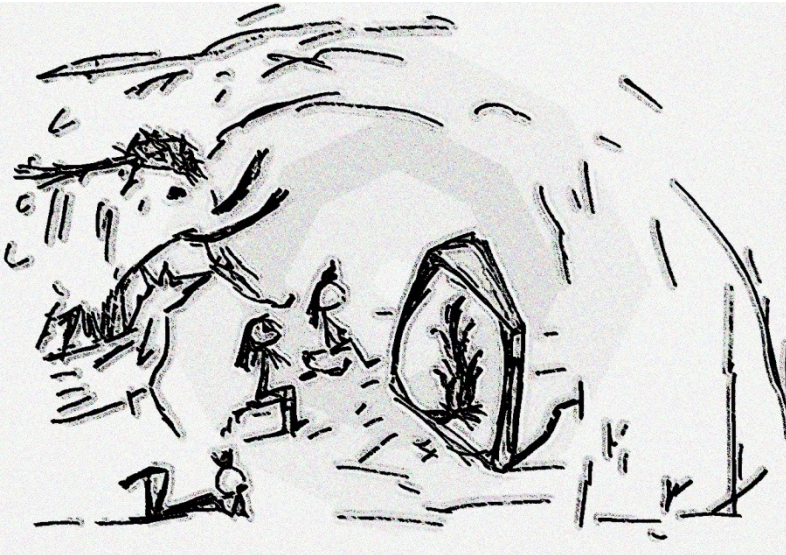
*Sweet childish days, that were as long as twenty days are now.*

-William Wordsworth

Before the age of television, hanging out on the porch was the norm. As I have gazed at my family and friends gathered around a TV, I have experienced a primordial flashback from deep within my genetic memory. I imagined us all dressed as cavemen and gathered around the mysterious, warm glow of a campfire. Has television replaced the campfire for humans today? If so, what vital element of that social gathering have we lost? As we gather around the TV *together*, are we genuinely together? Are we engaged with one another? Do we tell the stories and jokes that shape our identities? What have we lost, and how can we get it back?

The key ingredient is time. We must make quality time for each other. All is not lost. Technology does not have to rule our lives. A little television is not bad (I guess). At times we can use the television to create a social event that can develop positive relationships, like getting together to watch the Superbowl. But when television becomes our sole reason for sitting in the same room together, night after night, we need to put out the fire. Does technology have control of you, or do you have control of it? Is technology enhancing our lives or ruining them?

Now this is coming from a guy who recently hung his flat screen television above the fire place. We get the best of both worlds in our home, a caveman fire and the television at the same time. Ooooh, oooooh, oooooh! But my wife and I decided early in our marriage that we could save the big bucks it costs for cable or satellite by not subscribing, and yet we could use the television to watch an occasional movie. This lack of readymade programming has forced us to face each other as a family more. And that has been a good thing for us over the years. I am not suggesting that this is the solution for everyone, but I am suggesting that you should have a serious ongoing discussion about the technologies you allow into your home and lives, and whether you feel you are in control of them or whether they may be taking control of you.



*FIELD NOTES: List any technologies that dominate your time...*

Replacing TV time with family time is just the beginning. By replacing TV time with hospitality time to non-family members, life became more interesting, and my friendships with others grew deeper and grew more quickly. Relationships became rich through quality time and hospitality with others in our home. Relationships are better than TV programs and even better than church programs!

Folks today crave hospitality and genuine relationships. In a technologically driven culture that has lost its social way, we followers of Jesus have an incredible opportunity to model a better way, an ancient way, and a future way. The way to do this is not to throw out all technology as bad, but rather to use technology in healthy ways. To be counter-cultural today is as simple as turning off the television and inviting some friends over for a meal and a game, or to invite your prayer group or Bible study to gather in your living room rather than in the Sunday school classroom at your local church campus.

Invite your neighbors for coffee and donuts some time.



Be intentional about spending time with others. Reach beyond your normal clique of friends. Invite someone to your home you don't know well. Pray about this, read the Scriptures, and you are very likely to sense God's pleasure as you discover God's design for your life and family in hospitality and porch sitting. God's way has proven good for me and for my family.

*FIELD NOTES: Brainstorm some ways you and your family can be proactive in making time for each other and others...*

## **RAISING BARNS IS GOOD SOIL: HELPING HANDS, NOT HAND OUTS**

*You must love the Lord your God  
with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.*

*This is the first and greatest commandment.*

*A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself.  
All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based  
on these two commandments. -Jesus, Matthew 22:37-40*

God has designed us for relationships, first with Himself, and second with others. By design, these relationships are not self-serving, but rather self-sacrificial and empowered and propelled by selfless love. We look to God Himself in Jesus Christ as our best revelation of God's purpose and plan for humanity. After Jesus' baptism and Holy Spirit experience, He was led into the wilderness prior to His three year ministry. There while fasting and praying for the Father's will and strength, Jesus was tempted by Satan.

**Temptation #1: "If you are the Son of God, change these stones into loaves of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People need more than bread for their life; they must feed on every word of God.' " -Matthew 4:3-4**

Temptation # 2: *Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He orders his angels to protect you. And they will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone.'* " ***Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'Do not test the Lord your God.'* " -Matthew 4:5-7**

Temptation # 3: *Next the Devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him the nations of the world and all their glory. "I will give it all to you," he said, "if you will only kneel down and worship me."* ***"Get out of here, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, 'You must worship the Lord your God; serve only him.'* " – Matthew 4:8-10**

What can we learn from Jesus' temptations in the wilderness? Jesus knew that by design, there are no shortcuts to fulfilling God's work in the world. The Son of God had not come to earth with a magic fix-it wand. The Father's generosity goes much deeper than the apparent physical needs of His children. If Jesus were to solve the world's hunger problems by miraculously turning rocks into bread, global physical poverty as we know it would be over, but not spiritual poverty. Jesus told Satan, *"NO! People need more than bread for their life!"* Poverty is a deeper issue than merely provision of food. The spiritually poor need a deeper provision: Christ. The brokenness of sin and darkness in the world is soul deep, and the broken relationships humans are experiencing with their Maker and their neighbors is the chief cause of poverty in the world. A quick fix by generously providing food will not heal the root of the disease.

By Divine design, there are no shortcuts to reconciliation in broken relationships. In the same way, a mighty miracle provided by Jesus for the religious leaders at the temple would not heal the brokenness of the world. Even if Jesus were to rise to power as an all-powerful world-wide ruler, this would only



provide a temporary and incomplete solution for the world's problems if Satan and his forces were still active in the world.

By Devine design, there is no quick fix for the world. Jesus seemed to be aware that His Father had called Him to live fully, love fully and sacrificially, and to begin a love movement empowered by His model, His witness, His resurrection and the Holy Spirit which would turn the world upside down. By design, God intends to heal all of creation one person at a time by establishing an abundantly generous relationship with them. This will not happen by some miraculous provision of food, a single sign act, or a gifted world leader alone. People could be free from physical hunger but dying from a lack of spiritual food.

Generosity, by design is found in a person who laughs, eats, weeps, prays, struggles with temptation and suffers just like the rest of us. Salvation for humanity is relational, and like a love virus, is intended to spread from person to person until God is glorified and creation is made ready for the self-sacrificial rule of Jesus Christ, the anointed Messiah and Savior of the world. Jesus' prayer in the garden before He gave Himself over to the authorities for trial and crucifixion must be our prayer as well:

*My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me.  
Yet I want your will (design), not mine.*  
-Jesus, Matthew 26:39

**Here is the main point:**  
**GOD IS GENEROUS AND HE CALLS AND ENABLES  
CHRIST'S CHURCH TO BE GENEROUS AS WELL.**

By Devine design, there are no shortcuts to spreading Christ's love in the world. God and His church generously offer a desperate world assurance and peace by engaging the lives of others with tangible acts of hospitality, time and helping hands.

*If a community happens to be riddled with social ills, violence, corruption, fragmented and dysfunctional families, it will be an inadequate missional response merely to preach individual sin and repentance.*<sup>xxxiii</sup>

-Christopher Wright

When it comes to the church's efforts to be generous as Christ is generous, the temptation is to lean too far in one direction or the other. Either we seek to help meet the daily physical needs of those around us, OR we seek to preach God's truth and build spiritual relationships that will help others come to know and experience the salvation found in Jesus Christ. Jesus did both, and He did them both well. How? My guess is that by God's design, He relied on the Holy Spirit to reveal God's will along the way.

I am fairly certain that Jesus and His disciples did not organize a planning conference whereby they democratically came up with a grand master scheme for those three years of ministry. No, they prayed, walked, ate, ministered, healed, shared, prayed, ate, walked, ate, prayed, hung out, healed, taught, ministered, shared, prayed, walked, worshipped, and slept. And that was merely one day! For Jesus and His disciples, every moment of life was full of the potential of loving relationships that provided healing help for folks in every possible way: physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually. These guys and gals were walking evidence of God's love in action.

One of the generous ancient traditions of the Amish people remains today and is inspiring. When someone in an Amish community needs a new barn or a home to be built or repaired, the community comes together and has a "barn-raising". Everyone in the community attends. The women cook, the children play and assist as they can, and the men work together to assemble the building. Big feasts of food are shared together as everyone plays a part in helping the family in need to accomplish something much bigger than possible on one's own.

I experienced something similar to this when my wife and I became engaged. I mentioned in a men's prayer group that

I would be building a porch on my home for my soon to be wife. Unexpectedly, on the Saturday I had set apart to do this, about 7 men showed up with tools, supplies and smiles. I was amazed and frankly relieved because these guys knew what they were doing. They took time to make sure that I felt like I was in charge, and they taught me important construction skills and tips as we raised that porch together. I cannot tell you how deeply this act of generosity ministered to me and revealed more clearly what the kingdom of God is.

*To be connected to God in Christ in the Holy Spirit  
and to a community of faith is to move into radical relationality  
and seek the flourishing of all of life.<sup>xxxiii</sup>*

-Elaine Robinson

By design, the Gospel is all about relationships. It would not have meant as much to me if those men had shown up and built that porch without my being involved. Sure that would have been an awesome gift. What was more special to me was the genuine relationship that developed as we worked side by side. In a sense, I became one of them. I became identified as a brother, a peer, a friend, and not merely a charity case.

I love the show “Extreme Home Makeover”. I admit that I have even shed a tear or two during this show. It is amazing to see such a huge group of diverse people in a community sneak in and basically tear down an old home and rebuild a custom made dream home for someone in need in only a few days. And yet, the element that seems to be missing for me is the *cooperation*. How much more meaningful would it be if the needy family was able to be a part of all of the action and able to relate to and share in the work as it was taking place, rather than being removed to some distant resort? Rather than the celebratory cry of “Move that bus!” as the family sees their new home for the first time, how much more meaningful it would be if they could spend the final minutes of the program describing the lasting

relationships that had formed while working side by side with the crew.

*We have been more predisposed to invite people into our space, even making our space “seeker sensitive,” than to enter their space.*<sup>xxxx</sup>

-Leonard Sweet

Habitat for Humanity is a wonderful ministry that attempts to work towards alleviating the housing problems of the world by offering a helping hand, and not just a hand out. What I admire most about this ministry is that Habitat makes sure that the person or family in need is able to purchase the home to be built on their own at a reduced loan rate, and yet also requires that they invest a certain amount of sweat equity as they work alongside volunteer teams who help raise and construct the family's new home.

By design, I believe God calls all of us to build relationships with others through helping hands, rather than through handouts. Like a band-aid on a deeply infected cut, *handouts* may provide surface level therapy and stop the bleeding for a time. On the other hand, *helping hands* provide a much deeper and complete healing by allowing the needy to participate in their own restoration. To work alongside others creates a sense of pride and self-sufficiency, connects folks in relationships, develops reconciling connections and often provides a positive new identity with the partners. Surely it is more time efficient and less complicated to merely toss rocks/bread/money at a problem, but God's design always involves the deeper work of developing relationships.

Giving to certain charities and ministries is important Kingdom work, but when possible, we need to generously transform our outreach into relationship building opportunities. We get to know people when we spend time together, sweat together, laugh together, play together, and enter each other's worlds. By developing relationships through our outreach, we actively make ourselves available to be used by God as

ambassadors for Christ's Kingdom in what Paul referred to as the "ministry of reconciliation." Consider God's design. Find ways to raise a barn with someone. If we are paying attention, God will show us His design for balancing good works with good relationships. We must be purposeful in our generosity and not take the easy route of throwing stuff at the problem. Jesus taught:

*"I also tell you this: If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them."*

-Jesus, Matthew 18:19-20



~ *Action Response* ~

***By Design,  
our God invites us  
into a creative partnership with Him.***

*There's a riddle in the Talmud that goes like this, "If God intended man to live on bread, why didn't He create a bread tree?" And the answer is that, in fact, God could have created a tree that produced crusty loaves of bread, but He prefers to offer us a grain and invite us to buy a field and plant the seed. He prefers that we till the soil while He sends the rain. He prefers that we harvest the crop while He sends sunshine. He prefers that we grind the grain and knead it and bake it while He gives us air in our lungs and strength in our arms. Why? Because He would rather we become partners with Him in creation.<sup>xxxvi</sup> -Alan Hirsch*

- 1. Consider the Mission of God** – If God could have converted everyone in the world by now (and of course He could), why does He choose to partner with us?
2. If God provides the necessary ingredients for His mission, what are they?
3. How must we work with those ingredients so that we can partner with God in bringing the salvation of Jesus Christ into the lives of those who don't yet know Him?
4. Why are there different recipes for bread in different places?
5. What is the recipe for making and sharing bread in this place at this time?
6. If missional evangelism is one hungry beggar showing another hungry beggar where to get bread... our final DESIGN Action is to identify specific strategies to start sharing the Bread of Life!
7. During the next season, we will go out into our backyards allowing God's plans to DEVELOP through us.

**As a team, review your Season 1: DISCERN page  
and prayerfully write out a Season 2: DESIGN page  
to lead your congregation into Season 3: DEVELOP.**

**Be clear, be specific, and leave room for flexibility.**

## SEASON THREE: *DEVELOP*



### ~ CHAPTER 13: GET OUT ~

#### EASTER / PENTECOST / ORDINARY TIME: (To All Saints Day, November 1)

It is no accident that Christians celebrate the Resurrection of Christ in the heart of the season of spring. New life is budding all around, flowers are in full bloom, and all of creation visibly shout the praises of their Maker who has awoken them from their deep slumber. The recreation acted out each season of Spring is a wonderful reminder from the Creator of the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Death does not have the final word, but life is victorious and eternal by faith in the risen Lord!

The celebration of Easter continues for approximately 40 days, leading the church into the celebration of Pentecost.

*During the forty days after his crucifixion, he appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God. In one of these meetings as he was eating a meal with them, he told them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have*

*told you about this before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." When the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, are you going to free Israel now and restore our kingdom?" "The Father sets those dates," he replied, "and they are not for you to know. But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere-- in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." It was not long after he said this that he was taken up into the sky while they were watching, and he disappeared into a cloud.*

-Luke, Acts 1:3-9

We know the rest of the story found in the first verse of the very next chapter of Acts...

*"On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection..."*

The promised Holy Spirit made a dramatic entrance into the lives of the believers, and they were transformed from individual disciples into church. Immediately, as they were filled with God's Spirit, they were all compelled to leave the walls of their prayer room to witness with boldness to everyone from everywhere about the good news of Jesus and His resurrection salvation. God empowered these earliest believers to speak in the heart language of each pilgrim in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost or First Fruits.

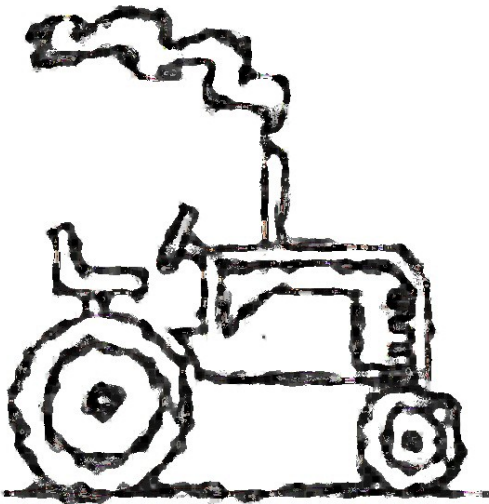
Everything changed from that moment on, and nothing could ever be the same. The day of Pentecost brought new life to the people of God gathered in Jesus' name, Christ's Church. Pentecost marks the moment the Maker fulfilled His promise to turn hearts of stone into flesh.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Since that Holy moment, God continues to breathe His resurrection Spirit into all those who wish to receive, take up their crosses, and follow Him.

*The active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God.*<sup>xxxviii</sup>

-Lesslie Newbigin



According to the liturgical calendar, the season following Pentecost is considered Ordinary Time but commemorates an extraordinary season of Holy Spirit empowerment for those who follow Jesus. Pentecost is a time of celebration for followers of Jesus, which highlights our role as participants in God's amazing mission of salvation. God wants and allows us to play a part in making all things new. God chooses to use ordinary folks like Moses, Gideon, David, Rahab, Peter, John, you and me in extraordinary ways to accomplish His loving will in the world. Like little kids who get an opportunity to help their daddy drive



the tractor on the farm, we get to help our Abba Father share the love of Jesus Christ with the world.

For believers, the season of Pentecost highlights the strange reality: God is with us in Spirit, truth, and His church, and at the same time, we are anxiously awaiting the time when God

will come again in all His fullness to heal all of creation and reign with His people.<sup>xxxix</sup> This is the mysterious cry of our faith: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!"

Followers of Jesus have been living in the season of the already but not yet, with an eye on His return for over 2,000 human years. In the meantime, we continue to faithfully develop relationships of love in Jesus' name, digging deep in the soil of the Spirit, seeking to grow as deeply rooted disciples, tending to the fields of our Master as we anxiously await the season of harvest.

## GO, SOW & GROW

*Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey.<sup>xd</sup>*

-Lesslie Newbigin

In regards to the Good Soil Process, we have now taken time during the season of Epiphany to DISCERN the will of God. During the season of Lent, we have thoughtfully considered God's DESIGN for us regarding His mission, in this place, at this time. Now, in this third season of the Good Soil Process, we step out in faith, trusting God to DEVELOP His plans and purposes through us.

This third season fills the majority of the year, from Easter in the springtime to All Saints Day in the fall. With our eyes on the resurrected Jesus Christ and our spirits filled with His Spirit of Pentecostal power, we take the steps necessary to go into the world, sow seeds of God's love and eagerly watch to see how the our Creator God will DEVELOP those seeds.

Now is the time for the faithful to step out in faith. This is the moment to take action on God's DESIGN. Pastor Henry Blackaby calls this moment the "crisis of belief." We recognize that God has called us to a God-sized task (the DESIGN), and we must decide whether we are going to trust Him and act. Will we step out in faith? Will we step out with complete trust, even though we don't know how the last page reads? Will we go, even though we may not have all of the provision for what God is calling us? Now is the time for action, and the only way to begin is to take that first step.

*For too long our identity has been formed by all manner of things except the deep Spirit of God. We have pursued our national agenda in the name of God. We have pursued our self-improvement in the name of God. We have pursued our desire for treasures and pleasures in the name of God. We have pursued our version of "church" at the expense of radical relationship with*

*God. Consequently we have too seldom opened ourselves to the radical love of God that transforms us in ways we can scarcely imagine... Godbearing is expressed in the world as bearing the renewed image of God within, bearing God to others, and bearing with God the suffering of others.<sup>xli</sup>*

-Elaine Robinson

The deep Spirit of God sets the agenda (the DESIGN) for our mission and leads our way into the neighborhood as *Godbearers*. We bear the hope-filled image of God to a hurt, broken and fragile world, one step of faith at a time. Often that step of faith is directed towards someone He loves, and He desires us to reach out in His name. Often, the first step is outrageously out of our character and out of our comfort zone and may not register to us as common sense. And yet God puts this action on our hearts through His Spirit so strongly as a burden and a calling that it seems to almost magnetically tug and pull us out into the world and towards someone.

Trust that instinct and simply go where God calls you to go. Don't reason the Spirit's nudges to death; don't argue with God like Moses. Simply step up like David before your Goliath, pick up your five smooth stones, and launch them. The key to allowing God's plans to DEVELOP through you and your local church is to listen carefully to your marching orders, trust God's Spirit, and simply GO.

*FIELD NOTES: Read Numbers 13 to 14:9. Pray for God to give you the courage, boldness, and urgency of Joshua and Caleb.*

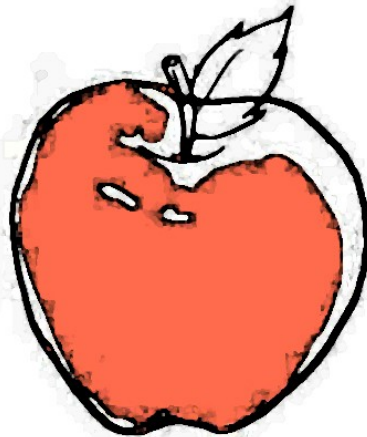
*Pray for unity of Spirit among your Good Soil Team. Pray for lives to be transformed by the Resurrection power of Jesus Christ and His love. Give God's Spirit time to move upon you and then to move you. Rally the troops and GO.*

*Oh, the Lord's been good to me. And so I thank the Lord  
For giving me the things I need: The sun, the rain and the apple seed;  
Oh, the Lord's been good to me.*  
-Kim Gannon

As we GO, we SOW. The legend of Johnny Appleseed comes to mind. Johnny Chapman, an ordinary apple farmer watched as brave and excited pioneer families set out west in droves looking for land, adventure and a new life. An ordinary apple farmer felt a tug from the Lord to provide physical and spiritual fruit for hungry pilgrims. Armed with a pot to cook in and wear as a hat, a Bible and a bag of seeds, the ordinary apple farmer set out across the frontier planting seeds of apples, hope, love, faith and God's Word.

An ordinary apple farmer answered God's extraordinary call to missions by stepping bravely out in faith and generously, compassionately and obediently sowing as the Holy Spirit led. Day by day, mile by mile, house by house, life by life, those seeds began to sprout and take root. Eventually, as the ordinary apple farmer looked back on where God had taken Him, he was blessed to see abundant blossoms and fruit where once there was none.

Our God loves to send us out on the impossible mission, because as we GO and SOW in His power and not our own, God gets the glory and others take notice. God the Farmer supplies us with the desire and energy to GO and the seeds of love to SOW. Then as we are faithful to do our part, our Creator God causes those seeds to GROW. And the fruit of His fields will produce many times over that little seed we placed in good soil for Him. That is the mystery and the miracle of the Good Soil Process.



*~ Action Response ~*

**During the DEVELOP season, it will be crucial that your team plan a means for documenting the steps taken during the spring, summer, and fall as you go, sow, and watch the seeds grow.**

1. How will you remember the story that develops as you walk it out?
2. Will you assign a person from each ministry outreach with the task of journaling?
3. Will you assign one person from the team to record the story of God's work through your congregation?
4. Perhaps a standard reporting form may be developed and used so that it is easy to remember the important names, dates, places, and details of God's work through you.
5. You don't want to get bogged down in reporting, but you do want to be paying attention to God's intervention and direction in order to celebrate effectively during the next season, DELIGHT.

**Here is a possible example:**

<i>Describe the mission:</i>
<i>Describe step one:</i>
<i>Describe any difficulties:</i>
<i>How did God overcome?</i>
<i>Did you see God heal or grow relationships (reconciliation)?</i>
<i>How did God get glory?</i>
<i>Possible future outcomes?</i>

## ~ CHAPTER 14: WALK THE WALK ~

### ENTHUSIASM IS GOOD SOIL: URGENCY

*Christ rose from the dead,  
and he will never die again.  
Death no longer has any power over him.  
He died once to defeat sin, and now he lives for the glory of God.*  
-Paul, Romans 6:9-10

I love worship on Easter morning! The sanctuary is always full, even if attendance is nominal on most Sundays. Children are dressed up in their finest new dresses and suits, hair combed down, or bows decorating bright cheerful faces. Smiles abound as old friends and new friends greet one another in the upbeat spirit of the season. Family from out of town fills rows of pews that quite often sit empty. The gospel has such a special ring to it on Easter Sunday morning as the Word is proclaimed urgently that Jesus Christ is alive! He was dead, but now He is alive! Every Sunday is a little Easter to some extent, but there is something extra special about the high holy Christian day, the super bowl of Christendom so to speak, where we shout and sing together from a mountaintop the amazing reality that “He Lives!”

The urgency proclaimed and displayed on Easter morning should be what life is like for all followers of Jesus all the time. Every single day is a special gift from our Maker, a day of abundant new life as one lives with the expectation of Jesus’ imminent return. And yet life goes on, and as profound and exciting as Easter Sunday is in contrast to the darkness of Good Friday, Monday always follows. Monday means we must return to the realities of the daily drudgeries of life and work. We can’t realistically spend every moment of every day dressed up in Easter Sunday celebration mode.

The joy of the resurrection is something to celebrate with urgency, but unlike a candle that burns out, that joy is intended to burn bright and steady in our souls not only on Sunday morning, but Monday through Saturday as well. Unlike happiness, joy is not fleeting and dependent on circumstances. Resurrection joy is steady, unshakable, and urgent day in and day out, not just one Sunday out of the year. The joy of the resurrection is soul deep.

We are awed when we imagine our earliest brothers and sisters of the church climbing down the steps from that prayer room during the festival of Pentecost, filled with the Holy Spirit and enthusiastically speaking in languages that Jews from all over the world understood. How beautiful is God's plan as it is played out on the stage of human history. Jesus was glorified in the enthusiasm and urgency of our ancestors in the faith as they allowed God's Spirit to send them into the lives of others. God was glorified as Peter stepped up and simply opened his mouth to try to explain the unexplainable scene that was playing out. And God was glorified as about 3,000 or so Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem believed, fell to their knees in repentance, claimed Jesus as Messiah, and were baptized into His fledgling church.

*"A deep sense of awe came over them all..."*

-Luke, Acts 2:43

## **DETERMINATION IS GOOD SOIL: PATIENCE**

*Pursue a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight for what we believe. Hold tightly to the eternal life that God has given you, which you have confessed so well before many witnesses.*

-Paul, 1 Timothy 11b-12

So, what happened next, after the enthusiastic and miraculous beginnings of Christ's church? They began worshipping together, learning together, eating together, sharing

all things together, partaking regularly in the Lord's Supper, and frequently more were added to their numbers. And they all lived happily ever after, right? Well, quite often we tend to romanticize the period of the early church by focusing on only some of the texts handed down to us through the generations. But the reality is that after Pentecost, Monday happened. Not everything stayed hunky-dory for the earliest disciples. Most of the New Testament is comprised of letters from leaders attempting to deal with the problems arising among God's children in the early church and its local mission outposts.

The reality is that being church, staying faithful to God's call, following God's will, and making disciples is hard work. Church is messy, because genuine community is messy. Thank goodness the Holy Spirit is with us, inspiring us, giving us a sense of urgency, helping us feel compassion, healing us where we are wounded, empowering us to overcome temptation and sinful habits, and helping us grow in God's wisdom and ways. Thank goodness God offers us grace and forgiveness when we mess up. And thank goodness God helps us to forgive others with that same grace when they mess up as well.

Walking the walk and following Jesus together as church is complicated at times, and there is not a simple sure-fire formula for success. All we can do is have patience, persevere when the going gets tough, and trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ. It is God's mission, not ours. We are merely allowed to participate. When things don't go exactly as we have planned, God is not off in heaven wringing His hands and sweating over our mistakes. God knows. God has it all under control. God is Sovereign. As my mom often reminds me: "Let go and let God..."

*Again and again they tested God's patience  
and frustrated the Holy One of Israel. -Asaph, Psalm 78:41*

*Patience can persuade a prince,  
and soft speech can crush strong opposition. -Solomon, Proverbs 25:15*



*Finishing is better than starting. Patience is better than pride.  
Don't be quick-tempered, for anger is the friend of fools.  
Don't long for "the good old days," for you don't know whether  
they were any better than today. –Solomon, Ecclesiastes 7:8-10*

## **PEST CONTROL FOR GOOD SOIL: SPIRITUAL WARFARE**

*Here is another story Jesus told: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. But that night as everyone slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat. When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. The farmer's servants came and told him, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds!' 'An enemy has done it!' the farmer exclaimed. 'Shall we pull out the weeds?' they asked. He replied, 'No, you'll hurt the wheat if you do. Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds and burn them and to put the wheat in the barn.'*  
-Jesus, Matthew 13:24-30

In Matthew's Gospel, immediately following the parable of the Good Soil, Jesus told the parable of the weeds and wheat (above). Jesus seemed to want to make certain His disciples knew they should not expect everything to be perfect in the future. Most of the soil will not be good soil, nor produce lasting fruit, and there will be lots of weeds that take up precious space in the fields. The weeds will put down roots, look a little like wheat, but in the end it will be judged to not be harvestable. Notice, the Farmer makes the decision for the servants not to attempt to remove the weeds. The servants are to ignore the weeds and wait until harvest when the Father will decide what to do with them.

*All right, I, the Son of Man, am the farmer who plants the good seed. The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom. The weeds are the people who belong to the evil one. The enemy who planted the*

*weeds among the wheat is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the world, and the harvesters are the angels.* -Jesus, Matthew 13:37-39

Jesus did not pull any punches when it came to spiritual truth. Many would say today that it is not politically correct to talk about spiritual warfare or mention the devil. Well, Jesus did not worry so much about offending others when He talked about Satan. As a matter of fact, one of the primary ways Jesus demonstrated the Kingdom of God was by casting demons out of people and giving authority to His disciples to do the same. As missional followers of Jesus, we would be remiss not to discuss at least briefly the realities of a very real enemy that does not want Christ's church to be successful.

*A final word: Be strong with the Lord's mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.* -Paul, Ephesians 6:120-12

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, encouraging them to not become discouraged because of the obvious difficulties they were facing. The problems people were experiencing seemed to have faces and names and often came from within their congregation. But Paul wanted the followers in Ephesus to know the spiritual truth. The truth was that their real enemy was unseen and working behind the scenes to cause havoc for Christ's church. In Jesus' words: whereas the Good Shepherd wants to "give life in all its fullness," the "thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10-11).

The truth is that when God's people get serious about the business of the Kingdom, a very real spiritual enemy takes notice. When missionaries begin pressing into territorial areas of spiritual darkness with the intention of sharing God's light and truth in Jesus Christ, the enemies of God do not like it. And

quite often missionaries who have been led to share the Gospel in a spiritually dark mission field report all “hell” breaking loose (pardon the pun). Some real-life examples are: financial problems, personal attacks from other people, relationship issues, health problems, depression, disunity in the body of believers, loss of passion, temptation, and so on. Thus, missionaries pray.

Consider the Pharisee Saul before his radical conversion to Christianity. He was convinced that as a devout follower of God he must persecute the followers of Jesus. On the road to Damascus he was struck by a blinding light and encountered the risen Lord. Jesus told him that he would soon become His witness to others who were blinded by spiritual darkness:

*I am going to send you to the Gentiles, to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.*

-Jesus, Acts 26:17-18

Saul, later known as the apostle Paul, learned firsthand the power of Satan to blind and distort God’s truth. He knew that there is an unseen enemy who hates God and all God’s children, who is an expert tempter and deceiver. The church in Ephesus was experiencing conflict and disunity within and many difficulties from outside the church. So, when Paul gave advice to this congregation, he did so with first-hand knowledge and understanding of the deceitful power of Satan. Does Paul tell the church to run and hide, or to give up the work that the Lord has given them to do? No. Paul knew that Jesus fought the devil with authority and boldness, and He empowers the church to do the same.

*When the seventy-two disciples returned, they joyfully reported to him (Jesus), “Lord, even the demons obey us when we use your name!”* -Luke 10:17

Paul's advice to the church in Ephesus was sound in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and remains good advice for those tending the Farmer's mission fields today:

*Use every piece of God's armor to resist the enemy in the time of evil, so that after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the sturdy belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News, so that you will be fully prepared. In every battle you will need faith as your shield to stop the fiery arrows aimed at you by Satan. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times and on every occasion in the power of the Holy Spirit. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all Christians everywhere. -Paul, Ephesians 6:13-18*

Spiritual warfare is a very real experience for all God's children today. Satan and his demons are hidden pests that are actively scheming to destroy the Farmer's fields. Our strength to overcome is found in God alone. We have no reason to fear, because fear is the opposite of faith. Our faith is in the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, who has gained victory over sin and death itself and has been given all authority in heaven and earth. Our weapons are the tools we use for farming the Master's fields: God's truth, God's righteousness, faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the peace that comes from the Good News, salvation in Jesus Christ, and the Word of God.

The cosmic power of love and forgiveness that Jesus offers is the most powerful force in all of creation. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is that the entire Good Soil Process be bathed in prayer. Pray together as often as possible. Pray for discernment. Pray for God's designs. Pray for God to develop His work through His workers. Pray with thanksgiving and praise when God gets glory and lives are changed. Pray for unity in the body of Christ. Pray for God's light to shine forth, in His church, and through His church in the world. Pray for spiritual insight when opposition arises. Pray for all God's missionaries on the front lines. Pray for those who don't yet

know Jesus and God's love for them. Pray for urgency. Pray for patience.

*Pray like this:*

*Our Father in heaven,  
may your name be honored.*

*May your Kingdom come soon.*

*May your will be done here on earth,  
just as it is in heaven.*

*Give us our food for today,  
and forgive us our sins,  
just as we have forgiven*

*those who have sinned against us.*

*And don't let us yield to temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.*

*-Jesus, Matthew 6:9-13*

*~ Action Response ~*

**The final task as we near the end of the DEVELOP season** is to wrap things up and prepare for the final season of the annual Good Soil Process, which is DELIGHT. The documentation that your missional team(s) has maintained will make this final step of planning almost simple. Reviewing where God has taken you and what He has done through you and for others will very likely be an extremely uplifting and spiritual experience. Make it so.

Take a retreat to process through the past several months, or find a meaningful way to truly celebrate God's work in and through you. You may wish to gather the entire congregation together as you look back and piece together the bigger picture. Most importantly, be sure to highlight what God has done, and how He has allowed your congregation to participate as an outpost of His amazing mission to the world. Emphasize that this is what we are about – this is church!

1. As a team, review the ministry reports generated during the DEVELOP season.
2. Allow folks to explain the urgency they felt and to describe the various mission outreaches.
3. Be sure to make mention of difficulties encountered, where patience was needed, and highlight ways God helped the local missionaries to overcome.
4. Spend time giving God glory, celebrating His Presence and thanking Him for every opportunity to be a part of what He is doing in the world.
5. Highlight possible future connections and ministries.
6. Finally, create a one page story report describing the previous DEVELOP season and how it has impacted the life of your congregation and the neighborhoods around your local church.

So far, your Good Soil Team has written three one-page stories describing your process each season:

1. DISCERN, 2. DESIGN, 3. DEVELOP

**Now it is time to move into the final season of the annual Good Soil Process, the season of DELIGHT!**

*The LORD your God will delight in you if you obey his voice and keep the commands and laws written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. -Deuteronomy 30:10*

## SEASON FOUR: *DELIGHT*



~ CHAPTER 15: GATHER ~

### ALL SAINTS DAY THROUGH CHRISTMAS (67 Days)

*The smoke of the incense, mixed with the prayers of the saints,  
ascended up to God from the altar where the angel had poured them out.  
-John, Revelation 8:4*

Ordinary Time or the Season of Pentecost continues through the summer months and for our purposes ends with the month of October.<sup>xlii</sup> Our fourth and final season in the Good Soil Process begins with the remembrance of All Saints Day or All Hallows on November 1. To hallow is to show great respect or reverence for someone or something or to identify them as holy, consecrated, saintly, sacred, or awe-inspiring.

The origins of this Christian celebration are rather complicated to explain and vary from tradition to tradition. In a nutshell, long ago the Western tradition of Christianity scheduled a celebration of All Saints Day on November 1 (at the time of the Roman festival of Lemuria) in honor of all the saints who had died. A saint is very simply someone devoted to the service of God. All Saints Day is also celebrated in recognition of the Celtic harvest festival of Samhain.

The church recognized how important these annual festivals had become to the local peoples who had converted to Christianity from pagan cultures and how they gave meaning and purpose to their lives. So, rather than attempting to simply abolish these seasonal celebrations, the Christian liturgists reshaped them into regular events that would highlight and affirm the practical nature of the Christian faith.

Admittedly, there are many variations of festivals that take place around this time every year. Halloween, or Hallow's Eve falls on the day prior to All Saints Day and derives directly from the same roots as All Saints Day. However, Halloween in the United States has developed into a secular festival where people dress up in outlandish costumes and children travel from house to house trick or treating for candy. Historically, the ancient Celts used to dress up in scary costumes once a year to scare off evil spirits.

For the Good Soil Process, we are going to highlight our final season of the year by focusing on All Saints Day rather than Halloween. All Saints Day is a Christian day of remembrance and marks the celebration of all of the faithful followers of Jesus who have gone on to be with the Lord. All Saints Day is also a time for celebrating the harvest and leads us into our final Good Soil Process season which is DELIGHT. This final season is comprised of 67 days and incorporates All Saints Day, Thanksgiving (an American holiday) and the seasons of Advent and Christmas.



*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. -Hebrews 12:1*

## **ABUNDANT DELIGHT IS GOOD SOIL: HARVEST**

*You take care of the earth and water it, making it rich and fertile. The rivers of God will not run dry; they provide a bountiful harvest of grain, for you have ordered it so. You drench the plowed ground with rain, melting the clods and leveling the ridges. You soften the earth with showers and bless its abundant crops. You crown the year with a bountiful harvest; even the hard pathways overflow with abundance. The wilderness becomes a lush pasture, and the hillsides blossom with joy. The meadows are clothed with flocks of sheep, and the valleys are carpeted with grain. They all shout and sing for joy! –David, Psalm 65:9-13*

The image of harvest is rich throughout the Scriptures. The farmers do what they can to prepare the soil, plant the seeds, tend to the crops, and pray about the weather. Eventually the farmer hopes to yield a valuable harvest that will provide food and income for one's household and perhaps even feed some hungry neighbors and strangers. And yet ultimately, after all of the preparation, work, and time invested, it is up to God whether fruit grows and the plants produce something worth harvesting.

*"A farmer planted seeds in a field, and then he went on with his other activities. As the days went by, the seeds sprouted and grew without the farmer's help, because the earth produces crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens. And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle." -Jesus, Mark 4:26-29*

For some reason, God allows us to participate with Him in planting and harvesting. When the harvest does finally arrive,

it is time to call the neighbors over to help gather the crop together and process it. Folks gather on porches telling the stories of the seasonal difficulties and how God came through in the end. Together we relive the hard work and celebrate the victories as peas are snapped, and corn is shucked.

A large table is prepared so that we can all gather together and gaze on the spread of God's abundance before us. As we share a meal together, we celebrate the wealth of God's blessing. The harvest is a time to delight in God's provision, to acknowledge what God has done and how He has allowed us to participate in His incredible work. In all humility, although the farmer may have worked hard and used wisdom in planting, in the end, God is the one who should be offered thanks. And yet the Lord allows us to delight as well.

*And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace  
and reap a harvest of goodness. —James 3:18*

## **STORYTELLING IS GOOD SOIL: SHARE GOD'S GOOD NEWS**

*Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires.  
Commit everything you do to the LORD. Trust him, and he will help you.  
—David, Psalm 37:4-5*

The fourth season of the Good Soil Process is the season in which we take time to take DELIGHT in the Lord and what He has done throughout the previous seasons. The Process contains four seasons, and is not a simple formula for success but rather an organic seasonal process for orienting ourselves towards God and His work in the world. The Process explained in this book is intended to help followers of Jesus pay extra attention to serving with the Lord as participants in God's mission.

This missional orientation requires that we work together as church. Together we must listen to the Holy Spirit to DISCERN His will for our missional outpost. Next we must ask God to make known to us His DESIGN for accomplishing His will. For the majority of the year we will step out in faith act upon God's call, paying close attention to how the Lord will DEVELOP relationships with others through us. Finally, in this final season, we pause to take stock of what God has done and allowed us to participate in. We gather together to DELIGHT in the stories of faith, hope, and love.

*Listening to one another retell stories from our experiences is how you step back and view your mission from afar.<sup>xliii</sup>*

-Alan Hirsch

Although we may develop quantitative measures to evaluate our efforts by counting numbers of people reached, served, etc., ultimately, the most important way to communicate and assess the work of the Lord is to tell the stories. Numbers and statistics rarely set people's hearts on fire. What generates passion and delight is a good retelling of an inspirational story.

*Stories are inspiring. They provide energy, which often leads to action.<sup>xliiv</sup>*

-Alan Hirsch

In our logical, analytical, digital society, we in the West have just about lost the art of storytelling. Every good culture is bound together by its story. Take away the story and you take away the connection. And within the church, over the centuries, we have delegated our storytelling to a minority of professional clergy. When it comes to the art of storytelling, you either use it or lose it. Too many laity in the church today have simply lost it, entrusting the pastor to keep the flame alive. The church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must reemphasize the value of all followers witnessing to the story of God and His work in the world.

*Remembering your stories will also allow you to discern where God has worked through you in the past. This will bring clarity for your future and remind you of your calling as a community.*<sup>sch</sup>

-Alan Hirsch

Our story is much more than what is written in the pages of the Bible. The revelation of God and particularly Jesus Christ in the pages of Scripture are foundational for understanding who we are and whose we are. But God is with us and is alive and active in each of our lives every single day. We live our story day in and day out, and God reveals Himself and His purposes to us through His Word, through circumstances, through tradition, and through our interactions with others. Every day God provides His children with new material for our stories.

We must focus all Jesus follower's spiritual eyes upon God's activity and teach, model, and encourage each other to tell God's stories. Time must be set aside, perhaps a whole season, to rest and relive God's work in us and through us. So we spend the next couple of months (November and December) intentionally celebrating together the DELIGHT of the Lord of the Harvest. The good news is too good to not tell. We should be known as the people who will stand up and testify to the goodness of God whenever opportunity arises. This is how we witness to each other and the world. God is up to something. He is making all things new! How are they going to know if we don't tell them?

*For "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

*But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

-Paul, Romans 10:13-15



## ~ *Action Response* ~

How will your community of faith decide to celebrate what God has done? How you determine to do that during the season of DELIGHT will be the substance of your team's final Good Soil Process Report for the year. This will be the fourth and final one page report, documenting the story of how your congregation has delighted in the harvest of God's mission. What did you do to tell your God stories? Who did you involve? What means and media did you utilize? How did you use your imagination, and how did you tie in the celebrations with All Saints Day, Thanksgiving, Advent and Christmas?

*A wise missional community will mine and treasure its stories.*

Here are some suggestions from Alan Hirsch and  
Darryn Altclass in the, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook*<sup>xvii</sup>...

- *Starting with the leadership team, make a commitment to remember and retell your stories as each member intermingles with others in the church group.*
- *Ask people for their cherished memories of engaging in mission together.*
- *Create slide shows (and videos). A picture paints a thousand words! Obviously, you will need photos for this, so document your ministry with a camera. Take photos of all the people with whom you are connecting, and of the places you connect, the parties, the food, the celebrations.*
- *Interview members for your newsletter. Ask them to talk about their favorite memories; get them to recall a story or two.*
- *Together, map how relationships began and developed. When did we meet so and so? Who met him first? How did it happen? Whom did he connect with next? Recall significant moments in your relationships.*
- *A simple question like, "How has God used us in the past?" will lead to many interesting stories.*
- *Get someone to write a book that collects the stories of the community and retells them in a compelling manner.*
- *Host an annual dinner where you eat together and remember the stories of the past twelve months.*
- *Organize a yearly weekend retreat for anyone interested in dreaming up the future. A significant portion of this weekend is spent recalling the stories.*

# ONWARD: *MAY THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN*

*“There is a time for everything,  
a season for every activity under heaven.”*  
- Solomon, Ecclesiastes 3:1

## ~ CHAPTER 16: LIFE ~

### A NEW BEGINNING

What some may consider the end, we followers of Jesus recognize as only the beginning. As we near the end of the Good Soil Process, and reflect on the four seasons which have recently passed, we realize that a new year has arrived, and new possibilities are on the horizon. The circle of life goes on, and the journey just keeps getting better. A seasonal approach to life provides the variety which makes life more interesting and meaningful.

A new journey begins, as we embark on the natural and supernatural missional adventure of the Good Soil Process once again:

1. DISCERN – Epiphany
2. DESIGN – Lent
3. DEVELOP – Easter, Pentecost and Ordinary Time
4. DELIGHT – All Saints Day through Christmas



*May the circle be unbroken, by and by Lord, by and by.*

## **THE MEANING OF LIFE**

Life is meant to be fully lived, not merely endured! This attitude is one many never grasp, and yet, others embrace with abandon. One of our greatest challenges is wrestling with the meaning of life and attempting to find purpose in the seemingly ordinary and often painful experiences of life faced on this unusual, spinning, burning, abundantly fruitful rock we call Earth. Is there a reason for our being here? Or are we all some cosmic fluke of mysterious microscopic particles spinning through space which just happened to collide and align in this unique way, in this particular time and place, so as to create the illusion of matter and reality and beauty and order amidst a backdrop of chaos?

The answers to those questions seem to be elusive even to the most brilliant philosophers, and so I will not even attempt to join the debate here. We all develop or are in a process of developing a philosophy for our lives. My philosophy of life, which is to live fully and love fully, is drawn out of my love of the Creator God and His Word as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and the biblical scriptures. For me, the Bible is the revealed truth regarding God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and His loving, redeeming work in the midst of His creation. Throughout the ages, many fellow seekers have discovered the fullness of renewed relationships with the One True God and His creation.

My experience as a follower of Jesus has been the discovery of a profound and ongoing deep healing grace in all areas of my life and a growing kinship with all of creation through a shared faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses and Jesus. I am convinced that God's Spirit is at work in the world everywhere and in everyone to whatever extent He is

allowed access. The Holy Spirit is actively wooing, renewing and making all things new. The Lord of all creation, Jesus Christ, wants all of us to find the Way of Life that is abundant and best for all of us.

*FIELD NOTES: What is your philosophy of life? How is it shaped by your understanding of God?*

### **LIFE WITH ABUNDANT BOUNDARIES or ABUNDANT LIFE?**

There was a time in my life when I lived by the dictum: *Life is hard, then you die, so party hard, 'cause only the good die young!* But, it didn't take long to discover the selfishness and bleakness of such a lifestyle, not to mention the incompatibility with the Christian faith I had grown up with. Much of my life has been spent trying to discover what it means to live life fully. As followers of the Way of Jesus, we find some answers to that question in the wisdom of our faith-filled ancestors who asked similar questions, and we unearth direction in the passed down stories, sayings, and actions of our Messiah, Jesus Christ.



*“My purpose is to give life in all its fullness.”*

- Jesus, John 10:10

There may be no easy answer to the question of abundant life except that as followers of Jesus we discover that a plentiful life results from moving forward together... in community... toward God and others on the Way. Abundant life is not necessarily achieved through a list of rules and regulations or even a one-size fits all set of standards, rituals and expectations. The particulars of life are so diverse and varied for each individual that it is impossible to lay out the specifics for each personal situation. This was Jesus' challenge to the religious leaders of His day. They had developed such a complex customary religio-legal system for every basic task of life so there was no freedom of flexibility, no room for a spontaneous faithful relationship with the Creator and creation.

God and His purpose for humans had been defined by religious leaders literally in black and white and oral tradition (or so they thought) within a strict code of conduct. But Jesus came on the scene and made it clear that the Father created us to be free and imaginative creatures whose characters are constructed by engaging faithfully and flexibly in the uncertainties of life. The law which was originally given as a means of grace to provide healthy boundaries for an immature community of faith in the wilderness had by the 1<sup>st</sup> century become a ball and chain for God's children. We rejoice that Jesus made it clear that the Father of all wants to see His children free to run and play.

*FIELD NOTES: List some ways religion can become inflexible and overly restrictive.*

## NO EASY ANSWERS

An enormous, super powerful mega-giga-google byte computer the size of the sun could not function for humanity as a step-by-step instruction manual for lives because we are too wonderfully and complicatedly constructed. Our Bible is the wonderful Spirit-inspired revelation of God and provides us with a glimpse into God's great intentions for us. The Word testifies to the saving work and mission of Jesus Christ in the world and is brought to life by the powerful breath of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is godly insight and wisdom for right living, but it was never intended to function as a magic 8-ball. Each life is unique, and so each of our ways is different in some manner or direction from our closest neighbor. Life is complicated, uncertain, with few easy answers. Quite often, life seems unfair. No matter how well we try to live, circumstances do overwhelm us at times, and life becomes painful and discouraging at best.

*FIELD NOTES: How much do you trust the Bible and how do you tend to use it?*

*It has been said that we don't read the Bible, the Bible reads us. What do you think about that?*

## HOLY SPIRIT PARTNERSHIP

But nevertheless, the question remains: what is the abundant life? For me it is the freedom to live purposefully, without holding back, loving fully and living fully. To be guarded and closed off from others is no way to live. Jesus took chances

with His life in order to live for God and others. He did not disregard the heart of God's law, or the basic rules of society, but He did keep them in proper perspective.

Thus, Jesus came near, so that we might discover abundantly full, plentiful, generous lives, even in the midst of disappointing and disheartening situations. His Spirit leads, guides, and empowers us with grace for living. In response to the Apostle Paul's request to remove the "thorn in his flesh", God said, "*My gracious favor is all you need... My power works best in your weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9). The implication is that our personal willpower and good works are not enough. In our weakest moments God is most free to move and work in us and through us. The abundant life is found in a relationship with the Lord. Adherence to religious rules or doing the right things doesn't constitute the abundant life. God is who man seeks.

Jesus modeled for us how God works best when we make ourselves vulnerable. Jesus drew close to humanity to provide nourishment for starving, drought-weary souls. Humanity's weakness is soul deep. Christ's cure is the vague and indefinite metaphors of "living water" and the "bread of life." The abundant life restores the whole person and the community and does not depend on bureaucracy or government programs but rather a personal relationship with the Great Physician himself and with those who choose to follow Him.

Jesus offers Himself for our healing. Jesus, our soul-surgeon, wants to mend us, complete us, make us whole and healthy persons, and allow us to participate with Him as surgical instruments uniquely shaped and laser-sharpened for assisting with the task of healing all of creation. Jesus set aside His power and glory to walk in our shoes, to show us that with God's help, we can rise above the hardships of life. Not only can we

overcome, but we can become agents of God's grace and love to a lost world that has strayed from its original purpose.

As overcomers, as agents of God's grace,  
we experience abundant life.

*FIELD NOTES: How has the Holy Spirit allowed you to partner with God as an agent of grace?*

*How have others been agents of grace in your life?*

## ~ CHAPTER 17: SEASONS ~

### **HIS STORY = OUR STORY**

Abundant life is the amazing story of grace which we are privileged to experience and allowed to share with everyone. God himself, the Creator of all things, moved into the neighborhood

and continues to knock on each of our doors with nothing to sell but this vital truth:

*Life is worth living and bursting with purpose.* Meaning and significance are obtainable. There is a profound, unshakable joyfulness available to everyone. With God's help, we can withstand and endure any unsavory circumstance. Happiness is fleeting and temporary, but the joy of the Lord is permanent, unstoppable, and eternal.

*Each participant in the Maker's way has cosmic significance and everlasting beauty.* God made humans extraordinary and wants to shape each of us into the masterpiece we were created to be. We are all made in the Maker's image to be imaginative and creative.

*For God so loves the world...* that He created it, and God the Farmer continues to walk in His garden, admiring and enjoying the work of His hands, tending and tilling, conceiving and conserving.

*For God so loves the world...* that He has never given up on us, even when we have chosen to harm ourselves and creation by challenging the healthy boundaries our Father has given us.

*For God so loves the world...* that our Creator wants the best for us, and so He sent His one and only Son, that anyone who trusts Him and follows His Way of life will not merely wither away and become eternally separated dust floating aimlessly through the cosmos but will instead experience abundant and everlasting life.

*For God so loves the world...* that He wants us to live fully and love fully, right here, right now, and forevermore. May our Maker's character and His ways become ours.

*This is our purpose...* (and our Creator/neighbor continues this Spirit-driven knock on the door of our souls and offers each of us this hope-filled invitation)... *Come on out and play, come out and follow me, come home for dinner, and meet the Father!*



*FIELD NOTES: In what ways has God changed you (made you better) by His grace?*

## **SEASONAL BOUNDARIES**

Even for those who know the Lord, who have abundant life, there are seasons of life. God's created world is one of contrasts: light and dark, water and land, bird and fish, dog and platypus, mountain and valley, summer and winter, spring and fall, work and rest, freedom and boundaries.

Those who work outdoors are acutely aware of the changes of season. Hay farmers know when to cut and bail. They know when to expect and hope for the rains as well as how to deal with the poor results when those rains don't arrive on time. Hurricane season often calls heroic electric company lineman into duty for weeks at a time, working non-stop to repair and restore electricity to broken and torn communities.

Even those of us who work indoors pay attention to the changes of seasons. Public school teachers and their pupils tend to have a special affinity for the summer months. Families love the winter holidays. Children love gift giving seasons. Our seasons of life are limited only to our engagement of the world around us.

Most of us have a favorite season for personal reasons. We like to play in winter snow, relish the blooms of spring, swim

in warm summer waters, or hunt in the fresh fall coolness. How bland life would be without regular changes of season. The sun rises and sets, the moon churns the seas, and the tilt of the axis of the earth provide variant levels of sunlight and heat. God surely works all things for the good of His creation, and the same rain falls on those who practice good and evil alike. Everyone experiences seasons.

Seasons can have negative characteristics as well. The same snow where we enjoy skiing and sledding can at times create dangerous avalanches and cut us off from our neighbors. The rains of spring can bring flooding and disaster. The heat of summer can endanger the health of the elderly and sick when they have no life-saving air conditioning. Unfortunately, the beautiful leaves of fall must eventually be raked up. What a pain!

*FIELD NOTES: What are your favorite and least favorite seasons and why?*

## **BIOLOGICAL SEASONS**

In the same way, the seasons of life go beyond mere weather patterns and absorb every arena of our existence – nothing stays the same. The universe, and all within it, is always in constant motion. Change is inevitable. Biology teaches us that anything that finds itself in a stagnant, inert state is no longer

alive, but dead. All of living creation is on the move, becoming more alive or dying, increasing in cellular activity or decreasing.

Life is full of momentum. All of us, regardless of our culture, mark our lives by the big seasons: birth, commitment to faith, love, marriage, child-bearing, old age, and death. We also experience many lesser seasons to mark our journeys while we are here, walking on this planet: our first big crush, a coming of age moment, perhaps a hard earned promotion. From time to time we endure personal seasons of suffering, illness, concern for and loss of loved ones. Some seasons hurt and some heal.

*FIELD NOTES: List some of the most important seasons of your life to date.*



*Oh, the joys of those who... delight in doing everything the LORD wants;  
day and night they think about his law. They are like trees planted along the  
riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. Their leaves never wither,  
and in all they do, they prosper.*

-Psalm 1:1-3

## **SEASONS OF ABUNDANT LIFE**

Hope, joy, praise, doubt, growth, faith, peace, decline, love, soul-searching, outreach, introspection, compassion... Life is a rhythmic journey which can seem out of control and chaotic, or it can be embraced as a great adventure. For those with eyes to see, there are mountain tops to be climbed and valleys to be traversed. All of the seasons of life we journey through are gifts from a loving God who is the Giver of abundant life and able to help us find our destination and make us better.

When we have abundant life (a relationship with God), all of life itself is embraced positively as a song to be sung, and God's Spirit becomes one's breath (whether we find ourselves playing a sad dirge, a melodious chant or a rocking harmony). All of life becomes part of a great masterwork. It becomes a magnum opus which brilliantly shines forth in darkness and illuminates the way for others to follow. Jesus is the magnum opus of humanity. He calls everyone to embrace life positively and to join in His chorus, singing praises to the Father God Almighty with all of creation as we walk through life together...

*Holy, Holy, Holy!  
Lord God of power and might!  
Heaven and earth are full of your glory!  
Hosanna in the highest!  
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest!<sup>chui</sup>*

Abundant life is a worshipful life. When our worship becomes rightly directed towards our Maker rather than His creation, life becomes full and focused. If we embrace life as Christ does, there is power and restoration and healing in praise! As we worship the Lord in Spirit and truth together, we can rise above the distractions of daily existence and enter the courts of the Living God. In that place of praise, angels, saints, and all of creation are shouting thanksgiving to the loving Creator of all things. As singer songwriter Jason Upton so movingly articulates:

*“In the place of suffering, there is a God worth worshipping...  
On these wings of worship we shall rise!”<sup>xlvi</sup>*

-Jason Upton

Life is always more complete when we season ourselves with praise for the Almighty. If you want your tank full, try being thankful.

Perspective makes all of the difference. As we follow Jesus through the seasons of abundant life, we must help one another re-focus on the Lord and His promises. The Spirit will give each of us God-goggles if we ask. Our vision prescriptions are fine-tuned in prayer and adoration. As we turn to Jesus with love, praise, and adulation, our eyes become opened. The lenses of praise shield us from viewing only our personal circumstances. Instead, we begin to see the bigger picture of what God is doing. The seasons of life begin to make more sense and God’s goodness becomes clearer. Jesus comes to us offering the correct prescription for 20/20 abundant life perception.

*Have you seen Jesus my Lord, He’s here in plain view,  
Take a look, open your eyes, He’ll show it to you.<sup>xlvi</sup>*

-John Fischer

*FIELD NOTES: Take a moment to write a note of thanks and praise to the Lord. Ask Him to open your eyes to His will and ways as you move into a new season of discernment.*

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## ENDNOTES / RESOURCES

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<sup>i</sup> Epiphany of the Lord is generally celebrated on January 6, followed by several Sundays leading up to Ash Wednesday. The period between is referred to as Ordinary Time which includes four to nine Sundays depending on the date of Easter. For our purposes, we are extending the Season of Epiphany to incorporate this Ordinary Time leading up to Ash Wednesday.

<sup>ii</sup> Leonard Sweet, spoken in a conversation.

<sup>iii</sup> Encarta Dictionary Online,  
<http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryResults.aspx?lextype=3&search=discern> (Dec. 15, 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> “*Father*” replaced for effect with “*Farmer*” by the author.

<sup>v</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Words of Jesus: A Gospel of the Sayings of Our Lord* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) p.36-37.

<sup>vi</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009) p.70.

<sup>vii</sup> “*Father*” replaced for effect with “*Farmer*” by the author.

<sup>viii</sup> Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) p. 99.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>xi</sup> Henry and Richard Blackaby, Claude King, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Life Way Press, 2007).

<sup>xii</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009) 113.

<sup>xiii</sup> Will Miller, Glenn Sparks, *Refrigerator Rights: Creating Connections and Restoring Relationships* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2007).

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>xv</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 71.

<sup>xvi</sup> Jehu Hanciles, "Beyond Christendom: African Migration and Transformations in Global Christianity." *Studies in World Christianity* 10, no. 1 (2004) 95.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

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- xviii Viggo Mortensen, "What Is Happening to Global Christianity?" *Dialog* 43, no. 1 (2004) 24.
- xix Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights From Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2007) 9.
- xx Ibid., 58.
- xxi David Kinnaman, Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2007) 15.
- xxii Ibid., 14.
- xxiii Ibid., 5.
- xxiv Ibid., 224-225.
- xxv Hugh Halter, Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community, The Posture and Practices of Ancient Church Now*, 43.
- xxvi Ibid., xxi.
- xxvii Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009) 56.
- xxviii Ibid., 57.
- xxix Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (United States: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) 72.
- xxx Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 59.
- xxxi Daniel Homan, Lonni Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2005) 108.
- xxxii Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) 13.
- xxxiii Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 432.
- xxxiv Elaine Robinson, *Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006) 3.
- xxxv Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009) 79.
- xxxvi Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (United States: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) 159.
- xxxvii See Ezekiel 37.
- xxxviii Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995) 56.

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xxxix See Revelation 21.

xl Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995) 56.

xli Elaine Robinson, *Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006) 76.

xliv The season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time actually continues for 33 Sundays well into November. For the Good Soil Process purposes, November 1, which is All Saints Day, will begin our 4<sup>th</sup> season which is DELIGHT.

xlvi Alan Hirsch, Darryn Altclass, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook: A Practical Guide for Developing Missional Churches* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009) 122.

xlv Ibid., 122.

xlv Ibid., 122

xlv Ibid., 124.

xlvi -from the United Methodist Liturgy for Holy Communion.

xlviii Jason Upton, *Trusting the Angels* (CD, 2004).

xlx John Fischer, *Have You Seen Jesus My Lord* (1970).

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The Good Soil Process is a seasonal approach to effective missional disciple making. This "field guide" follows the annual Christian calendar and leads followers of Jesus towards vibrant, adventurous lives of faith. All of God's children are participants in God's amazing mission in the world. This field guide attempts to help the church reorient itself outward, as missionaries in our own backyards. The four annual seasons of engagement are Discern, Design, Develop and Delight.

## **the good soil process: a backyard missional field guide**

**"Our God loves to send us out on the impossible mission, because as we GO and SOW in His power and not our own, God gets the glory and others take notice."**



**keith tilley**

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**[www.thegoodsoilprocess.com](http://www.thegoodsoilprocess.com)**





# Texas East Good Soil

Review: 1.5 Years



Keith Tilley  
July 28, 2010

# Good Soil



**The Good Soil Process** is the name of the Texas East District's most recent efforts at reigniting passionate missional ministry among the 107 mostly rural congregations scattered around approximately 10,000 square miles of deep East Texas. What follows is a brief and honest summary of what our Good Soil leadership team has learned over the last year and a half regarding what has been effective in inspiring missional ministry and what has not. **History:** Rev. Keith Tilley was hired to serve as director of Good Soil with district superintendent, Dr. Jerry Pennington in June of 2009. His appointment was to Bonita UMC and to the Good Soil extension ministry. Rev. Phyllis Riney of Pearland UMC is also serving as a Good Soil coach/consultant with the East District.

### **TOP THREE GOALS:**

1. Develop a culture of effective rural missional ministry
2. Leadership development
3. Missional paradigm shift

### **ADDITIONAL GOALS:**

4. Qualitative accountability (storytelling)
5. Increased use of technology
6. A multilateral approach to empowering and working with East District congregations
7. Develop a seasonal process for effective mission and ministry
8. Develop pastor/lay leader/connectional teamwork
9. Encourage creative small group scenarios
10. Imaginative alternative 21st century ministries
11. Explore and initiate Shared Ministry
12. Encourage and develop missional relational evangelism
13. Develop clergy oversight of multiple congregations
14. Increase lay ministry
15. Recruit qualified rural pastors and increase tenure within the East District
16. Encourage and empower local congregations to explore out of the box missional ministry
17. Asset-based, Spirit-led ministry
18. Develop in-house and share communication/training tools and resources (DVD's, curriculum, books, website, web conferencing, etc.)
19. Enlist the assistance of outside consultants for specialized training and assistance

## What Has Not Worked:

**Synergy** - An attempt to gather lay leaders and pastors from ten congregations into an online community to discuss mission and ministry issues. The goal was to inspire, equip and challenge lay and clergy leaders in local congregations to think beyond the routines and established norms of church life, and to reach into the community in new ways. Unfortunately, participation in the weekly online chats was limited to about 60% clergy and 10% laity. **Lesson:** time commitments must be kept to a minimum when organizing and equipping clergy and laity.

**Hub Conference Calls & Quad Meetings** - In 2008 to 2009, Dr. Pennington required clergy to participate in monthly hub conference calls. Quad meetings were also held in four locations, quarterly. Both pastors and laity in each area were encouraged to attend. Unfortunately, attendance was sparse for both the calls and the onsite meetings. **Lesson:** the distances people had to travel for Quad meetings was too far, and the conference calls proved to not be the best means for disseminating information.

## What Has Worked:

**Spring Equipping Workshops** - For the past two years the District has brought in author and consultant Bill Kemp to lead seminars for both clergy and laity. Kemp's emphasis is upon the rural church, and his books have proven to make excellent small group studies. The first book we studied as a district was Ezekiel's Bones: Rekindling Your Congregation's Spiritual Passion, and the second was Saul's Armor: Reforming Your Building and Organization for Ministry. Participation in the workshops has been very good, and testimonials of applications has been positive.

**Shared Ministry Parishes** - Development of innovative relationships of sharing among East District congregations within a defined geographic area, culture, and/or mission field. Expert, Julia Kuhn Wallace of Tennessee, will be assisting our District in developing effective shared rural ministries. Shared ministry partnerships will provide increased opportunities to enhance and utilize lay minister leadership under the guidance and direction of equipping pastors and will also encourage the sharing of congregational resources and ministry within a broader mission area.

**Current Parish Projects:** Diboll Area Parish (4 congregations, 2 elders), Nacogdoches Shared Ministry (2 congregations, 1 elder), North Nacogdoches Rural Parish (6 congregations + 1 church start, 1 elder), Henderson Area (in discussion and prayer), Livingston Area (in discussion and prayer), McMahon's Chapel Area (in discussion and prayer).



**Presiding Elders** - Currently ten sub-districts have been formed and are led by already appointed clergy elders. These elders oversee the charge conferences and basic administrative tasks of pastors and congregations within their sub-district. They also seek out clergy and laity who are willing to respond creatively to God's call to mission in their local neighborhoods and offer personal networking, assistance and advocacy. These elders are offering the congregations within their mission field as-needed training, assistance and representation with the District Superintendent and the District Lead Team.

**Paragraph 213 Consultations** - Phyllis Riney is a Good Soil Coach who is currently leading several congregations through the process of ministry self-assessment and re-directioning prescribed in the Book of Discipline under paragraph 213. Julia Kuhn Wallace, who actually wrote the 213 legislation and has greatly influenced certified lay ministry and our East District models for shared ministry, is providing consultation at the district level. Mrs. Wallace will also be personally assisting in some cases at the local church level. Trained coaches/consultants are available to visit with any congregation that desires some focused attention and assistance. East District Good Soil and the Texas Annual Conference Congregational Excellence teams are offering this valuable help to local churches at no cost.

**Video Communication** - Brief training and informational Good Soil videos are occasionally developed in-house and shared with clergy and congregations.

**Specialized Training** - Throughout the year there are a variety of leadership training opportunities for both clergy and laity who desire to grow and develop in specific ministry areas. These resources are offered by both the Conference and the District for little or no cost.

**Field Guide Seminars** - Keith Tilley has written a book for small groups, The Good Soil Process: A Backyard Missional Field Guide. He will be leading five seminars around the district. Each three hour seminar will assist small groups and facilitators with development of a working plan to use the Good Soil Process for prayer, discussion, creative visioning and missional action in their communities. The seasons of the process follow the church calendar and help guide a group to discern, design, develop and delight in how God has touched neighbors lives through them.



Texas East UMC

# Project Proposal

Prepared by: Keith Tilley, Texas East Good Soil director & Bonita UMC pastor

July 26, 2010

## North Nacogdoches Rural Parish

### Objective

Create a shared ministry parish among six rural United Methodist congregations within 30 minutes drive time of each other while at the same time starting a unique new church in the Nacogdoches Texas area.

### Goals

Provide elder oversight for administration, order, sacrament and sharing of the Word. Equip and oversee a team of lay ministers who would assist serving among the six congregations. Encourage sharing of ministries and assets among the rural congregations for missional outreach. Develop well-rounded discipleship opportunities for all congregations in the parish. Offer the rural parish a sense of participation in the will of God and broader Church by providing the opportunity to support a new church start in the Nacogdoches area. In a very real sense, the rural parish will *mother* a new church start. Offer greater attention, representation and advocacy within the district and conference for the rural congregations in the parish. Make it possible to offer ongoing qualitative pastoral leadership to the rural congregations while in most cases lowering pastoral salary, housing and benefits costs.



Texas East UMC

## Solution

Form the **North Nacogdoches Rural Parish** as a shared ministry within the guidelines and recommendations of the 2008 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. Initially the congregations involved in the covenant agreement would be: Bonita UMC, Mt. Enterprise UMC, Concord UMC, Atoy UMC, Lilbert UMC, and Cushing UMC. A new church start would be a by-product of the union, which would be initiated and developed by the elder in charge, or the “equipper” of the rural parish.

## First Steps

Consultant and shared ministry expert Julia Kuhn Wallace would be utilized as a coach and lead the covenant development process between the six congregations. Elder Keith Tilley would be assigned as the “equipper” of the rural parish, and pastor of the new church start and would participate fully in the organization of the parish. Information gatherings would take place, followed by a cluster charge conference, and the necessary meetings for organizing and establishing a working covenant.

## Long-term Benefits

- The Texas East District believes that this model for ministry could provide a much needed renewed emphasis upon the priesthood of all believers, a recognition of pastor as equipper of ministry, and a renewed emphasis upon missional evangelism, discipleship and church planting. Necessarily, increased tenure for the equipper/pastor would be vital which could create a sense of stability, sustainability and continuity of leadership and vision.

