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Finding Life: An Organic Model of Renewal for Existing Churches

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

FINDING LIFE:
AN ORGANIC MODEL OF RENEWAL FOR EXISTING CHURCHES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
THOMAS E. RESTER, JR.

NEWBERG, OREGON

DECEMBER 2008

All Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version
of the Bible unless noted otherwise.

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DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

THOMAS E. RESTER, JR.

DATE: OCTOBER 28, 2008

TITLE:

**FINDING LIFE:
AN ORGANIC MODEL OF RENEWAL FOR
EXISTING CHURCHES**

**WE THE UNDERSIGNED CERTIFY THAT WE HAVE READ
THIS PROJECT AND APPROVE IT AS ADEQUATE IN
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**GEORGE FOX
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The penultimate draft of this dissertation was finished on August 29, 2008, a date significant for two reasons. It is my daughter Ann Claire's fifth birthday. It is also the third anniversary of the terrors of Hurricane Katrina, whose aftermath provided the impetus for my exploration in these pages. The weeks following the hurricane reminded me that out of disaster comes great hope and even new life. Many of south Mississippi's churches, pastors, and lay people have lived what I have written in these pages. Over the past three years they have fought, not just to stay open, but to make the gospel authentic and alive in places where hurt and loss were (and still are) very real. They have found life, even when it seemed there could be none. This work is dedicated to their ongoing, very organic ministry.

My wonderful wife, Audra, has spent the past four years encouraging, cajoling, and occasionally speaking the truth to me in love in this quest to finish a dissertation. Even when I doubted I would ever finish, she knew just when to ask the question, "So, did you work on your dissertation today?" As I secluded myself for weeks at a time, she took care of the house and our daughters Sydney and Ann Claire without ever once complaining. I owe her so much more than I could ever give.

For over eleven years now I have been a part of Parkway Heights United Methodist Church as youth director, associate pastor, person who attends on Sunday, and now Lead Pastor. I thank the staff and congregation for putting up with me and being the unwitting guinea pigs for many of the thoughts and ideas presented in this dissertation. They will never know how much they challenge me and inspire me with their love for Jesus and the world they inhabit.

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Finally, there are three others who must be thanked. Brenda Plum and Nova Corley tirelessly (and often on very short notice) worked to revise, edit, and fix the various drafts of this dissertation. Without them, it would be a mess of commas and Faulkner-esque sentences. Lex Mason, who picked me up from the airport in 1997 for my interview at Parkway Heights, has spent eleven years asking me when I was going to get my doctorate. My diploma will need to spend time on his wall as well as mine.

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ABSTRACT

Title: AN ORGANIC MODEL OF RENEWAL FOR EXISTING CHURCHES

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Statistics reveal most existing mainline churches are small, declining, and unable to minister effectively in their current environment. Rising stress is the result for these congregations. For mission and ministry to continue in many of these places, the stress must become an opportunity to release a deeper organic understanding of identity and ministry within the fluid postmodern context.

Chapter 2 presents biblical materials from the book of Acts. Focusing on Acts 15, we discover that in a moment of great stress and confusion, the church was able to change and evolve to find new life in the midst of conflict.

Chapter 3 presents materials from Christian history and thought demonstrating how the church flourished in many different cultures throughout history, adapting its approaches to ministry while maintaining a clear vision of the hope of the gospel for its age. The primary focus is on ministry models, methods, and mindset that emerged throughout modernity, particularly the early spread of the Wesleyan revival of the 18th century.

Chapter 4 presents current materials illustrating characteristics that must be present in order for significant change to occur within organizations. If they are

present, the ability of churches to reclaim their identity as a center of viable Kingdom mission can become a reality.

Chapter 5 investigates specific images and metaphors that provide alternatives for ministry in the current context, allowing churches to move past stress and toward new life. We further explore the postmodern context and how these images will enable churches to reclaim their primary mission.

The conclusion integrates the findings from scripture, history, the importance of metaphor, and foundations of change with the understanding of the context and ethos of the church. These findings will help churches return to health and wholeness, as they begin to reconnect with their local culture and context.

CHAPTER 1

A STRANGE HOPE

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Louisiana and Mississippi coastline with wind, rain, and a storm surge that destroyed homes, businesses, schools, roads, and plant life. In many areas the devastation was complete, leaving nothing but land wiped clean by the fury of the storm. Other areas provided shocking scenes of shattered homes, twisted trees, and bare slabs.

Two weeks later, as people were still getting their bearings and assessing the work of recovery and rebuilding, something peculiar happened: trees and flowers began to bud and bloom. Dormant trees suddenly sprang back to life. Azaleas bloomed. Victims of the storm referred to this event as a “second spring.” Biologists know this phenomenon as “whole-plant stress response.”

In the face of hurricanes, drought, damaging wind, flooding or other stresses, plants respond to their environment to mitigate the damage and to ensure life continues. According to biologist Arthur Galston, “Successful wild plants have adapted to these dangers by evolving special structural, chemical, or behavioral modifications that protect them against adverse conditions.”¹ Further, he notes, “Plants compensate for the detrimental effects of stress through many mechanisms that operate over difficult time scales, depending on the nature of the stress and the physiological processes that are affected.”² This type of behavior in plants is critical, says Galston, because “A species that fails to evolve an adequate protection against

¹ Arthur William Galston, *Life Processes of Plants*, Scientific American Library Series 49 (New York: Scientific American Library: Distributed by W.H. Freeman, 1994), 142.

² Ibid.

even one stress can face extinction, so the new countermeasures have to be applied quickly and effectively.”³

These “countermeasures” demonstrate that plants have an innate sensitivity to their environment. Rather than simply cycle through annual patterns of dormancy and growth, plants are constantly engaging their environment and responding in ways beyond established seasonal patterns, intuitively changing in order to ensure growth and survival. In times of drought, a plant may go unseasonably dormant; in response to a flood, a plant may regulate its intake of water; in the face of a life-threatening hurricane, a plant may bloom to ensure the future survival of the species. In *Plant Physiological Ecology*, we learn that “These examples suggest that a plant is continuously sensing its changing environment and using this information to control its physiology and allocation patterns.”⁴ Environmental factors play a key role in the life of plants.

Churches, like plants after Hurricane Katrina, now find themselves in an era of great environmental stress. The cultural landscape has undergone a significant transition over the past generation in terms of how people understand truth, progress, and relationships. These changes create significant anxiety for pastors and congregations about what to do and how to survive. Stanley Grenz wrote that these transitions have repercussions for Christians, stating, “The shift from the familiar

³ Ibid.

⁴ H. Lambers, F. Stuart Chapin, and Thijs Leendert Pons, *Plant Physiological Ecology* (New York: Springer, 1998), 343.

territory of modernity to the uncharted terrain of postmodernity has grave implications for those who seek to live as Christ's disciples in the new context."⁵

The stress has moved deep into the mentality of churches. Recent interviews with three pastors, serving in different denominations, different-sized churches, and different areas of Mississippi, illustrate an inordinate amount of difficulty among the leadership of churches and within the congregations as they struggle with their changing environments. Each reported significant tension over diverse issues such as music, the role of the pastor, facility usage, stewardship of financial resources, instruments used in worship, food and drinks in the sanctuary, and dress for worship. Struggling, they all continue to try different programs and strategies to grow their congregations, to relieve the stress of declining attendance and loss of young adults and to bolster flagging finances.

Pastor 1 – Turning the Titanic

"Rob," who serves a large conservative congregation in a mid-sized city, reflected on ten years of leading his congregation. "Changing the culture of the congregation is hard work, if it can be done at all," he said. Over the course of his tenure, members of the congregation attended workshops and seminars at some of the largest and most "successful" churches in the United States. Church leaders integrated what worked for other churches with the ministries of their church. Rob recounted all the changes his congregation had undergone through the years to be more "relevant." These included adding worship services, changing the leadership structure, and even changing locations. Each decision was difficult for many in the congregation, and the

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 162.

pastor recounted with pain how some “just didn’t get it.” He even lamented that “those closest to you will be the ones to hurt you the most.” The battle for what he described as the “soul of the church” was brutal for him and the congregation, and it often played itself out in the local paper.

Despite the struggles and strain, overall, the church has grown during Rob’s tenure. There are many more young adults and children, but a number of the original members have moved on. The pastor reflected, “The interior focus of churches is what kills them.” Yet he readily admitted that trying to change a congregation could kill it as well. The pastor was under immense pressure to constantly replace and rebuild, which unfortunately drew his own attention inward.

Pastor 2 – Too Much, Too Fast?

“George,” a middle-aged pastor serving a mainline congregation in another part of Mississippi, suffered through the first 18 months of his appointment to a mid-sized (250-300 in worship) suburban congregation. For the first 12 months he led his congregation in successive studies designed to help them determine how they were or weren’t reaching their people in their area. At the end of the studies, the congregation’s leadership voted to add a new contemporary worship service and to make significant changes in the structure of their traditional Sunday School.

The next morning members of the congregation were enraged. “Almost instantly, everyone reacted,” said George. “Even some of the leadership who had voted for the changes woke up angry.” Despite the great unrest among the congregation, George and the church leadership decided to move forward. “We felt that going back wasn’t an option after the decision was made,” said George.

While plans were being developed, the leadership worked to communicate the changes, and the need for them, to the congregation. The congregation's anger did not subside. Many began to leave the church as "the day" approached. Others continued to express displeasure with the changes and with the pastor's leadership. George expressed great surprise that his congregation would react so negatively to reaching beyond themselves. He was even more surprised that he was the target of their anger even though the congregation's leadership took full responsibility for the decisions. A few months after our conversation, George was asked to leave his church. A new pastor immediately undid the changes, and members of the congregation began to return.

Pastor 3 – Keep the Organist Happy

"Dan" was appointed to a rural mainline church in the Mississippi Delta. Dan, in his mid-30s, replaced an older pastor who had served the church for over a decade. "Things were exciting here for the first six months," Dan reported. "We had some of the highest attendance numbers people could remember. Young adults and children were coming to the church in droves." What happened next, though, disturbed Dan. Long-term members, even as they enjoyed the influx of new, younger members, began to assert their control of the church by refusing to adapt the budget to reflect changes in the congregation or to make any modifications in programming or worship to more effectively engage the new families.

One of the primary instigators of the backlash was the organist. The frustrated pastor said, "She runs the church from the organ bench. No one in the congregation will challenge her, and she knows it. She even controls worship. It doesn't matter

what songs I pick. When I show up on Sunday we sing what she can play.” The organist was the church’s longest-tenured staff member—playing for more than 50 years. “Miss Beth” felt she had earned the right to speak her mind and she did so, influencing others along the way.

In month nine of his tenure, Dan noticed the younger families stopped returning. “This church had a moment of opportunity,” he lamented, “but they let it pass them by. I think the problem was that the church wanted me to fix them, not change them. There’s a big difference in the two. When they realized that they were going to have to change, they opted not to.” Still, Dan continued to push and challenge the congregation. “We spent an inordinate amount of time fighting, but nothing ever really changed. We can see our issues every Sunday when we show up for worship. There are only a few children; very few young adults. When new young adults do show up, the long-term members act as if they don’t want them here so visitors don’t come back.” After 15 months of fighting, Dan left the church and took a sabbatical.

Each of the three situations reveals a congregation experiencing great stress as it attempts to work within a culture it intuitively knows is different. With limited or no success, each church has tried to respond through new programs, different styles of worship, or rearranging structure. Rather than help the congregation connect with their new environment, the changes often intensified the anxiety of the membership, resulting in a backlash. Is there an alternative to abortive structural modification, programmatic switching, and painful conflict? Plants under stress can sense their changing environment and respond in ways conducive to providing a future for the

individual plant or species. Can the same be said for churches? Do churches have the same latent ability woven into their fabric that, if released, could allow local congregations to sense and respond to their changing environment in ways leading to life rather than a slow decline and death? Plants, as organisms, have the ability to break free from established patterns in order to ensure life. What is necessary for churches to break free in ways that actually lead to new life, not just institutional maintenance or infighting?

The current context of congregational life clearly shows the challenge that awaits congregations during this era. Numeric decline in every major indicator of church life leads one to the assumption that there is little hope for Christianity in America, or at least for established churches, particularly mainline churches. Finding life in the midst of stress requires a significantly different response than found in previous generations. Alan Hirsch asserts, “We always seem to default to preconceived answers.” He continues by encouraging a “radical rethink about the actual *mode* of the church’s engagement.”⁶ The church has defaulted to an institutional and programmatic response to the culture that was successful during the days of modernity. The current demographic and cultural contexts show clearly that the “default” response is not adequate, nor is it faithful.

Demographic Context

Many churches, unable to respond to the changed and changing cultural milieu, are now increasingly under the stress of aging congregants, loss of members, few (if any) professions of faith and reduction of resources. Statistics reveal that

⁶ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 51.

“85% of the mainline church is in serious decline.”⁷ Every major protestant denomination lost ground in terms of percentage of the general population from 1980-2000. Only the Roman Catholic Church and the Mormon Church gained ground as a percentage of the population.⁸ Furthering the decline, young adults are leaving the church and not returning. According to Cathy Grossman, 70% of Protestants who attended church regularly in high school quit attending church by age 23.⁹ *The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* produced by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life provides the most in-depth information about the shift in religious affiliation in the United States. Some of the Pew Forum’s significant findings include

- The number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today is 16.1%--more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children.¹⁰
- Among Americans ages 18-29, 25% say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion, compared to 8% of those age 70 and older.¹¹
- Among all adults, just over one in ten claims to be atheist, agnostic, or secular/ unaffiliated.¹²

⁷ Leonard I. Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 75.

⁸ The United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, “Making Disciples for Jesus Christ: A Statistical Review of the State of the Church,” <http://www.gcfa.org/MakingDisciplesForJesusChrist.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2006).

⁹ Cathy Grossman, “Young Adults Aren’t Sticking with the Church,” *USA Today*, August 6, 2007. http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-08-06-church-dropouts_n.htm?loc=interstitialskip (accessed July 10, 2008).

¹⁰ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

- Members of mainline protestant churches are older on average than members of other religious groups, with half of mainline members reporting to be age 50 and older, compared with only four in ten American adults overall.¹³

The data points to a growing disconnect between congregations, particularly mainline congregations, and people rooted in the current cultural environment. The church has the hardest time reaching and retaining young adults.

A quick look at statistics for one mainline denomination, the United Methodist Church, reveals alarming trends. In 2005, the United Methodist Church as a whole lost members and worship attendees, with both categories showing dramatic dips from the previous year.¹⁴ A 2003 report revealed that 40.7% of all United Methodist churches did not have a single profession of faith.¹⁵ A report released in April 2006 by the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration offered these statistics:

- From 1974 to 2004, membership in the United Methodist Church dropped from 9.9 million to 8.07 million, a drop of almost 20%. At the same time average weekly worship attendance for the denomination dropped from 3.62 to 3.4 million.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ The United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, "2005 Preliminary Report: Executive Summary," <http://www.gcfa.org/2005%20Preliminary%20Statistics%20Report%20Exec%20Summary.pdf> (accessed July 10, 2006).

¹⁵ The United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, "Making Disciples for Jesus Christ: A Statistical Review of the State of the Church," <http://www.gcfa.org/MakingDisciplesForJesusChrist.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2006).

- In 2004, 42.1% of United Methodist congregations did not report a single profession of faith. Since 1984, this percentage has grown every year.
- Since 1994, the number of United Methodist congregations in the United States has decreased 4.9%.¹⁶

Alarming, the United Methodist Church's membership as a percentage of U.S. population dropped from 4.75% to 2.7% between 1973 and 2005. During the same period, the number of United Methodist churches has declined by 12.4 percent.¹⁷ The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey reports that while 26% of the denomination is 60 or older, only 11% of the denomination is 18-29. The United Methodist Church is in free fall in terms of membership, attendance, professions of faith, and numbers of young adults.

Looking deeper—at the local level—provides further insight into the inability of local congregations to respond to their surrounding environments. The Mississippi Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, located squarely in the “Bible Belt,” is shrinking, with the rate of closure far outpacing the rate of new church planting. According to 2004 statistics collected by the Mississippi Annual Conference, 970 of the 1,149 United Methodist Churches in Mississippi have fewer than 100 in worship on Sunday morning.¹⁸ In 2007, the Mississippi Conference closed eight churches, while only opening three.¹⁹

¹⁶ The United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, “The State of Our Connection: A Structural Analysis of the Jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church (2006).” <http://www.gcfa.org/PDFs/StateofConnection.pdf> (accessed July 10, 2006).

¹⁷ Marta Aldrich, “Changing Demographics Will Affect Church Funding,” *The Mississippi United Methodist Advocate*, October 16, 2007.

¹⁸ All Mississippi Conference membership and worship attendance figures are taken from the 2004 *Official Journal of the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church* (Jackson, MS:

Overall, statistics expose a downward spiral for established churches, particularly mainline, in the United States. The past 30 years have been particularly damaging for the United Methodist Church in terms of membership, worship attendance, and young adults. It is no surprise that these declines coincide with the dramatic cultural changes occurring during the same period.

Historic Timeline

For churches, particularly mainline churches, the decline in membership and attendance has paralleled a cultural transition from a modern, Enlightenment-centered culture to the postmodern era. During this challenging transition, churches have lost not only their voice within culture, but also their ability to effectively reach the people around them with the Gospel.²⁰ The state of today's church leads Leonard Sweet to comment, "The American church may be working harder than ever before, but it is getting fewer results than perhaps ever before."²¹ Unfortunately, the church continues to work within a cultural mindset that is dying rapidly while a new cultural landscape with which it is unable to communicate is taking shape.

Ironically, the church's willingness to adapt to and identify closely with the cultural structures of modernity enabled it to be overwhelmingly successful at spreading the gospel in the Western world over the past centuries. Robert Ellwood

Mississippi Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, 2004). The statistics above are extracted and summarized from the full statistical report.

¹⁹ Jean Gordon, "Mississippi Conference Plans 3 New Churches," *Mississippi United Methodist Advocate*, July 4, 2007.

²⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). Hauerwas and Willimon offer a thorough examination of the church's loss of voice in this era (particularly in chapters 1 and 2).

²¹ Sweet, 46.

comments, “The founder religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, and the Judaism out of which the last two branch—are religions of history and the written word. They are thus of one piece with the metanarratives of progress and of universal truth.”²² The church over time began to tacitly express its message comfortably within the story and language of the Modern era. But now that the cultural foundations of modernity are eroding, the church finds itself with few tools left that effectively communicate and minister.²³

In many ways, the era the church has so closely associated itself with was vitally important for humanity. The Modern Era, or the Age of Enlightenment, began, depending on who you read, as early as the early 16th century or as late as the 18th century.²⁴ Lukacs adds an additional designation to this era, referring to it as the “European Age,” a time when “European institutions, customs, industries, laws, inventions, and buildings spread over most of the world.”²⁵ As the repressive Dark Ages retreated, the Age of Enlightenment brought hope and progress. Modern science was born. Diseases were cured. Plagues ended. Men and women explored the world. Democracy grew and flourished. People began to believe the problems and evils of the world would be eradicated through the growth of science and reason. “The

²² Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 15.

²³ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 294. Bosch states, “[Christians] confused their middle-class ideals and values with the tenets of Christianity.”

²⁴ Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life Is a Paid-for Experience* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 188-190. Though he is an economist, Rifkin offers a concise and very readable summation of the major characteristics and beliefs of the modern age. He holds that modernity emerged in the 18th century.

²⁵ John Lukacs, *At the End of an Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 10.

Modern Age was characterized by a belief—some might call it a faith—that the world runs by immutable laws that are knowable and that can be exploited to advance the human condition.”²⁶ These “beliefs” were the archetypes or “metanarratives” that informed people’s understanding of the world around them, determined goals for individuals and nations, drove people to seek education, and transformed societies. Although authors have identified numerous metanarratives of modernity, three have had primary implications for the life of the church: privacy, progress, and the quest for unity.

As modernity grew people began to pull back from their previously interdependent, communal life and for the first time discovered privacy. Lukacs points out that “The Modern Age discovered the virtues—and pleasures—of privacy. The respect for privacy distinguished a civilized society from barbarian or primitive people.”²⁷ The emerging market system, focused on the private ownership and development of resources played into this new understanding of “civilized society.” Economist Jeremy Rifkin refers to this era as “the triumph of private property.”²⁸ People who once found meaning in community and an open culture not only began valuing time apart from others, they also viewed owning land and other property a “private” matter. Jeremy Rifkin highlights the difference:

Unlike medieval life, which was conducted openly and in public, the bourgeoisie lived mostly behind closed doors. Their life was an interior one—lived out in small shops and drawing rooms. The bourgeoisie organized their lives the way they organized their property. Every aspect of their being was

²⁶ Rifkin, 188.

²⁷ Lukacs, 21.

²⁸ Rifkin, 188.

enclosed, privatized, controlled, boundaried, categorized, protected, hoarded, and hidden away from public scrutiny.²⁹

In many ways, society was a reflection of the science of the time. Science focused on separating things into their smallest parts—cells, atoms, electrons. As science was breaking things into parts, so the social structure broke into smaller parts with significant boundaries. Loneliness ensued. Margaret Wheatley, in *Leadership in the New Science*, argues, “Loneliness pervaded not only science, but all of Western culture. In America, we raised individualism to its highest expression, each of us protecting our boundaries, asserting our rights”³⁰ Humans became islands, leaving behind earlier notions of communal responsibility and openness.

In this emerging modern world, faith and values became virtues of the private life. Newbigin describes the private world as the place “where we are free to follow our own preference regarding personal conduct and lifestyle, provided it does not prevent others from having that same freedom.”³¹ Facts were viewed separately from values; reason and faith occupied two realms as well. Reason and fact remained virtues of the public arena, but because faith and values could not be proven empirically, they were given over to the life of the private individual. As noted by Leonard Sweet in *Quantum Spirituality*, the communal aspect of virtue, character, and ethical living was negated. “The fundamental fact of modern life became not its communal dimension but its privatization of life’s pilgrimages, rites of passage, and

²⁹ Ibid., 198.

³⁰ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999), 32.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986), 19.

rituals. Religion was made into predominantly a private affair with little public meaning.”³² What had been the important shared aspects of life—faiths, values, caring—were relegated to the quiet corners of an individual’s private home. Salvation was presented as “personal.” The church’s response “was to accept the dichotomy and withdraw into the private sector.”³³

Although they retreated to their private worlds, people still held a shared, overarching belief in progress. This was one of the grand “metanarratives” of the age, according to Jean-Francois Lyotard.³⁴ “The modernists,” said Lyotard, “introduced the idea of progress. The Golden Age, they argued, lay not in the distant past but in a negotiable future.”³⁵ Reason, science, and social advances worked together to convince people that through the correct application of science or social science anything could be solved—from disease to poverty. Even the ravages of wars could not slow down this powerful narrative.

The pervasive power of progress also infiltrated the church, which spent immense amounts of energy and resources to bring “progress” to the dark places of the world, all in the name of the Kingdom. Through missions to eradicate poverty and disease, the establishment of universities and schools, and even the formation of Sunday School to combat illiteracy, churches were a part of the machine of progress, seeking to bring humanity closer and closer to the perfection. Of this paradigm shift

³² Leonard I. Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic*, 1st ed. (Dayton, OH: Whaleprints, 1991), 107.

³³ Newbigin, 19.

³⁴ Lyotard, as quoted in Ellwood, 13. Ellwood interprets Lyotard by saying that one of the two primary metanarratives of the age was “the emancipation of humanity by progress, both political and scientific.”

³⁵ Rifkin, 189.

Bosch wrote, “There was a widespread and practically unchallengeable confidence in the ability of Western Christians to offer a cure-all for the ills of the world and guarantee progress to all—whether through the spread of ‘knowledge’ or of ‘the gospel.’”³⁶ The church led the charge in the social arena for change, progress, and a better life.

The third metanarrative that held modernity together was the belief in an all-encompassing unity. Ellwood writes, “The epitome of modernism was unity: unity of truth, unity of self, unity of words and meaning, a unified state, a view of history as unitary and moving one direction, relative conformity in the way of life and the view of those who count.”³⁷ Scientists searched for a universal theory or “theory of everything.” Democracy and capitalism were viewed as social organizers for all people. Children attended schools with standardized curriculum.³⁸ The United States, whose coinage declares “*E Pluribus Unum*”—“From many, One”—was viewed in the 18th and 19th centuries as a grand “melting pot” where all cultures and people merged into one unified body. The ultimate goal was unity—unified thinking, unified goals, unified learning and reason.

Anything that did not fit this model was relegated to a lesser place. Newbigin emphasizes this point when he writes at the end of the modern era, “The public world is the world of facts upon which every intelligent person is expected to agree.”³⁹

³⁶ Bosch, 343.

³⁷ Ellwood, 13.

³⁸ Lukacs, 24. Lukacs states, “The age of institutional schooling was another feature of modernity.”

³⁹ Newbigin, 18-19.

Since faith, values, and moral ideals had no value as “fact” as they could neither be proven nor agreed upon, they were viewed as suspect. Some of the ways the church countered this were to make its presentation of the gospel more palatable by removing or explaining away miracles, using its own science of exegesis to rationally explore texts, and attempting to make faith claims palatable to a reasoned world through apologetics. The church seemed desperate in its quest for a place at the table of rationality—wanting to be a part of the culture—to be unified with the workings of the world.

The church adapted to its environment throughout the modern era. Tim Conder’s exploration of existing churches in our day leads him to believe that “the identity of the existing church has been thoroughly shaped by the assumptions, threats, challenges, and opportunities of modern, Enlightenment culture.”⁴⁰ However, the world built on modern assumptions crumbled throughout the last half of the 20th century. The surroundings that gave the church purpose, meaning, and even comfort began to disappear, leaving behind a radically changed environment—one that the church found difficult and frightening.

⁴⁰ Tim Conder, *The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 13.

Beyond the Modern Era

Historians dispute the date of the beginning of the postmodern era,⁴¹ the length of the postmodern era, and even the end of the postmodern era.⁴² None, however, deny the fundamental shift in the way people view, understand, and react to reality in the postmodern era. Jeremy Rifkin asserts that “The postmodern age is built on an entirely different set of assumptions about the nature of reality—assumptions that ultimately undermine modern ideas about property and give support to the restructuring of human relations around principles of access.”⁴³

The postmodern age is viewed as a time of transition from one established way of understanding the world into a new one.⁴⁴ During this season of disassembly and questioning, it is important to identify the significant markers—the signs that point to places of belief and importance for the people who are living in these days. The aim here is not to present an exhaustive list of the markers and characteristics of the postmodern era, but rather to highlight several that have implications for the church and leadership.

⁴¹ Lukacs, 11, believes the modern age ended at the latest in 1945 and argues for a much earlier date; Ellwood, 6, sees the transition as occurring in the late 1960s. Bosch, 349, writing in the early 1990s stated that we are presently “working in terms of two paradigms.” Sweet, in *SoulTsunami*, 17, seems to indicate a beginning date for the postmodern age as late as 1980.

⁴² Sally K. Morganthaler, “Is Postmodernism Passe?,” *Rev!*, September/October 2001, 69.

⁴³ Rifkin, 191.

⁴⁴ See Ellwood, 6; Lukacs, 40; Rifkin, 7; Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality*, 28; Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 17.

Fragmentation

One of the primary markers of this postmodern era is the distinct fragmentation of the culture. After centuries of seeking unifying principles, unified societies, and unified religious belief, the culture splintered in countless directions.⁴⁵ Gill, exploring foundations for ethics in the postmodern era, sees this as “one of the most obvious features of a shift from modernity to postmodernity.”⁴⁶ Notions of good and evil, light and dark, moral and immoral that had been clear to those born and raised through modernity began to fragment, pulling apart as people sought to identify truth for their own context. Ellwood traces the emergence of this marker to the idealism of the 1960s. He believes, “The Sixties finally ended up with so much pluralism that dualism was defeated. The triumph of pluralism was evident by around 1970, when the Sixties’ causes and campaigns based on a dualistic, light-versus-darkness vision of the world seemed suddenly to dissipate.”⁴⁷ The world of modernity, based upon ideas of clear science, fact, and reason, broke in ways that could not be restored. The clear lines were permanently blurred.

Unlike modernity, the fragmentation did not pit different causes, beliefs, or visions against one another. The black-and-white, right-and-wrong dualism of the previous age disappeared, leaving people willing to hold to their own belief systems while accepting the belief systems of others. The either/or world has now become a both/and world where morals, beliefs, and faith are relative to each person’s context

⁴⁵ Lukacs, 106, points out that “by the end of the 20th century, the quest of physicists for a unified theory had become an absurdity.”

⁴⁶ Robin Gill, *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 17.

⁴⁷ Ellwood, 20.

and unique perspective. “No single meta-narrative can hope to secure consensus in a postmodern culture. Postmodernism, according to many, is a move toward greater eclecticism.”⁴⁸ This “greater eclecticism” allows autonomous persons to view the world as filled with choices about what to believe and affirms the right of others’ choices, as well.

In an era of this nature, Bosch believes “Rationality must be expanded.” No longer can people depend on a rationality based in one context, scientific field, or subculture; it must be expanded to include the experience, position, and perspective of a variety of sources. And it must do so without the dualistic judgment inherent in modern systems. Rifkin points out, “Postmodern sociology stresses pluralism and ambivalence and preaches tolerance for the many different stories that make up the human experience.”⁴⁹ The unity of thought, action, and belief so desired by the metanarrative of modernity has no place in the transitional culture.

Relationships

In response to an era that diminished communal life, people are once again discovering the joy and necessity of community. Newbigin, writing about ministry to the modern culture in the closing days of that era, was already pointing to this shift (which was well underway by the time he wrote) as he called on the church “to create, above all, possibilities in every congregation for laypeople to share with one another the actual experience of their weekday work and to seek illumination from the gospel for their daily secular duty.”⁵⁰ Tired of a world overtaken by loneliness and

⁴⁸ Gill, 17.

⁴⁹ Rifkin, 195.

⁵⁰ Newbigin, 143.

isolation, people of the postmodern world are discovering ways to connect and participate in the lives of others. While old structures of community are being rediscovered (town squares, malls, etc.), new ways of connection are emerging as the World Wide Web continues to grow in breadth and depth. The rise of MySpace and Facebook attest to the power of the Web to build connections.

The evidence of the need for community and connection came from human experience, as well as from the complete overthrow of the sciences in the early 20th century, when Newton's linear world of cause and effect was replaced by quantum physics and chaos theory. In her discussion of leadership from the perspective of science, Wheatley points out, "In the quantum world, relationships are not just interesting; to many physicists, they are all there is to reality."⁵¹ Science now indicates that without relationships, matter cannot exist or change. This is one of the primary discoveries of the postmodern world: in the postmodern era, people are defined by their relationships.

Businesses and industry have discovered this and are now basing business practices around the power of relationships. According to Rifkin, "In the network economy, market transactions are giving way to strategic alliances, co-sourcing, and gain-sharing agreements. Commercial success in the access economy depends less on individual exchanges of goods and more on establishing long-term commercial relationships."⁵² By centering their practices on networks and relationships, businesses are reflecting one of the primary markers of this age.

⁵¹ Wheatley, 34.

⁵² Rifkin, 5.

For institutions, including the church, seeking to make the shift into this transitional era, discovering ways to encourage people to connect is vital to success. Leonard Sweet, in *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, points to a great paradox: “the pursuit of individualism has led us to this place of hunger for connectedness, for communities, not of blood or nation but communities of choice.”⁵³ Creating these “communities of choice” will require more than a polite nod toward “friendship”; it will require a de-structuring of institutions in order to favor community over production; it will require trust and honesty that has not been evident in systems and institutions prior to this point.⁵⁴ We must “retrieve togetherness, interdependence, and symbiosis” as we remember “the individual is not a monad but part of an organism.”⁵⁵ Wheatley reminds us that we must “learn how to support the workings of each other, [realizing] that intelligence is distributed and that it is our role to nourish others with truthful, meaningful information.”⁵⁶

Funnovation

As a young-adult group was discussing what was important to them, one of the young women coined the word “funnovation.” After the laughter subsided at the merger of “fun” and “innovation,” it became quite apparent that everyone in the group shared this value. Play, creativity, humor, and innovation are characteristics of the people of the postmodern world, more so than the modern virtues of industry and

⁵³ Leonard I. Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 109-110.

⁵⁴ Wheatley, 108-112.

⁵⁵ Bosch, 362.

⁵⁶ Wheatley, 102.

duty. Sweet sees this lightness as a characteristic of leaders in this era, maintaining, “A scientist/scholar will draw from a fund of humor, directed mainly at himself or herself.”⁵⁷ Humor is used, not to avoid reality, but rather to reframe it in new, creative ways.

We see the transition to “funnovation” emerging around us as our world centers itself around “play,” with malls becoming “destination entertainment centers.”⁵⁸ If the modern world sought to “quantify, qualify, and reduce humans,”⁵⁹ then one of the primary markers of the new age is the release of humans to seek their creative best. Rifkin claims, “A new type of human being is being readied for the twenty-first century—individuals whose sense of self is bound up less in how much output they produce and how many things they accumulate and more in how many vivid experiences and relationships they have access to.”⁶⁰

The world is also becoming more focused on creativity and innovation. Martoia reminds us, “we live in a highly niched, customizable culture. From the range of [body modification] to customizing your computer’s desktop environment with icons and colors, we like making individualized statements.”⁶¹ In a world of empowered individuals, each person can work creatively to craft a life from the myriad choices and opportunities before them. As the world gets more diverse, and as communications options grow, the creative energy of people is being released.

⁵⁷ Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality*, 49.

⁵⁸ Rifkin, 158.

⁵⁹ Lukacs, 166.

⁶⁰ Rifkin, 198.

⁶¹ Ron Martoia, *Morph! The Texture of Leadership for Tomorrow's Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003), 105.

Image and Metaphor

“Images come as close as human beings will get to a universal language.”⁶²

With this bold statement, Sweet points to possibility beyond the fragmentation of the postmodern milieu. Ellwood believes that the 1960s brought this dependence on image to the forefront of life for postmoderns. “Of equal interest is the way in which even the secular wing of the Sixties placed the same virtually religious emphasis on symbol, gesture, language, and community.”⁶³ To people with various contextualized understandings of events, images offer a common language and cohesiveness.

In the postmodern world, therefore, effective communication must use image and metaphor. “Images,” said Sweet, “have supplanted words as the cultural vernacular.”⁶⁴ In a postliterate culture, image and metaphor convey meaning in a way that allows people to interpret and internalize meaning on one’s own terms. Bosch suggests, “Metaphor, symbol, ritual, sign, and myth, long maligned by those interested only in ‘exact’ expressions of rationality, are today being rehabilitated; they create forms that ‘synthesize and evoke the integration of the mind and will.’”⁶⁵ Image and metaphor have the power to move people because they allow for an experience that can be easily seen and remembered.

The current historic context reveals the deepest issues the church must face. More than adjusting to a loss of membership, it must now find ways to adapt and

⁶² Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 86.

⁶³ Ellwood, 19.

⁶⁴ Leonard I. Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 152.

⁶⁵ Bosch, 353.

relate to its changed postmodern environment. Meaningful changes must be deeper than new programs or adding worship services. The church must find a way to release its innate ability to organically evolve and adapt.

Claim

Though many church leaders have attempted “church-growth” strategies or new programming to reinvigorate congregations, Scripture, history, and even basic biology reveal a different possibility—one that is organic in nature. In order to respond to their current environment, churches do not need to add anything new; they need to reveal a part of them that lies waiting to be released. How can congregations rediscover what is intuitive to the Body of Christ in all ages and allow that to lead them to life in their new environment? The answer lies beyond certain tools or methods. Alan Hirsch believes “the church (the *ecclesia*), when true to its real calling, when it is on about what God is on about, is by far and away the most potent force for transformational change the world has ever seen.” The issue, according to Hirsch, is whether or not we can “arouse and reengage that amazing power that lies within us.”⁶⁶ Throughout these chapters, we will explore what it means to “arouse and reengage” with the power the church has within it to sense and respond to the changed and changing environment around it.

In Chapter 2, we present biblical materials that show the church as an institution changed and evolved throughout its early history, particularly in moments of stress. Looking to the book of Acts (primarily chapter 15), we discover a critical

⁶⁶ Hirsch, 17.

moment when the emerging church found a new way to engage its environment, including ministering to an entirely new set of people.

Chapter 3 presents materials from Christian history and thought showing how the church has developed and flourished in many different cultures throughout history, adapting and changing its approaches to ministry while maintaining a clear vision of the hope of the gospel for its age. The primary focus of this chapter is on ministry models, methods, and mindset which emerged throughout modernity, particularly during the early spread of Wesleyan revival of the 18th century. We compare John Wesley's renewal movement with current emerging-church thought.

In Chapter 4, we present current materials that discuss the process of change in systems that leads to a more effective and efficient existence. These changes lead to a decrease in stress as organizations become more responsive to their current environment. Business literature, systems theory, even contemporary science offer important observations about the nature of change and the role of leadership in bringing about change. These findings are crucial for church leaders as they seek to bring about the release of new life in congregations.

In Chapter 5, we focus on churches' finding their way within the new environment, offering lessons from a more organic, postmodern-centered understanding of ministry. This chapter explores possible images and metaphors that could allow existing congregations to respond effectively and faithfully to the postmodern world.

In the conclusion, we integrate the findings about the early church, image, and foundations of change with the understanding of the context and ethos of the current

cultural environment. These findings will help churches return to a semblance of health and wholeness as they begin to connect again with their local culture and context.

CHAPTER 2

ACTS 15: FINDING A WAY FORWARD

The church of the 21st century is not the first generation of disciples to face significant stress over its future. The winds of Pentecost had scarcely died down before questions arose about the church's charity, leadership, and understandings of obedience and morality. Yet of all the early church's challenges presented in the New Testament, the question of what to do with Gentile converts stands alone as the divisive dispute that threatened to unravel the expanding reach of the fledgling *ekklesia*. "We should not minimize the tensions that arose in early Christianity as the church increasingly became frequented by Gentiles," scholar Ben Witherington notes.¹ Gentile converts created problems the early church had not anticipated and was not prepared to handle.

The letter to the Galatians deals with the conflict directly throughout its pages. Its early chapters point to the unfolding drama as Paul claims to be the apostle for the uncircumcised while "Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised."² Clearly a significant rift developed in the missional efforts of the early church with differing understandings of who could receive the gospel and more significantly the implications for Gentile followers who had received the gospel. Was circumcision necessary for followers of Jesus? Must Gentiles first become Jews in order to receive God's grace or continue in grace? This conflict reveals "two vastly disparate cultural

¹ Ben Witherington, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 208.

² Galatians 2:7.

complexes arrayed against each other—Jew and Gentile.”³ While this dispute may seem trivial to us, its resolution would determine the church’s ability to move outward from Jerusalem into the Roman world and beyond.

Acts 15 records the pivotal moment for the church as the apostles gathered in Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas to deal with this issue. The focus of this chapter will be to look at this gathering of the early church as an organic moment in church history when, in a moment of significant stress, the church was able to find a path that led to life. The impact of this moment in the history of the church cannot be overstated. Jürgen Becker proclaims “on the basis of position and significance for the whole of the early Christian history, the Apostolic Council receives unrivaled priority in this time period.”⁴ Scott, in commenting on the Apostolic Council, maintains, “Nothing less than the content of the Christian message, the Christian undertaking of the Kingdom of God, the nature of the Christian religion was at stake.”⁵ We will study the forces that moved the church to this momentous council meeting as well as the elements that allowed the church to grow faithfully beyond it.

³ David K. Strong, “The Jerusalem Council: Some Implications for Contextualization: Acts 15:1-35,” in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 198.

⁴ Jürgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 84.

⁵ J. Julius Scott, Jr., “The Church’s Progress to the Council of Jerusalem According to the Book of Acts,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 7 (1997): 221.

The Church Jesus Left Behind

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends the disciples out for the first time without him. They have been given “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.”⁶ Jesus’ instructions about their mission are clear: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁷ At this point in his ministry Jesus has been unafraid to work among Gentiles (Matthew 8:5-13; 8:28-34), but limits the mission of the disciples to the “house of Israel.” Jesus does not ask them to cross the boundaries established by their Jewish heritage and theological understanding.

The post-resurrection commissioning of the disciples, though, is not limited. Each gospel and the book of Acts records a “commission” following the resurrection that sends the disciples beyond the boundaries of their Jewish faith—beyond the “house of Israel.” Though each commission is unique, Jesus’ words contain common themes that would serve to guide the unfolding mission of the emerging church:

Matthew 28:19: Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you;

Mark 16:15-16: Go into *all the world* and preach the gospel to the *whole creation*. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.⁸

Luke 24:46-47: Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to *all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem*.

⁶ Matthew 10:1.

⁷ Matthew 10:5-6.

⁸ These words of Jesus are from the “Longer Ending of Mark,” an addition to the “Shorter Ending” found in verse 8. While scholars debate the validity of the longer ending, that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

John 20:21: Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so *I send you*.

Acts 1:8: But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*.

The impetus of Jesus' words is clearly outward. The synoptic gospels and Acts even maintain that the outward focus should extend to "all nations," "all the world," "the whole creation," and "to the ends of the earth." Matthew and Luke use the Greek term *ethnē*, which the NRSV translates as "nations." This term is "undoubtedly a technical term for the Gentiles as distinct from Jews or Christians."⁹ Jesus' intention is for the disciples to work outward from the "house of Israel," reaching even those considered unclean or unrighteous by Jewish standards. The disciples left behind by Jesus, who would become the core of the church as it grew in Jerusalem, were given an outward orientation. This orientation was to be the driving force behind their work and mission. But understanding the implications of this mission would take time.

After the dramatic arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, Peter stood to preach the first sermon calling people to repent and believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Peter's first sermon is aimed clearly at the Israelites and attempts to make the gospel of Jesus Christ acceptable to his Jewish audience. Multiple times he directs his comments clearly to the "Israelites" (2:14; 2:22; 2:29; 2:36). Peter's first inclination on the day of Pentecost is to reach those within the "house of Israel" with the truth of Jesus he knows. Luke, the author of Acts, begins the story by focusing "on Jerusalem as the place of renewal and the starting point of

⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "Ethnos in the NT."

the mission of the church.”¹⁰ The narrative in Luke-Acts gives a sense of a church with definitive roots in Judaism that widened its reach over time. Scott recognizes this movement and notes, “From the idyllic harmony and unity of the first days of the fellowship in Jerusalem, the author of Acts leads step-by-step as the Church moves beyond a constituency of strictly Hebraic Jews in Jerusalem.”¹¹ This movement, however, was not smooth, nor seen as necessary by all of the early Jewish Christians.

The church Jesus left behind was distinctly Jewish in understanding and approach. In fact, the first Christians were Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They did not see their belief in Jesus as something that separated them from their Jewish roots. They continued to worship at the temple, and their converts came from the temple and synagogues. Michael Braun asserts that, “It is commonly granted that the early Jewish Christians saw themselves as the members of the remnant within unbelieving Israel.”¹² This understanding of identity limited the willingness of many in the first generation of Christians to see beyond those Jewish roots. Scott sees in the book of Acts that

Those from Judea argued that the new faith is inseparably bound to the old and that it is entered in exactly the same way one entered old Israel, by birth or through proselytism (circumcision, ‘according to the custom of Moses,’ Acts 15:1, 5). They apparently meant that one cannot be a Christian without first becoming a Jew because the Kingdom of God is inseparably bound to Israel as a race, culture, and religion.¹³

¹⁰ Eddie Gibbs, “The Launching of a Mission: The Outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost,” in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 20.

¹¹ Scott: 218.

¹² Michael A. Braun, “James’ Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council: Steps Toward a Possible Solution of the Textual and Theological Problems (Acts 15),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20, no. 2 (1977): 119.

¹³ Scott: 219-220.

These first followers of Jesus saw themselves as a sect within the life of Judaism. There was not a sense of either/or—either you were a Christian or you were a Jew. According to one scholar writing on Jewish-Christian relations, “A Jew of the first century, at least in the earliest Christian decades, was not faced with such an alternative, either ‘Judaism’ or ‘Christianity.’”¹⁴ As the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes found a place within the umbrella of Judaism, so the early Christians were willing to live under that umbrella as well. Scott maintains that the early Christians “accepted the basic tenets and practices of Judaism in general and of one or more of the Jewish groups of the time. At first they were virtually indistinguishable within the complex Jewish social, religious structure.”¹⁵ The only distinguishing feature between these Jewish Christians and other Jews was what they believed about Jesus.

According to Scott, “They were simply Jews who were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and that through him the ‘age of fulfillment’ had arrived.”¹⁶ These beliefs about Jesus set them apart from their fellow Jews but gave them no reason, at least in the early days, to see themselves as separate or independent. The inertia and comfort of being a part of Judaism, though, was difficult to overcome. Until Peter and Paul wrestled individually and together with the issue of unclean food and people, there was little movement beyond the confines of Judaism to Samaritans or Gentiles.¹⁷

¹⁴ Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, “New Testament Issues in Jewish-Christian Relations,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 22, no. 1 (1977): 71.

¹⁵ Scott: 208-209.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 209.

¹⁷ Witherington, 178.

First Steps

The movement of the church into “all the nations” and to the point of conflict over the place of Gentiles among the people of God came at times gradually and at other times dramatically. The claims of the first Jewish Christians about the Lordship of Jesus attracted conflict within Judaism, as evidenced by the questioning of Peter and John before the Council, the persecution of the apostles (Acts 4 and 5), and the arrest and stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8ff). As the tension within Judaism began to rise, opportunities to move beyond Hebraic Judaism also arose. A dispute over the care of widows in Chapter 6 reveals that the followers of Jesus embraced Hellenistic Jews early. These “Hellenists” represented a Greek branch of Judaism. They accepted at least some elements of Greek culture and tended to be broader and more inclusive in their outlook. They spoke Greek and were comfortable within the cultural framework of Roman society. While seemingly small, this represented a first step beyond the first Christians’ conservative and homogenous grouping. Ferguson asserts that this early attraction of Hellenistic Jews was critical in the success of the Christian movement in the first century: “The synagogues in the Diaspora provided a base of operations for Christian preachers in the early years of the church. Moreover, they attracted many Gentiles who proved to be prime prospects for the Christian gospel and the beachhead into a wider Gentile world.”¹⁸ While small, this first step would prove critical in the later growth of the church.

In Chapter 8, we see another gradual step beyond the bounds of traditional Judaism as Philip “went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to

¹⁸ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003), 617.

them.”¹⁹ The hostility between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus’ day is well documented, rooted in centuries of disagreement over the proper place to worship and observation of the Torah. However, they represented a logical widening of the circle because “they were not like Gentiles. Samaritans were racially ‘half-Jewish’ and observed the Mosaic Torah (albeit in their own editions).”²⁰ Though ostracized by Jews, the Samaritans offered an easy expansion point for the gospel because they were familiar with Jewish heritage, story, and tradition. Josephus, historian of the early church, was ambivalent toward them, “sometimes treating them like a Jewish sect but at other times regarding them as non-Jews.”²¹ This ambivalence provided an opportunity for Philip and the early church.

After reports of Philip’s work reached Jerusalem, Peter and John were sent to investigate the work among the Samaritans, giving their approval and praying that the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit.²² This is a significant moment as the church officially recognized the movement of the Holy Spirit beyond groups considered acceptable by Judean Judaism. Ferguson recognizes the major shift taking place: “[The Samaritans’] position of religious proximity to, but alienation from, Jews who looked to Jerusalem meant that Christian preaching to them was a significant step toward the universalism of the gospel.”²³ Paul Hertig concurs with that opinion, offering that Philip’s journey into Samaria is “no mere transition but a giant leap

¹⁹ Acts 8:5.

²⁰ Scott: 211.

²¹ Ferguson, 534.

²² Acts 8:14-17.

²³ Ferguson, 535.

considering that after the Babylonian exile, the Samaritan claim of a holy mountain produced antagonism with the Judean Jews.”²⁴

The Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 represents another group that provided an opportunity for the church to extend its reach. The eunuch had “come to Jerusalem to worship.”²⁵ Though a foreigner, this man was one of a group of proselytes or God-fearers who, though not completely converted to Judaism, were attracted to its worship and allowed to do so in some limited fashion. In some regards this eunuch was simply a Gentile, but his openness to Judaism put him in a different category. According to Witherington, God-fearers and proselytes “are Gentiles who are to some degree adherents of early Judaism but not full-fledged converts to Judaism; otherwise, they would simply be called Jews.”²⁶ Philip’s witness to this man and his baptism demonstrates the church’s movement not necessarily beyond Judaism, but definitely to “the fringes of Jewish society.”²⁷ By extending its reach to Samaritans and proselytes, the church showed its willingness to move with the Spirit to people who were detached, but not removed, from the worldview of normative Judean Judaism.

²⁴ Paul Hertig, “The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria,” in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 111.

²⁵ Acts 8:27.

²⁶ Witherington, 209.

²⁷ Keith H. Reeves, “The Ethiopian Eunuch: A Key Transition from Hellenist to Gentile Mission,” in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 115.

The Coming Storm

Acts 10-11 tells the story of Peter's visit to the home of Cornelius and the subsequent fallout. This visit stands as a sharp departure from the previous expansion of the mission of the church. While the church's efforts to reach Hellenists, proselytes, and Samaritans kept them in the Judaic "family," Peter's visit crossed significant ritual and legal boundaries. According to Richard Bauckham,

The common Jewish characterization of Gentiles in general as sinners was not only a matter of social boundary-drawing, in that Gentiles lived outside the bounds of the Torah, but also of concrete practices which were indeed widespread in non-Jewish societies and regarded by Jews not as minor deviations but as major offences rendering Gentile society as a whole iniquitous and abhorrent to God.²⁸

Peter would not willingly choose to enter the home of Cornelius, as he understood that Jews "are to remain separated from Gentiles lest they be morally contaminated by the moral impurities of the Gentiles."²⁹ Despite Cornelius' characterization as "an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation,"³⁰ the fear of being "contaminated," or even seen as collaborating with a Gentile, would normally have been enough to keep Peter away. According to Charles Van Engen, "It apparently took an act of God for the first Jewish Christians to be willing to accept the Gentile converts over the objections of the Judaizer faction."³¹ Crossing this boundary would not be about human intention, but God's intervention.

²⁸ Richard Bauckham, "James, Peter, and the Gentiles," in *Missions of James, Peter, and Paul* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 97.

²⁹ Ibid., 104-105.

³⁰ Acts 10:22.

³¹ Charles E. Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission," in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 135.

Acts 10 begins with direct contact between God and Cornelius. As Cornelius prays, God directs him to send for Peter. Peter was staying at a home in Joppa. While the meal is being prepared, Peter encounters a vision of a large sheet containing all manner of unclean animals. After being directed by God to “kill and eat,” Peter refuses and God rebukes Peter, saying, “What God has made clean you must not call profane.” Bauckham, in summarizing Peter’s initial understanding, allows that “both forbidden animals and Gentiles are—in Peter’s Jewish eyes at the beginning of the story—both impure and profane.”³² Peter encounters the vision three times, then awakens to find men at the door ready to take him to Cornelius.

At Cornelius’ home, Peter states his confusion about his presence there. “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” The crowd urges Peter to share “what the Lord has commanded you to say.” Peter begins his message with the profound, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Peter’s statement of “no partiality” is significant because the Jewish faith was built upon the premise of God’s partiality—God’s gracious choosing of the nation of Israel. The Israelites had suffered through the ages in spite of and because of this choosing. The Israelite priests served not just to lead the ritualistic life of Israel but “to ‘make a distinction’ . . . distinguishing the sacred from the profane, and the impure from the pure.”³³ While Peter’s declaration here may seem to be an open,

³² Bauckham, 104.

³³ Ibid., 105.

magnanimous statement, Wall counters that “Peter’s lesson is about God and not the scope of his mission.”³⁴ Indeed, at this point Peter has yet to grasp the implications of his presence among Cornelius and the crowd, but he is beginning to see God’s work in a different light.

Things move quickly, as God interrupts Peter’s sermon by sending the Holy Spirit upon the crowd. In the presence of such a movement of the Spirit, Peter sees nothing to do but baptize, making decisions on the move as he lives with his conclusion that “the author of this plot is God.”³⁵ Peter remains with Cornelius and his Gentile family and friends for several days, trusting that the work of the Spirit had once and for all made the previously profane Gentiles clean.

Word travels quickly to the believers in Jerusalem, and Peter’s arrival home is met not with cheers for what God has done but criticism for taking the gospel where it does not belong. Here we begin to see the division that threatens to cripple the church as those who reprimand Peter are identified as “the circumcised believers,” pointing to the rising conflict over what must be required of non-Jewish converts. Peter, responding to the criticism, shares his story and closes with these words, “Who was I that I could hinder God?” For now the conflict is suppressed. The crowd, overwhelmed by the work of God, can only respond after a time of silence, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” Willimon captures the moment: “The church’s silence and then response shows that it realizes a

³⁴ Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*, ed. et al. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 167.

³⁵ William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 99.

bold (and perhaps frightening) chapter has opened in the saga of the People of God.”³⁶

Though the door to the Gentile mission has been opened, no determination of how to move forward is made by the church leaders in Jerusalem. The reader is left to wonder if this was an exceptional event in the life of the church, or something that would become normative practice. Peter simply discovers “that Gentiles who come to faith in Jesus Christ are neither impure nor profane.”³⁷ He is willing to accept the exceptional movement of God among the Gentiles but makes no move to reengage the mission to the Gentiles at this point.

The Storm

The story moves from this crucial moment in Jerusalem to Antioch, where Christians scattered by the persecutions in Jerusalem settled and continued the work of calling people to repentance and faith. The work of the Spirit began in Antioch “and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord,”³⁸ prompting the Jerusalem church to send Barnabas. After surveying the situation, Barnabas makes a crucial decision, retrieving Saul from Tarsus to assist him with the work in Antioch. From this base in Antioch, Saul (soon to be known as Paul) and Barnabas would extend the mission to “all the nations” and bring the church to a moment of decision about its future.

If Peter’s vision opened the door to the Gentile mission, Paul walked through boldly offering Christ without the trappings of Judaism to any who would hear the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bauckham, 114.

³⁸ Acts 11:21.

message. Paul's ministry was a great departure from the careful movement of the Jewish Christian Church in Jerusalem and represented the true beginning of the Gentile mission. Ben Witherington asserts, "It is mistaken to think that before Paul there was any considerable focus on evangelizing the Gentiles or any changing of Jewish practices of the followers of Jesus to accommodate a large influx of pagan converts."³⁹ Paul brought the conflict over the future mission of the church to a head.

As the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was a critical geographic and cultural hub.⁴⁰ In Antioch the church quickly moved from its Judean roots, reaching Hellenists and Gentiles.⁴¹ The Antiochene church "became the pioneer in the law-free Gentile mission" because of the work of Barnabas and Paul in their midst.⁴² The Antiochene church was vital, active and driven by its understanding of mission to reach "all the nations."

Acts 13:2 records that the Holy Spirit directed the church to "set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." With the blessing and commissioning of the church in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas departed on a missionary journey that resulted not only in Jewish converts to Christianity, but also large numbers of Gentile Christians. Barnabas and Paul followed a protocol of beginning in the Jewish synagogues where they preached the good news of Jesus Christ (Acts 13:5, 13:14, 13:44, 14:1). This was the logical first step in the new towns because virtually every town of any size in the countries bordering the Mediterranean had a substantial

³⁹ Witherington, 178.

⁴⁰ Becker, 84.

⁴¹ Scott: 215.

⁴² Becker, 85.

Jewish population.⁴³ These diasporan Jews, according to Stark, “were accustomed to receiving teachers from Jerusalem” and “were the group best prepared to receive Christianity.”⁴⁴ Large numbers of Jews and Gentiles responded to Paul and Barnabas’ message in their travels. However, Paul and Barnabas met stiff opposition from many Jews who believed they were blasphemous (Acts 13:45). The two missionaries returned as heroes to the church in Antioch, in sharp contrast to the reception Peter received in Acts 11. Scott sees this effort as “the first initiative by Christians to reach large numbers of Gentiles and resulted in the beginning of a radically different racial-cultural makeup in the Christian community.”⁴⁵ While the church in Antioch celebrated the movement of God’s Spirit, others fumed. The storm had arrived. In the midst of the conflict, the leaders of the church would have to find a new understanding to hold the church and its mission together.

Acts 15:1-3 draws the lines of battle. Jewish Christians from Judea arrived in Antioch preaching, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved.” The issue went beyond whether or not Gentiles could believe and be saved. Peter’s experience with Cornelius had already taught them that “God shows no partiality” and that “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”⁴⁶ The physical issue was circumcision, but the deeper theological issue centered on what made the converts pure and righteous. If Christianity were simply a

⁴³ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 34.

⁴⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, 1st HarperCollins ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 62.

⁴⁵ Scott: 217.

⁴⁶ Acts 10:34 and 11:18.

sect of Judaism, then purity and righteousness were to be found through the rites and rituals of Judaism—including circumcision. Paul and Barnabas did not share that view. Bauckham asserts that “the principal issues in the dispute are the boundaries of the messianic people of God—whether they are defined by the gift of the Spirit or by circumcision and Torah observance—and the way in which Gentile believers can attain moral purity—whether by faith and repentance alone or by circumcision and Torah-observance in addition.”⁴⁷ To accept the position of Baranabas and Paul would require the Jewish Christians leading the church to accept a radical shift in thinking and understanding about God, purity, and practice.

There was no middle ground in this battle. The growing number of uncircumcised Gentiles claiming to be followers of Christ, particularly in the synagogues beyond Jerusalem, required an answer. As Becker notes, their presence “increasingly erased the boundaries between Judaism and paganism. Now the cultic purity of the synagogue was in fundamental and continual danger.”⁴⁸ Those who sought to require circumcision, as well as adherence to the Mosaic Law, were fearful of becoming unclean through contact with the unrighteous Gentiles and of losing those rituals and rites that for generations had defined them as a people. They had known God through Temple and Torah and believed that following Jesus required others to enter into the same life and faith they had known. Becker asserts, “The Jewish-Christian position is the traditional one and the one most understandable from

⁴⁷ Bauckham, 118.

⁴⁸ Becker, 86.

the historical situation. It was the general rule and until then almost the only valid one.”⁴⁹

Paul and Barnabas (and Peter) presented an argument that was new and, to many on the other side, radical and destructive. Though we do not know much about the thought processes of Barnabas and Peter, Paul’s letters reveal his understanding of the argument. While the bulk of Paul’s letters were written after this incident and probably reflect a growing and maturing theology across the years of his ministry, we can still discern from them core components of why he believed Gentile converts were not required to comply with the legal requirements of the law and circumcision. As a life-long Jew who did not believe the Gentile mission required faithful Jews, or even Gentile converts for that matter, to renounce all requirements of the Jewish law, Paul continued to proudly proclaim his heritage. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, Paul boasts,

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but under Christ’s law) so that I might win though outside the law.

Paul is claiming priority of Christ’s law—grace—over Jewish law. Yes, the Jewish law is important, Paul asserts, but it is no longer primary. Witherington notes, “Keeping the Mosaic law is seen by Paul as optimal, not obligatory, for being a Christian, but he believes that keeping the new law of Christ is obligatory.”⁵⁰ Paul,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁰ Witherington, 201.

writing to the Galatian churches early in his missionary career about this specific issue, sums up his understanding in Galatians 2:15-16:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by doing the works of the law.

Paul does not banish the law but understands the primacy of the grace of Jesus Christ as the determining factor in the life of a believer. God brings justification, not humans through following the law. The Greek in Galatians 2:16 for “justified” is *dikaiōō*. Paul uses this term to refer to the “justifying acquittal which takes place in the present . . . a present act of grace through Christ.”⁵¹ Since God is the actor through Christ to bring justification, receiving justification does not require conformity to the law, just a belief in the grace of Christ.

In this understanding, Paul is actually able to defend the law, as in Romans 3:31, when he asks, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” The legal code is a part of Judaism and can be a part of a disciple’s life, but more important is belief in the grace of Christ. Paul’s new understanding of the grace of Christ allows the law to be placed in proper perspective in the life of a disciple.

Paul hoped his position could convince the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to allow his mission to the Gentiles to continue unfettered by regulations concerning circumcision. He believed the mission to Jews and Gentiles was a part of God’s unfolding plan of salvation. Stylianopoulos believes that “[Paul] did not envision a final break between church and synagogue. He did not dispute the validity of the

⁵¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “*Dikaiōō* in the NT.”

Mosaic Law for Jews and Jewish Christians.”⁵² However, Paul’s experience of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles led him to believe that now God was working through these new followers of Christ and creating righteousness through faith alone.

After the emergence of this conflict in Antioch, the church sent Barnabas and Paul and “some of the others” to go to Jerusalem to confer with the “apostles and elders” there. This deference to the church in Jerusalem shows the churches were still connected to one another and were attempting to discern together where God through the Holy Spirit was leading them. There was not a strategic plan or guidebook for the missional movement of Christ’s church; instead the early followers of Christ worked together to understand the implications of the conflict and the future of the mission of the church.

Finding a New Way

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is the critical moment in the young life of the church. According to David Strong, “The passage serves as the watershed of the overall narrative of Acts.”⁵³ The Council met to resolve the “Gentile problem,” a move that would determine the ability to expand beyond Judean-Jewish boundaries and into the wider world.⁵⁴ Paul and Barnabas had begun something new—an active and intentional missionary outreach to people who were not Jewish or related to Judaism. A decision to force converts to submit to circumcision and the law would

⁵² Stylianopoulos: 73.

⁵³ Strong, 197.

⁵⁴ There is much scholarly debate on how the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 and the meetings described by Paul in Galatians 1-2 meet. The questions surrounding this issue are interesting but are not within the scope of this chapter.

undermine his success in the Gentile world. Paul needed this decision in order to further what he believed was God's work.

Both parties were represented (though all participants were Jewish Christians), with the "believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees" speaking first (15:5). This group does not deny the Gentiles a place among the people of God but reiterates the position concerning circumcision and the law. According to Becker, the Council's discussion centered on "the fundamental issue of whether Christianity can be founded on faith in Christ alone outside the synagogue and with the prerequisite of the law and whether such a church can be recognized in the same way as the Jewish Christian church within the synagogue."⁵⁵ Peter, Paul, and Barnabas gave witness to the work of God among the Gentiles, claiming that the law was a "yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear."

After listening carefully to arguments, James the brother of Jesus spoke, quoting Scripture from Amos 9:11-12:

After this I will return
and I will rebuild the dwelling of
David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it.
and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may
seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over
whom my name has been
called.
Thus says the Lord, who has
been making these things
known from long ago.

⁵⁵ Becker, 88.

This passage, simply read, “stands as a prophetic declaration of the way God will judge the nation and yet preserve it.”⁵⁶ Part of the preservation will be the inclusion of others who “seek the Lord.” James, in his interpretation of the passage, makes it clear that these “others” will be accepted by God as they are in their cultural setting. They will be allowed to continue living as distinctly Gentile. James, a man deeply committed to the traditions of Judaism, validates the position of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter because he understands Amos to speak “of both Jews *as Jews* and Gentiles *as Gentiles* seeking the Lord.”⁵⁷ James’ stature as disciple and brother of Jesus settles the issue for the moment. The decision is that the Council “should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.”⁵⁸

The decision does have some limits for the Gentile converts. The Jerusalem leaders ask them “to abstain from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.”⁵⁹ These prohibitions “correspond to the four things that are prohibited to ‘the alien who sojourns in your/their midst’ in Leviticus 17-18.”⁶⁰ While seemingly strange requirements for the converts, they serve an important purpose: maintaining fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians. The Council is removing anything that would keep Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians distant from one another. The Gentile Christians, for the sake of the unity of the whole church, are asked “to avoid the impurities which would otherwise

⁵⁶ Braun: 114.

⁵⁷ Ibid.: 118.

⁵⁸ Acts 15:19.

⁵⁹ Acts 15:20.

⁶⁰ Bauckham, 119.

impede fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in the church.”⁶¹ Asking the Gentiles to make a clean break with their former idolatrous lives ensured that all could share in meals and worship together without fear of idolatry or corruption.⁶² The decision about the future work of the church was made together in such a way as to keep the mission unified, not separate or splintered. The Council ratified the decision by sending a letter to Antioch where the conflict began. The crisis ended for the moment, and the church passed a critical test that could have hindered its ability to live into the commission of Jesus.

Organic Lessons Learned from the Jerusalem Council

The Jerusalem Council, as well as the events preceding it, offer the church some important lessons on growing organically, particularly through moments of great stress or uncertainty. The decision and workings of the Council offer us glimpses of what is necessary for the church to move through an impasse, allowing organic growth rather than programmed decisions to lead the way. Through the Council we see an evolutionary paradigm, trust in the integrity of leaders, and a commitment to a missional life. These aspects of the early church’s life and decision making determined its ability to continue to produce fruit.

Evolutionary Paradigm

Through the Council, the early church affirmed that they did not see the future predetermined or predicated by God’s action in the past. At this point the church was in uncharted waters. Rather than moving toward what was known through previous

⁶¹ Ibid., 121.

⁶² Witherington, 247.

tradition and experience, it made a commitment to remain in uncharted waters. The primary leadership of the church—Peter, James, and Paul—were all lifelong Jews and could have easily led the church closer to the shores of their Judaic heritage. Instead, they affirmed that they trusted God to move in ways that were not consistent with their experience. The Council “recognized that God ‘worked’ in the Pauline mission field just as he did for the Petrine mission.”⁶³

One factor that allowed the church to maintain this evolutionary paradigm was its keen awareness of the movement of God around it and in the world. In Acts 15, the church simply wove together what was already happening. By observing the response of people to the message of the gospel and by listening to Peter and Paul’s (and others’) reports, the leaders were able to recognize the disparate threads revealing the movement of the Spirit. In that situation they chose the uncomfortable path of moving with God into the world.

In this paradigm the leaders recognized that the people’s experience of God and response to the grace of Christ would be different. Within these differences the church sought to maintain unity of the movement. James, in quoting the prophet Amos, “does not expect Jewish Christians to renounce their Jewishness anymore than he expects Gentiles to become Jews.”⁶⁴ Although freedom to live faithfully was difficult to maintain (as evidenced by Galatians 2), it was a critical feature allowing the church to grow, not according to a human plan but according to the unfolding commission of Christ revealed by the Holy Spirit to reach “all nations.”

⁶³ Becker, 91.

⁶⁴ Strong, 203.

Trusting the Integrity of Leadership

When Paul and Barnabas had disagreements with believers over the need for circumcision, they immediately turned to the “mother church” for a decision, even though the outcome of that meeting was not certain. In Jerusalem, according to Galatians 2:9, Peter, James and John occupied positions of leadership in the fledgling church. The roles these three played are not clear in Scripture, though Witherington attests that according to Galatians 2 and Acts 15, “James was the administrative leader while Peter was the chief proclaimer.”⁶⁵ In the end, the opinions of Peter and James carried the most weight in the decision of the Jerusalem Council.

The Jerusalem Council, according to Acts 15, was not a private meeting of leaders but instead took place as an open conversation with representatives of both sides of the issue present and allowed time to make their argument. In the end, James proclaimed, “I have made the decision . . .”⁶⁶ and it is his decision that stands. The process of decision-making and discernment gives the reader a sense that the participants in the dispute shared high levels of trust in their leadership to make a faithful decision at a time when there was little, if any, middle ground.

Commitment to a Missional Lifestyle

Finally, the leadership, through the conflict, made an implicit commitment to a missional lifestyle for the church. Strong maintains the decision of the Council “[prioritized] mission over cultural constraints.”⁶⁷ The church would not be bound by “cultural constraints” regardless of their importance to followers. Circumcision, the

⁶⁵ Witherington, 176.

⁶⁶ Acts 15:19.

⁶⁷ Strong, 197.

physical sign of every faithful male Jew—a sign of the covenant—was less important than the mission God had called the church to through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The implications of this decision would be challenged repeatedly, not only in the earliest days of the church but throughout church history. The conflict in this moment was resolved by claiming the mission of God to work first in Jerusalem, but ultimately to the ends of the earth.

James' resolution of the conflict involved four restrictions on the lives of Gentile Christians. Ultimately, these decrees were issued to make table fellowship—the sign of hospitality and unity—possible among people with differing backgrounds, cultural heritages, and understandings of how to live faithfully.⁶⁸ Table fellowship would serve as the sign of the unity of life and mission for the church. At the table they were one in all things.

Conclusion

Acts 1-15 reveals the movement of the church from behind the walls of Jerusalem into the wider Middle Eastern world. The movement came in fits and starts and created a controversy that threatened to derail the commission of Christ to his followers. Yet eventually, the community of disciples “came to realize under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the risen Lord wills that the church be a universal, inclusive community of all nations.”⁶⁹ The moment of definition came when they

⁶⁸ Ibid., 203.

⁶⁹ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*, ed. et al. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 503.

were confronted with a new problem—understanding the implications of faith as the church grew beyond its roots in Judaic Judaism. Though a limited expectation was placed on Gentile converts, the church acknowledged the power of God continuing to move in unexpected ways. Coming to a resolution of the conflict “transforms the church, inasmuch as the Gentile mission is not only affirmed but also equipped with a gospel free from the ritual law.”⁷⁰ Affirming the Gentile mission allowed the leadership of the church to naturally and organically claim a missional and evolutionary paradigm as normative for its life.

⁷⁰ Strong, 200.

CHAPTER 3

JOHN WESLEY MEETS THE EMERGING CHURCH

Acts 15 is the culmination of a period of great stress in the life of the church that resulted in a renewal of the mission and recommitment of the church to follow the Holy Spirit into the mission field. Other moments in church history reflect not just stress, but significant decline in the life of the church. Churches in 18th-century England and the late 20th/early 21st-century United States show similar patterns of decline and decay. John Wesley's Methodist movement in the 18th century led the church to a new commitment to follow the Holy Spirit into the mission field. Today, emerging churches are leading the way. Interestingly, both movements bear similar elements and speak to the situation of today's existing churches.

Setting the Stage

John Wesley's 18th-century movement within the Church of England brought great renewal and transformation for the religious life of people in England and ultimately the United States. Wesley was not alone in seeking a renewed corporate existence for the life of faithful people. The church has had reforms and reformers throughout its existence. Early church fathers, such as Tertullian and Irenaus, used their "Rules of Faith" to define the contours of faith and church life. In the third and fourth centuries the church developed various creeds (including the Nicene Creed) to maintain a rigorous understanding of faith over and against heresies that were—or were perceived to be—undermining the work of the Body of Christ.¹ Luther, Calvin,

¹ For a summation of the ancient "Rules of Faith," the development of the Creeds, and vital church writings through the centuries, see *Creeds of the Church*, edited by John H. Leith (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982).

and Zwingli all brought revitalized existence to the faithful and the church as they worked against the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church. Transformations within the life of the church continue today in a number of ways—through discussions about the impact of the postmodern context on evangelism and mission, evolutions in hymnody and music, and even through architectural design.

The vision and theology of John Wesley and his movement continue to be relevant, as we seek renewal for 21st-century congregations. Wesley's passion to "spread scriptural holiness across the land" found its way to the English colonies prior to the American Revolution and ignited the work of the people called Methodists through the centuries.² In post-Civil War America, the success of the Methodist movement was seen in the establishment of hospitals, colleges and universities, and a wide array of health-care services and orphanages. Membership between 1800 and 1900 jumped from 61,000 to more than 6 million.³ As the Methodists moved into the 20th century, great optimism marked the movement. Indeed, the 1968 merger between the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church was seen as a great opportunity for the fledgling United Methodist Church.

That optimism is not present today. As noted in Chapter 1, the institutional expression of Wesley's movement in the United States, the United Methodist Church, is experiencing significant decline. Leonard Sweet, in discussing the loss of

² For a thorough history of the Methodist movement in England and America, see Richard Heitzenrater's *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) and Frederick A. Norwood's, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974).

³ Dennis M. Campbell, "Does Methodism Have a Future in American Culture?" in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, ed. William B. Lawrence, Russell E. Richey, and Dennis M. Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 13.

membership of the United Methodist Church notes, “We suffered a 48% loss in our market share in the past half century.”⁴ While numerous reasons for the decline have been postulated over the years, some church leaders and scholars have recently focused their attention on “an outdated denominational structure that came into being at another time to achieve different intentions.”⁵ Dennis Campbell reflects this thinking when he observes, “Wesleyan theology has no particular institutional interest but the interest of communicating a positive gospel to a hurting world.”⁶ Campbell further stresses that the historic connection of United Methodists is to be understood “theologically, not institutionally.”

This emphasis on institutional structure, which arose after the 1968 merger of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, removed the locus of ministry and mission from the local setting, effectively communicating that “real ministry” occurred at the General Church level. In this understanding, local churches exist primarily to serve the hierarchy. Langford and Willimon lament that “we have become victims of the line of reason that thinks the most important work of God is always elsewhere, beyond the local setting.”⁷ The inability to emerge from this crippling mindset reduced the missional imperative at the local level, while creating a bureaucratic scramble for resources at the General Church level. This 20th-century

⁴ Leonard I. Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 16.

⁵ Andy Langford and William H. Willimon, *A New Connection: Reforming the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 11.

⁶ Campbell, 22.

⁷ Langford and Willimon, 43.

convention of “top-down” ministry is no longer viable in the current culture where power is generated from the bottom up.

The current circumstance of the denomination, as we will see, betrays the cultural responsiveness and ingenuity of John Wesley. Wesley believed in structure and control, but his structure was driven by a simple understanding of mission: “Offer them Christ.” The renewal led by Wesley occurred in a culture that no longer exists. We cannot recreate his 18th-century structures and expect to be effective. However, his concepts and understanding of mission speak volumes to our current malaise.

John Wesley is not alone in sparking renewal for the church. “Emerging” churches in the United States and around the world are offering fresh expressions of the gospel embedded in their local contexts. There are many similarities in today’s movements and Wesley’s movement from 300 years ago. There are also noteworthy contrasts. The intersection of these two movements, one ancient and one new, can provide a transforming ethos to guide and propel the renewal of the existing churches in our day and in the years ahead.

John Wesley’s Movement

Regardless of how the history of the Methodist movement is written, at the epicenter is the passion, vision, and direction of one man: John Wesley. Wesley’s preeminent biographer, Richard Heitzenrater, states, “Wesley’s own personal pilgrimage of faith is centrally and inextricably intertwined with the development of the theology, the organization, and the mission of Methodism in the eighteenth

century.”⁸ Because of that close connection, a brief overview of his story, providing the contours of his life and spiritual journey, is instructive.

Wesley was born the son of an Anglican pastor, Samuel, and a stern mother, Susanna, in 1703. While growing up he showed little interest in pursuing “holy” things, but upon entering college he became much more interested in pursuing the holy life. While a student at Christ Church College, Oxford, he became the leader of a small group of dedicated Christians. They prayed early in the morning and fasted regularly. Because of their strict discipline and intense methods, other students derided them, calling them “Bible Moths” or “Methodists.” Their routine also included visiting prisons, hospitals, and orphanages.

Following graduation and ordination into the ministry of the Church of England, John and his brother Charles set off for America to work with a local congregation and among the Indians in Georgia, with the express purpose of making converts. John is clear about his work in Georgia, writing in his journal on the day of his departure, “Our end in leaving our native country was not to avoid want, nor to gain the dung or dross of riches or honour; but singly this—to save souls; to live wholly to the glory of God.”⁹ Charles, disillusioned, gave up the work soon after he arrived and returned to England. At the local church, John tried to set up his strict society along the lines of his experience at Christ Church College and was unsuccessful. His ministry with the Indians was also a failure. The reason for John and Charles’ failure in Georgia was easily explained. “[John and Charles Wesley’s]

⁸ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), xi.

⁹ John Wesley, Journal entry dated, “Tuesday, October 14, 1735” in Percy Livingston Parker, ed., *The Heart of Wesley’s Journal*, illus. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1989), 3.

work was ineffective [in Georgia] principally because of their rigidity and inability to work with the rough colonists and Native Americans.”¹⁰ Following a disastrous courtship, John returned home a failure in his own eyes. In his journal he confessed, “I went to America to convert the Indians; but O! Who shall convert me?”¹¹

The trip to America was not a complete loss, for on the boat to and from Georgia John met and befriended a group of Moravians—German Pietists whose deep faith and joy in that faith not only astonished John but also saddened him, as he could not share their joy. Upon returning to England, John debated giving up preaching but Peter Böhler, a German friend, encouraged him to continue preaching. Wesley began to meet with a small group of Christians in London, still doubting his salvation and effectiveness as a minister. Finally on May 24, 1738, Wesley found the assurance of faith he was searching for during a prayer service on Aldersgate Street. While there, during a reading of Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans, he reports, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”¹²

After this moment of assurance, Wesley took his call to evangelize and call others to repentance very seriously, and at the insistence of George Whitefield began to do something he had always sworn to avoid. “At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation,

¹⁰ William H. Willimon and Robert Leroy Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame: Strategies for a Vital United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 38.

¹¹ John Wesley, Journal entry dated, “Friday, January 13, 1738,” in Parker, 29.

¹² John Wesley, Journal entry dated, “Wednesday, May 24, 1738,” in *Ibid.*, 43.

speaking from a little eminence in the ground adjoining the city, to about three thousand people.”¹³ April 1739 was a critical turning point for Wesley as he “moved from a somewhat personal and parochial sort of ministry to a more public and evangelical sense of vocation.”¹⁴ The evangelist began to put behind him anything that would hinder or prevent him from boldly proclaiming the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Though many churches had closed their doors to his bold preaching, Wesley now preached to anyone, anywhere.

Because he did not want these new Christians to fall away from their new-found faith, Wesley began to set up “societies” for them to meet together. Within these societies he established small groups. At first he encouraged members of the societies to join “bands,” groups of five to six Christians who met for strict accountability. Later, as an act of expedience for pastoral care, he divided his societies into classes with appointed class leaders. All members of the societies were required to attend their classes.

One of the primary challenges facing the fledgling movement was the question of who would preach. Without support from the Church of England or many ordained preachers coming to his aid, Wesley began to send out lay preachers to the different societies, even sending an occasional woman who would “witness.” These committed lay preachers, who were the heart of his early “connection” in England, later became known as “circuit riders” as they followed the American population in its westward advance.

¹³ John Wesley, Journal entry dated, “Monday, April 2, 1739,” in *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁴ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 104.

Members of the Methodist Societies moved to America, setting up their own societies in their new home. Wesley, in 1769, began to send preachers to help them organize. Following the American Revolution, the Church of England in America was decimated, with few functioning congregations or pastors remaining. Wesley begged the bishops of the Church of England to ordain several Methodist lay preachers so they could administer the sacraments to the American congregants. The bishops refused, leaving Wesley no choice but to set apart Dr. Thomas Coke as a general superintendent for the church in America and ordain two others. Dr. Coke traveled to America and at the Christmas Conference of 1784, after a vote of the ministers in attendance, ordained Francis Asbury as a bishop. In that moment the church in America was born.

While there is much more that could be written about the life and organization of John Wesley (and indeed much more has been written), this brief overview of his life and ministry will suffice to outline some of the prevailing characteristics that marked his renewal movement.

Wesleyan Renewal Characteristics

First, and possibly foremost, is the reality that what Wesley began was a **movement**, not an institution or even a church. Wesley adamantly maintained throughout his ministry that the Methodist Societies would not separate from the Church of England. And although he helped create The Methodist Church in America, the church retained many features of the original movement. Richard Heitzenrater comments,

A careful review of the Wesleyan revival reveals that while there may have been no preconceived shape for Methodism, the movement does seem to have

gone in a specific and determined direction. And it seems that Wesley is much more interested in maintaining the momentum in the proper direction than in creating or preserving a preconceived format.¹⁵

For Wesley, the flexibility to rapidly adapt was of primary importance. Had the movement settled quickly into an institutional mode, it could not have achieved the breadth of success it had in reaching people in England and America of vastly different cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Without the burden of institutional structures or strictures, the movement was nimble enough to react quickly when needs arose to establish new societies, move preachers, realign resources or build facilities.

Bill Kemp, writing about present-day churches, states, “Unhealthy churches let their buildings determine their actions.”¹⁶ Wesley refused to let anything but the needs of the movement determine his actions. Even in America after the Revolutionary War, according to Donald Matthews,

Methodism was first of all a movement Relying on preachers whose credentials were an ability to elicit intense emotion and to inspire religious commitment, Methodists became so effective at recruitment and mobilization that the post-Revolutionary generation would be called by religious historians “the Methodist Age.”¹⁷

For Wesley, and those who would follow closely after him, keeping the movement nimble enough to proclaim the gospel where needed was critical. Norwood senses

¹⁵ Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, x.

¹⁶ Bill Kemp, *Holy Places, Small Spaces* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2005), 87.

¹⁷ Donald G. Matthews, “Evangelical America--the Methodist Ideology,” in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Kenneth E. Rowe, Russell E. Richey, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1993), 17.

that Wesley “organized as needed with very little advance planning.”¹⁸ In fact, Wesley’s greatest fear was expressed in this one statement; “I am not concerned that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, either in Europe or in America, but that they would continue to exist only as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.” Most would say Wesley’s fears have become reality in present-day Methodism.

Wesley’s vision for renewal was driven by a **practical theology**. His deep understanding of grace and how that grace worked itself out in the life of a believer helped him craft the contours of the renewal movement. He believed that grace, received by a person in the moment of salvation, not only justified them (made them right with God) but also began the lifelong process of sanctification (being made holy). For Wesley, sanctification had practical aspects that would be lived out in visible and measurable ways via “works of mercy” and “works of piety.” Wesley discusses this aspect of sanctification in his sermon, “The Scripture Way of Salvation”:

First, all works of piety such as public prayer, family prayer and praying in our closet, receiving the Supper of the Lord, searching the Scriptures, by hearing, reading, meditating, and using such a measure of fasting or abstinence as our bodily health allows.

Secondly, all works of mercy, whether they relate to the bodies or souls of men, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted, such as the endeavouring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner . . .¹⁹

¹⁸ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 32.

¹⁹ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” in *John Wesley* ed. Albert Outler, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 280.

Wesley, with minimal organization, kept his movement keenly focused on people receiving and being transformed by God's grace. The societies encouraged believers in their faith and provided an intimate experience of the Holy Spirit. The classes and bands provided accountable discipleship. This practical theological emphasis did not end with a person's prayer life but was to be revealed in every relationship and encounter. As one theologian states, "What was important was not what, but how the Christian ought to believe."²⁰ The "how" was critically important for Wesley and his followers because it indicated spiritual health and growth in sanctification. The "how" also kept believers focused beyond themselves, as they were compelled to live their faith in relation to others.

Bishop Richard Wilke claims that contemporary United Methodism has failed at precisely this point claiming, "We do not produce because we are misfocused."²¹ Tasked with conducting business and tracking statistics, the institutional church has lost its focus on Wesley's practical theology; consequently, there is little energy for producing transformed lives. Later, we will explore the importance of a grounded theological center as a key to renewal in our current environment.

The Wesleyan renewal was also marked by its use of **laity** (including women), as well as clergy. In fact, other than John and Charles Wesley and a handful of ordained preachers, the movement in England and America was led by laity trained and sent by Wesley. Class leaders were laity selected for their faithfulness and growth in grace. Leonard Sweet claims, "Wesley's mobilization of the laity was the hallmark

²⁰ Mathews, 21.

²¹ Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 26.

of the Wesleyan movement.”²² After some initial misgivings, Wesley saw the laity as equals in terms of ability to preach, teach, and grow fellow Christians. This partnership of lay and clergy was crucial to the success of the movement. The laity supplied a ready force of preachers for society meetings. Importantly, it was composed of men (and a few women) who understood the culture people were experiencing.

Wesley worked hard to ensure that these preachers continued to preach grace, understood the boundaries of their work, and were equipped and focused. At quarterly conferences for his preachers, he asked the questions and gave the answers on practical and theological topics.²³

This emphasis on lay/clergy partnership continued until the 19th century, when Methodism began to settle into its institutional life. Through the 1820s lay preachers outnumbered ordained preachers by two to one.²⁴ From this point forward and through the 20th century, the denomination relied heavily on seminary-trained clergy and professional staff to provide leadership.

As Sweet notes, one of the crucial characteristics of Wesley’s movement was the focus on **small groups**: “The heart of Methodist methodology of discipleship was the cell known as the ‘class meeting,’ in effect a house church.”²⁵ In these small groups, people grew in relation to other Christians and in their relationship with Christ.

²² Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateways*, 114.

²³ To see a sample of the “Minutes” of these conferences, see Outler, 134-177.

²⁴ Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateways*, 113.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

For Wesley, the creation of these small groups was pragmatic, providing a way to disciple new Christians and continue the growth of long-term Christians. Everyone who participated in a Methodist Society was required to participate in a class, a gathering of up to 12 people organized geographically.²⁶ Participation in a class gave entry to the general meeting of a society. How important were these small class meetings to the success of the renewal movement? “Historians tell us that more conversions took place in class meetings than ever occurred under the preaching of these noted evangelists.”²⁷ John and Charles Wesley knew the power of small gatherings of Christians, since their own “converting” experiences in 1738 occurred at the small meeting of Christians on Aldersgate Street in London.

A subtle but important characteristic of the movement was Wesley’s ability to modify and temper his own preferences and the established preferences of the movement to meet the unique **context** for ministry in 18th-century England and America. Variances in organization and style were allowed so that the gospel might be communicated more effectively. While the Church of England largely ignored the nation’s rapid industrialization, Wesley and his societies eagerly met people where they lived and worked. In America, Methodism “was characterized by aggressive evangelistic endeavor attentive to the unique reality of American development and American mentality.”²⁸ Campbell further argues that in the post-Revolutionary War years, “Methodism was popular because it met the needs of men and women where

²⁶ Wesley’s organization for the United Societies is laid out in “The Rules of the United Societies,” which can be found in Outler, 177-181.

²⁷ Wilke, 80.

²⁸ Campbell, 11.

they were, and it had the itinerant ministry to meet them.”²⁹ The ethos of the early Methodist movement was to be where people were—in the “highways and hedges”—and to be authentically vibrant in those places. In Sweet’s words, Wesley “learned how to reach the six-pack generation of his day.”³⁰

Though Wesley’s renewal movement was driven by additional factors, those highlighted here provide a framework for the movement of the Holy Spirit. The societies were driven by a practical theology and fleshed out in small groups of Christians. Laity, equipped through worship, study, and accountability, carried the gospel into their unique contexts for ministry. Further, Wesley did not create a monolithic structure or prescriptive format but provided theological and practical resources for the movement to engage people within their cultural moment. Wesley’s movement, centuries later, has left behind a legacy of churches in almost every county in the United States and in nearly every country around the world.

The Emerging Renewal

Many pastors, theologians, and writers are pointing to a new movement of the Holy Spirit within today’s churches. While some pastors from within the United Methodist Church have written about changes, transitions, and attitudes necessary to meet the changing needs of the postmodern world, the movement is not bound to any denomination or group.³¹ Within this emerging movement, regardless of theological or ecclesial slant, there appear to be some decisive factors.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening*, 63.

³¹ United Methodist pastors who have written on the subject include Adam Hamilton, *Leading Beyond the Walls: Developing Congregations with a Heart for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002); Michael Slaughter and Warren Bird, *Unlearning Church: Just When You Thought You*

Underlying all the characteristics of renewal and transformation is a strong sense of **congregational identity** or **vocation**. Unfortunately, many churches have stumbled into an anemic understanding of ecclesiology and mission because they have not revisited their purpose in generations. Thom Rainer, head of the Rainer Church Consulting Group, examined over 50,000 American congregations searching for what he defined as “breakout churches.” He notes, “Though it might sound simplistic, a church must know why it exists to know what it is supposed to do. Any structural decisions must be based on the purposes of the church.”³² He is not alone in his thinking. Again and again, pastors, authors, and theologians are drawing the same conclusion. A congregation must have a sense of who it is and what it is called to do; without this, renewal cannot occur. Guder states, “The church’s crisis is one of fundamental vocation. Revival is not a program we can put on a calendar and post on a banner.”³³

The fact that many congregations cannot claim a healthy sense of vocation indicates the complexities of identity. They either claim the wrong vocational identity or choose to claim no identity. Willimon and Wilson write, “Across United Methodism there are scores of congregations and their pastors who have become debilitated because of unfocused, unrealistic, unbiblical understandings about the

Had Leadership All Figured Out! (Loveland, CO: Group Pub., 2002); Dick Wills, *Waking to God’s Dream: Spiritual Leadership and Church Renewal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

³² Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 105.

³³ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, ed. Darrell L. Guder, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 150-151.

nature and purpose of the Christian Church.”³⁴ This debilitating loss of vocation is a primary reason for congregational decline, and clergy and member burnout.

According to varying pastors and theologians, the basis of vocation for each congregation is found in Jesus’ closing commands to his disciples: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel” (Matthew 28) or “You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1). Theologian Darrell Guder states boldly, “What connects all local congregations to one another and forms the church catholic is the domical mandate: You shall be my witnesses.”³⁵ For United Methodists, the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* reflects this understanding: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”³⁶

Passionately claiming this vocation is *the* critical matter for congregations experiencing renewal and transformation. Kemp, after studying small membership churches, affirms, “Small membership churches may need to examine whether or not the congregation can even become passionate about what the church is currently stating as its beliefs.”³⁷ When disciple-making becomes an embedded part of the ethos of a congregation, people instantly recognize it. Tom Bandy, church consultant, believes, “This identity is transparent to every participant and immediately clear to every newcomer.”³⁸ This clear sense of identity provides fertile ground for sharing

³⁴ Willimon and Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame: Strategies for a Vital United Methodism*, 25.

³⁵ Guder, 180.

³⁶ United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2004 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 87.

³⁷ Kemp, 21.

³⁸ Thomas G. Bandy, *Christian Chaos: Revolutionizing the Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 42.

the faith, discipling Christians, and launching new ministry endeavors. Such clarity drives the use of resources, human and financial, and determines what opportunities the church will pursue and which it will not.

How each congregation lives out this identity must be a matter of careful and prayerful contemplation. Living this identity in an urban setting will differ greatly from living it out in a rural farm community; therefore, congregations must spend time not only claiming the vocation of “being witnesses,” but must consistently seek to live it in their context and cultural setting. Because the context for ministry continually evolves, this conversation about living out their vocation is ongoing for congregations experiencing transformation.

Emerging congregations’ identity is a launching pad for their **missional** expression. According to Frost and Hirsch, “The missional church is a sent church. It is a going church, a movement of God through his people sent to bring healing to a broken world.”³⁹ Missional churches sense a strong desire to do ministry for the world, not for the church. At heart, they claim to exist only for those beyond the walls of the institutional church. Everything followers of Christ do in worship, Bible study, and prayer prepares them for their mission in and for the world. They understand that “to be the church is to be missionary.”⁴⁰ This characteristic aligns most closely with Wesley’s societies, which existed with minimal structure and maximum outreach.

To fully understand what it means to be missional requires a closer look at Frost and Hirsch’s discussion of centered-set and bounded-set churches in *The Shaping*

³⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 18.

⁴⁰ William M. Easum and Dave Travis, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches That Work* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2003), 13.

of Things to Come. They believe the church of our day is predominantly expressed as bounded-set: “In bounded-set churches all sorts of criteria are determined for the acceptance or rejection of prospective members.”⁴¹ Bounded-set works from the assumption that there are propositional boundaries which define who is “in” and who is “outside” the church. Churches may use rules, theological dogma, ecclesial definitions, education level, or socioeconomic factors to define the boundaries that make clear exactly who can be accepted as a Christian and who cannot.

Conversely, centered-set thinking works from a central idea of who God is and then sees everyone in relation to that center. According to Frost and Hirsch, this means “the missional-incarnational church sees people as Christian and not-yet-Christian.”⁴² Everyone, regardless of whether or not they claim faith in Christ, is in relation to the center (God). People are not defined by any humanly constructed boundary, only by God. Centered-set thinking claims that God works beyond any boundaries. In this understanding, theological and dogmatic consent are less important. Instead, “belonging is a key value.”⁴³ When Christians see others in relation to “the center,” their mission is no longer to drag people within the boundaries or to encourage others to accept dogmatic principles, but simply to help them along the journey. When Christians envision their calling as “guides” for the journey, the vision of “every Christian community [seeing] itself as a community of

⁴¹ Frost and Hirsch, 47.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

missionaries” becomes more realistic.⁴⁴ Further, this perspective moves the church from “having a mission to being a mission.”⁴⁵

Emerging churches as well as existing churches undergoing renewal also seem to carry a sense of **constant evolution**. These churches work well within chaos and change. They do not allow the forms of their structure to define the contours of their mission. Therefore, they more readily adapt to changing circumstances or opportunities. Change is viewed not as an enemy of the mission of the church, but as a natural part of who it is and what it does. Bandy notes, “Leadership in the 21st century is not about controlling the river of change. It is about chaos surfing.”⁴⁶ “Chaos surfing” is a major determinant in how churches reach the ever-changing culture around them. Discussing the differences in the leadership needs of previous generations with the leadership needs in today’s church, Sweet claims, “In the past, leaders were those who could execute a task the fastest. Tomorrow’s leaders are those who can learn new things the fastest.”⁴⁷ Churches experiencing renewal have leaders who can learn on the fly and a congregational ethos of continuing adaptation and evolution. One theologian refers to this as the church’s “continual conversion.”⁴⁸

Driving this adaptability and continual conversion is the congregation’s clear sense of identity and mission. They sense, “The goal is not to protect a heritage or maintain an institution but to generate the greatest positive change possible in the

⁴⁴ Guder, 178.

⁴⁵ Easum and Travis, 14.

⁴⁶ Bandy, 12.

⁴⁷ Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateway*, 39.

⁴⁸ For an excellent discussion on the continuing conversion or evangelization of the church, see Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*.

world—in the spirit of Christ.”⁴⁹ With the mission ever before them, these congregations do not feel compelled to cling to what has been before. They mine their own history for what is important to their current circumstance and push onward toward where God is leading.

Congregations face significant internal hindrances in their ability to “chaos surf.” First, churches struggle with structures and organizational methods that determine mission. Restructuring alone will not bring renewal, but it can free the decision-making structures and return ownership to individuals within the congregation. Kemp notes, “It is surprising how many churches believe they are dying when they simply need to trim their structures.”⁵⁰ Allowing the organizational form to develop with the missional outreach of the church is a key component in living as an evolving congregation.

Church property also can be a major obstacle for a congregation in its attempt to live as an evolving community. Easum and Travis, reflecting on the tendency to associate a church with a building, state, “In many cases it is the property, more than the calling, mission, or opportunity, that dictates the form and amount of ministry a church can provide.”⁵¹ While a church’s buildings and property can provide an important sense of place and history, they can also prevent congregations from living their mission in new and invigorating ways. Phillip Reiff, writing about the “resurrection” of St. Paul’s church in Atlanta, points to the loss of the church’s three-

⁴⁹ Bandy, 37.

⁵⁰ Kemp, 31.

⁵¹ Easum and Travis, 13.

story education building as one of the key moments in the church's revitalization. He quotes a letter from the pastor, Lee Ramsey, to the congregation:

We are much more than a building. We are music and prayer, children's laughter, and warm meals delivered to each other's homes, hospital visits, Sunday School classes, Easter egg hunts, food for the hungry, hope for the broken-spirited. We are "the dwelling place of God in the Spirit."⁵²

A word of caution is important here. Churches evolve and change in order to fulfill their missional calling, not to follow ministry trends. Some pastors, like Dennis Sawyer, understand that "Any kind of growth in any kind of church would require constant change."⁵³ The adaptation and evolution occurs naturally in response to environment and mission. It is not imposed. Like individuals, "healthy churches shed what they no longer need" and claim what is necessary to continue to live from their identity.⁵⁴ Innovation meets the needs of mission; mission does not meet the need to innovate.⁵⁵

While evolving, emerging churches serve as **catalyzing** forces in the lives of people by igniting passion, healing, service, and mission within the lives of their congregants. According to Frost and Hirsh, missional churches place a "high value on communal life, more open leadership structures, and *the contribution of all the people of God*."⁵⁶ Catalyzing churches understand that the gifts, abilities, and resources of each congregant are vital to the mission of the church. Kemp attests that "vitality

⁵² Joseph T. Reiff, "The Resurrection of a Congregation: The Story of St Paul United Methodist Church," *Quarterly Review* 16 (Winter 1996): 338.

⁵³ Dennis Sawyer, "Rekindling Vision in an Established Church," *Leadership* 14 (1993): 89.

⁵⁴ Kemp, 87.

⁵⁵ Rainer, 197.

⁵⁶ Frost and Hirsch, 22; emphasis added.

depends on equipping and employing the laity.”⁵⁷ In most emerging congregations the living out of their identity and mission is decided not by administrative structure but by the “gifting, calling, equipping of laity.”⁵⁸

Some critical aspects undergird the ability of a church to become a catalyzing force:

- *The Lay/Clergy Relationship* – In their traditional roles, clergy and staff are the official organizers, initiators, and theologians for the congregation. But for catalyzing congregations, the pastor and staff see themselves in a different light. The artificial distance between clergy and laity is mitigated by a commitment to the shared mission of the community. While Kemp is dealing with traditional structures of church-life in his writing, he still sees that “in a healthy church the relationship between clergy and lay leadership sets a tone of trust and mutual respect. . . .”⁵⁹ The shared commitment found in catalyzing congregations means more than flattening hierarchical structures and reworking the organizations; a new vision of relationship whereby the pastor does not *do* ministry *for* a congregation but rather views himself or herself as ministering *with* a congregation must take hold. The pastor is not a hired gun or a paid professional. Instead, in this setting, he or she is a primary equipper and one voice—no greater than any other—in the mission of the local church. Easum and Travis assert that “two words hinder the development of a culture of equipping: staff and volunteer. The problem is that often paid staff comes

⁵⁷ Kemp, 99.

⁵⁸ Bandy, 122.

⁵⁹ Kemp, 51.

to mean the people who are the best equipped to do ministry,” and volunteers are seen as less qualified.⁶⁰ In catalyzing congregations the relationship of the clergy/staff and laity is a relationship of equals.

- *Trust* - In old church models with multiple levels of organization and bureaucracy, trust was not an issue because of the redundant checkpoints along the organizational flowchart. No one had to implicitly trust because no one could do anything without multiple votes and meetings. Thriving churches are vastly different. Their “permission-giving” culture expects members to discover the best way to employ their gifts and resources in mission and ministry. According to Tom Bandy,

Thriving church systems that are preoccupied with changing people and the world . . . are noteworthy for the extensive freedom that they offer teams, programs, and leaders. The organization celebrates an implicit trust and mutual respect among congregational participants.⁶¹

Traditional congregations must learn to recognize and rid themselves of systems that either breed mistrust or fail to encourage a trusting atmosphere among church members. Again, Bandy offers insight on this issue: “Control is an issue for both traditional and permission-giving organizations, but for different reasons. Permission-giving boards struggle to exercise self-control. . . freedom is more important than procedure.”⁶² When trust and freedom are prevalent in the ethos of a congregation, individual Christians, teams of Christians, and entire congregations are able to acknowledge and exercise

⁶⁰ Easum and Travis, 49.

⁶¹ Bandy, 35.

⁶² Ibid., 95-96.

their calling. A new outreach or ministry may emerge at any time. Will this be chaotic? Yes. But trusting environments are equipped to endure seasons of chaos.

- *Relationships.* For emerging churches experiencing vitality, building and maintaining relationships is key to discipleship and growth: “Disciple-making . . . cannot be accomplished without intentional community-building.”⁶³ Small groups, Sunday School classes, women’s and men’s groups, prayer groups, study groups, and issue-centered groups make up the heart of these congregations. Beyond established groups, the culture of hospitality provides a breeding ground for spiritual growth. In our current postmodern culture, as discussed in Chapter 1, people are searching for relationships and places to belong. Frost and Hirsch remind us that what is needed “is the recognition that people today are searching for relational communities that offer belonging, empowerment, and redemption.”⁶⁴ These “relational communities” provide a healthy setting in which people can explore together what God is calling them to do, encourage one another in their growth, and hold one another accountable.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, emerging congregations understand and minister within their given context. They are truly **incarnational**. The incarnational nature of these churches has its roots in the incarnation of Christ. Guder reminds us that “We are all confronted by the fundamental mandate of the incarnation

⁶³ Kemp, 103.

⁶⁴ Frost and Hirsch, 10.

of Christ as the context of our message and the definition of the way we carry out our mission institutionally.”⁶⁵ As we shall see, for a church to live incarnationally means certain things and requires specific commitments.

First, these churches recognize that there is no one way to “do” or “be” a church in terms of worship style, organizational structure, or program. “The concrete shape of the local community will differ from place to place, from culture to culture,” argues Darrell Guder.⁶⁶ Form is directly related to their sense of function within their local community. Can different churches learn from one another? Yes, but churches cannot mimic one another or assume that successful ministry in one place will be transferable to another.

Incarnational congregations stay connected to their communities by spending significant time within them. Many traditional churches present an image of being walled off from their community or are seen as a refuge from life in their towns. However, according to Frost and Hirsch, “The issue of cultural context is essential because the missional church shapes itself to fit that context in order to transform it for the sake of the kingdom of God.”⁶⁷ As such, emerging churches see themselves as a vital part of what God is doing within their neighborhood. One author warns, “Churches die when they get separated and lost from ministry to their own neighborhood.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Guder, 192.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁷ Frost and Hirsch, 7.

⁶⁸ Kemp, 71.

But the issue runs deeper than just knowing the issues, problems or opportunities in the local context. As Jesus identified with humanity, so the church is called to identify with its “host community.” Jesus is our model: “Jesus moved into the neighborhood; he experienced its life, its rhythms, and its people from the inside and not as an outsider.”⁶⁹ Emerging churches find that their ministry is not defined by walls or liturgies, but by the community from which they emerge. Above all, they understand that “in reaching a group [they] will need to identify with them in all possible ways without compromising the truth of the gospel itself.”⁷⁰ Identification is crucial because of the cultural shift away from recognized experts as role models and mentors to people with like experiences.⁷¹

For many existing churches locked within a large, sprawling bureaucracy, this may be one of the most difficult aspects of the emerging church to engage. Mission and ministry spread across denominations and requiring large amounts of energy, resources, and finances from the local church divert these churches from mission and ministry in their local context. Willimon and Langford point out, “We must begin by encouraging each congregation to define its own ministry and mission in its own particular setting.”⁷² Bishop Richard Wilke of the United Methodist Church also weighs in on this: “The ‘at-homeness’ is where our people are, and they are going to heaven or hell in the midst of those issues.”⁷³ Recovering the incarnational spirit of

⁶⁹ Frost and Hirsch, 39.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁷¹ Ibid., 97.

⁷² Langford and Willimon, 45.

⁷³ Wilke, 39.

ministry is a difficult transition point for many congregations. Rainer, after studying “break-out churches,” identifies passion for the community as the key to unlocking the incarnational mindset when he asserts, “A congregation cannot be an island in a community of needs. There can be no vision without a clear discernment of the community’s needs. And there can be no discernment of the community’s needs without a passion for the community.”⁷⁴

Living incarnationally is also a critical issue for pastors and leaders. As one pastor lamented, “What I learned in seminary may have enabled me to be substantive in my preaching and teaching, but somehow I missed the class that taught me how to translate all that into small-town ministry.”⁷⁵ Leaders within congregations, particularly those who come in from the “outside,” must spend considerable time learning the stories, language, and culture of their new communities.

John Wesley and the Emerging Church

The impact of John Wesley’s renewal movement is still felt almost three centuries later in communities throughout the world. Today’s renewal movements also have much to say to the established Body of Christ. On the surface, both movements seem to have much in common, but there are inherent tensions as well. The five contours of the emerging church identified here provide a field for comparing and contrasting the two.

⁷⁴ Rainer, 125.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Schirle, “Big Ambitions, Small Church: When Our Whole Family Felt the Pinch. I Adjusted My Expectations,” *Leadership* 20 (Winter 1999): 105.

Vocational Clarity

Vocational clarity is a key component of Wesley's renewal and among the emerging churches which are thriving in our day. Today's churches see the task of discovering and maintaining clarity of vocation and identity as a local church matter. Wesley saw this task in a different light. He defined his societies' vocational clarity according to his vision to "spread scriptural holiness across the land." A review of the "Minutes" from different quarterly conferences reveals that, as previously stated, John Wesley not only asked all the questions of his preachers about their task, but *he gave the answers, too*. The vocation of the Methodist societies was strictly pursued, as it is by many of the thriving churches in our day, but Wesley was the sole provider of the understanding of that vocation.

Missional Outlook

The missional outlook may be one of the strongest points of agreement between Wesley and emerging churches of today. As seen in Wesley's methods, he preached wherever the people were and sent preachers to places to meet people in their context. He clearly saw the mission of the Methodists as reaching people the Church of England could not or would not; therefore, his view was constantly outward—beyond the accepted boundaries of the Church of England.

Though Wesley would never have used the terms "bounded-set" and "centered-set," his understandings of grace reflected a "centered-set" position in many regards. His teaching on prevenient grace—the understanding that God is working in people, even before they realize it—aligns well with the centered-set understanding, which maintains that we are either Christian or not-yet Christian.

Constantly Evolving

Wesley tinkered with his method through the years. For instance, after the emergence of the class meeting, the role of the smaller bands (a group of five to six people meeting for intense accountability) diminished significantly. Wesley's ordination of Cokesbury, Whatcoat, and Veasey with the express purpose of establishing a Methodist Church in America also was a severe departure from his earlier stance that he only led a movement, not a church. Not wanting the trappings of an institution to weigh the movement down, Wesley was flexible on pragmatic matters. However, even with his willingness to adapt as circumstances changed, it is doubtful he would have allowed the flexibility in methodology that many of today's emerging congregations employ.

Catalyzing Influence

One of the strengths of Wesley's movement was its intentional work to help people find a better life. His ministry reached orphans, educated children, and provided health care to people. He also helped lay people discover their gifts for preaching, teaching, and leading through his societies and classes. Interestingly, there is little conversation about spiritual gifts (a major topic of discussion in many of today's congregations) in Wesley's writing or preaching.

Incarnational Approach

One of Wesley's great contributions to 18th-century Christianity was his emphasis on going where the people were. He indigenized Christianity for the people of England and in some respects for those in the American colonies as well. Wesley was a well-trained theologian, an Anglican priest, and a product of "high church." But

his heart was for the people. He created a system of preaching and small-group meetings that engaged people within the confines of their locale.

Would Wesley approve of today's movements to renew the church? Maybe. Wesley's movement was grounded in his vision of ministry and mission. Today's decentralized movements that exist without clear leaders, expectations, or at times apparent theological grounding may have irritated his innate sense of control. However, Wesley was open to other ways of understanding how to "do" church. He understood that he did not have all the answers, nor did he need them. In a letter to an unnamed Roman Catholic layman, Wesley pointed out the basic agreements of the faith, called for "this endless jangling about opinions" to be put aside, and lastly encouraged mutual support by offering, "If we cannot as yet *think alike* in all things, at least we may *love alike*. Herein we cannot possibly do amiss."⁷⁶ Even if Wesley had disagreed with the form, he was always eager to affirm those who were professing and preaching the true faith.

Conclusion

Wesley is just one of the voices of the continuing renewal of the Body of Christ, albeit an important one. In many ways his vision of renewal lines up with today's renewal movements. Wesley would have recognized, as Frost and Hirsch do, that the church's "missional imperative compels it to move out from itself into that host community as salt and light."⁷⁷ Wesley and the early Methodists' work to reach

⁷⁶ John Wesley, "A Letter to a Roman Catholic," in Outler, 498.

⁷⁷ Frost and Hirsch, 19.

people in the “hiways [*sic*] and byways” was incarnational in every respect of the word.

This “missional imperative,” held by Wesley and today’s emerging congregations, is critical for existing churches in America. The local expressions of the Body of Christ have an opportunity to claim their locale as their place of ministry and to redefine themselves in terms of their host community. Wesley’s revival as well as the direction of the emerging church provides existing churches an understanding of how to find life once again in the contexts in which God has placed them.

CHAPTER 4

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Scripture and church history have offered us compelling elements necessary for organic renewal and transformation. The Jerusalem Council, Wesley's Methodist movement, and the emerging church reveal powerful moments when the Holy Spirit and humans worked together to realize a renewed sense of mission for the church. What does the secular world offer us, though, in terms of possibilities for transformation? In this chapter we will explore factors shown to be essential for businesses and organizations in the postmodern era seeking transformation and change.

The Setting: Constant Change

Technology has altered our lives in ways our ancestors could never imagine. An almost unfathomable amount of information is at our fingertips through iPods, TiVos, cellphones, BlackBerries, broadband, XM Radio, iPhones and other devices. Every enhancement is sold to us on the premise that it will make our lives work smoother, faster. Even people without the use of technology intuitively know the world is moving at a rate that makes it difficult for anyone to keep pace. This phenomenon leads John Kotter, renowned business consultant and writer, to give notice that "the rate of change is increasing."¹

The rate of change has dire implications for businesses and organizations in our culture. Consider these warnings from business leaders and consultants:

¹ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 30.

“Those [businesses] that do not change and keep on changing will eventually disappear.”²

“The rate of change in the business world is not going to slow down anytime soon.”³

“Forms of management and organization serviceable a few years back are now obsolete.”⁴

“To live with E-culture is to live with change.”⁵

The current culture in which organizations—secular and religious—function requires the capacity to change at a rapid pace and a different attitude toward change. Institutions are dying because of resistance to change coupled with slow decision making, a love for tradition, aging members or staff, and arcane bureaucracy. These groups often perceive change as impossible or overwhelming.⁶ Either intuitively or experientially, many organizations recognize that “changing inevitably creates conflict.”⁷ How can these groups move from an attitude averse to change to understanding change as a force enabling them to achieve their organizational mission?

² Charles Hardy, “Managing the Dream,” in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, ed. Sarita Chawla and John Renesch (Portland: Productivity Press, 1995), 46.

³ Kotter, 161.

⁴ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 2nd ed., The Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 5.

⁵ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Evolve! Succeeding in the Digital Culture of Tomorrow* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001), 255.

⁶ Alan Deutschman, “Change or Die,” *Fast Company*, May 2005, 53. Deutschman’s research indicates that only one organization out of nine attempting significant change is successful.

⁷ Bolman and Deal, 325.

Research on change within organizations reveals common factors that enable change to occur. The presence of these factors individually will not ensure great change within an organization or congregation, but collectively these interrelated forces set the stage for organizational transformation to occur. While some factors may seem out of reach for some declining congregations, particularly smaller congregations, we will see that even small congregations have more factors present than they realize. In Chapter 1, we asked what factors could release a congregation to find life beyond stress. Those identified here are accessible to any organization or congregation of any size and can allow them to reclaim life, even in the midst of a stressful or changed environment. They are systems thinking, a trusting environment, shared vision, transformational learning and growth, a defined reality, a collaborative ethos, evolutionary bias, and committed leadership.

Each factor will be individually considered with an eye to their cause-and-effect relationships. For instance, committed leaders build trust, which leads to collaboration, which provides an arena for transformational learning to take place, which can then lead to a shared vision. Further, we specifically look to the role each factor has in the organic renewal of a congregation.

The Factors

Systems Thinking

For a variety of reasons, most organizations tend to treat only the symptoms of much deeper problems that exist. In an effort to solve problems, programs and events are planned to bring about the sought-after renewal. Many business analysts, however, do not believe events, programs, or simply treating symptoms have the

power to bring about sustainable change to organizations. Renewal is most often brought about when organizations look to deeper issues and to the interrelatedness of multiple issues. Organizations must think in terms of systems, not symptoms.⁸

Systems thinking entails “organizing complexity into a coherent story that illuminates the causes of problems and how they can be remedied in enduring ways.”⁹ By looking to an array of factors—history, personnel, patterns of activity, and decision making—leaders can more readily determine which are inhibiting growth and which must be enhanced or removed. This provides an opportunity to make decisions and choices that can affect and sustain change rather than merely treat another symptom.

Systems thinking requires organizational leaders to see the collective whole rather than just individual departments and segmented branches. Common managerial response is to deal with individual segments of the organization, rather than the whole. For example, in a non-systems approach if sales are lagging, it’s presumed the sales department has an issue or a problem to be solved. Systems thinking, however, would broaden the scope, looking to distribution, retail agreements, vendor problems, or a whole host of interrelated aspects of the organization, prior to deciding the root of the sales drop-off. Bolman and Deal observe that “managers regularly face an unending series of puzzles or ‘messes.’ In order to act without creating more

⁸ Thomas G. Bandy, *Moving Off the Map: A Field Guide to Changing the Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 20; Hardy, 32. Bandy states, “Change must be systemic. It must alter the very nature of the species.” Hardy claims one of the three foundations for a learning organization is “a capacity to see and work with the flow of life as a system.”

⁹ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990), 128. *The Fifth Discipline* provides a thorough look at the impact of systems thinking (Senge’s “Fifth Discipline.”) on organizations.

problems, they must first establish what is happening.”¹⁰ Thinking in terms of the entire system requires managers and leaders to look beyond simple solutions found by fragmenting the organization into small pieces. When leaders see only fragments, the tendency is to create quick, easy fixes through programs. In her discussion of the impact of “E-culture,” Rosabeth Moss Kanter addresses this tendency in relation to technology: “A company is not transformed because it creates a Web site; that might be only a cosmetic change. Success requires a more complete makeover, namely, rethinking the model for how to organize the work of the whole organization.”¹¹

As one writer states, “The proliferation of complex organizations has made almost every human activity a collective one.”¹² Even before the Internet, networked data, and e-mail, organizations were much more than the sum of their parts. However, the collective nature of human activity has increased dramatically with the advent of electronic communication. The work of one group or one person within an organization invariably affects others. Any significant effort at renewal must address the whole. This may mean specific changes to pieces of the puzzle—changes arising from efforts to bring health and renewal to the entire organization.

While often seen as complicated, systems thinking empowers organizations and propels them toward sound solutions. Peter Senge believes systems thinking releases organizations from a victim mentality that blames outside sources for problems and issues. “Systems thinking shows that there is no outside; that you and

¹⁰ Bolman and Deal, 29.

¹¹ Kanter, 72.

¹² Bolman and Deal, 7.

the cause of your problems are part of a single system.”¹³ This mindset provides organizational leaders with the impetus to seek solutions or leverage points where actions and changes in structures can lead to significant, enduring improvements.¹⁴ Groups and organizations free from the victim mindset are free to explore internal solutions rather than react to perceived external causes.

Churches are not immune to the victim mindset. In fact, dying congregations often have a laundry list of blame for their decline: an ineffective preacher; a lack of children; no committed young adults; costly facility maintenance; a changing neighborhood; the “worship wars.” Rarely do churches pause long enough to seek established and recurring patterns inhibiting growth. By refusing to engage the problems at a deeper level, churches focus only on superficial issues and never take full ownership of the real issues or the solutions. Without a systems perspective, they will never discover that the reason they do not have young families is a building issue—an inadequate nursery; they will never see that attitudes about worship are preventing an outreach to the local Hispanic community; they will never associate the church’s distant committee system with the inability to establish a mission team. Systems thinking reveals the complex issues and leverage points for local churches.

Trusting Environment

Trust is essential in the process of organizational renewal and change. Trust is described as an aspect of collaboration,¹⁵ a key ingredient to teamwork,¹⁶ a crucial

¹³ Senge, 67.

¹⁴ Ibid., 114.

¹⁵ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 244.

characteristic of leadership,¹⁷ a facet of commitment,¹⁸ a value for stakeholders,¹⁹ or a supporting quality.²⁰ Lovett Weems pushes the necessity of trust further than these definitions. Trust, in his view, is at the forefront of any attempt at change, transformation, or renewal, not just a characteristic, a facet, or a supporting quality. He believes “the ability to create trust is the foundational competence for effective change.”²¹ He further asserts, “When trust is limited, it is difficult for progress to take place. Change requires a minimal level of trust.”²² Prior trust is a critical factor in any attempt to effect significant change in an organization. Trust must exist between leadership and workers; between the corporation and general public. Change challenges trust levels within an organization. When changes are attempted, values are questioned and people encounter judgment over how they have previously worked. If the organization does not have a minimal level of trust prior to embarking on a change effort, people’s ability to work together toward a common goal or vision will be significantly reduced. Without a basis of trust, groups will splinter under assumptions, miscommunication, or the fear of potential gains.

¹⁶ Kotter, 52-53.

¹⁷ Kouzes and Posner, 27, 32.

¹⁸ Kanter, 156.

¹⁹ Jayme Rolls, “The Transformational Leader: The Wellspring of the Learning Organization,” in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow’s Workplace*, ed. Sarita Chawla and John Renesch (Portland: Productivity Press, 1995), 107.

²⁰ Hardy, 46.

²¹ Lovett H. Weems, *Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 22.

²² *Ibid.*, 27.

Trust is built on specific foundations, the first being, according to Weems, relationships.²³ These relationships are not built through e-mail or segmented work environments. Rather, Kanter proposes that “Face-to-face meetings with no formal agenda can help build relationships that foster trust.”²⁴ Organizational leaders must be intentional about building in considerable time and opportunities for the various constituencies to establish bonds that can withstand the stress of change and renewal. Patrick Lencioni, in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, identifies lack of trust as the first dysfunction and states that building trust “requires shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members.”²⁵

Further, the organization must institute processes that provide for openness in communication and flow of information. The “elimination of secrecy” is an important determinant for the establishment of trust.²⁶ Constituents of an organization must feel they are part of something that has nothing to hide from anyone—particularly them. Leaders and managers at all levels must focus on communication skills and creative processes to disseminate important information throughout the company, “and in place of one-way, formal pronouncements, introduce two-way, more informal dialogues.”²⁷

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Kanter, 156.

²⁵ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 197.

²⁶ David K. Hurst, *Crisis & Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change*, The Management of Innovation and Change Series (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1995), 69.

²⁷ David M. Schneider and Charles Goldwasser, “Be a Model Leader of Change,” *Management Review* 87, no. 3: 45.

The flow of information is bolstered by open dialogue, defined by Senge as “the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine ‘thinking together.’”²⁸ The suspension of assumptions requires participants to believe the viewpoints of others are as valid as their own, even if the ideas are different. A trust built upon relationships and an open system allows for dialogue that moves the organization forward, even through strained conversations.

While Weems contends there must be a “minimal level” of trust, that trust must have enough depth to handle impending dissension, competing points of view, and conflict. The process of change can be long and arduous, what one writer refers to as “the purgatory of transition.”²⁹ Trust during “purgatory” is the bond that binds people with competing views together and allows for effective dialogue. Breen and Dahle contend that “Trust is the glue that invariably holds a change effort together.”³⁰ Members, workers, or constituents must feel that regardless of a difference of opinion, they can trust others to ultimately have the best interest of the organization at heart. In this situation, conflict takes on a different character and “is seen as creative and something to be encouraged.”³¹ People can use the conflicting ideas and dissension to build something better than what they individually brought to the table.

Finally, trust eliminates fear, enabling people to take risks. When there is trust that new ideas and conversations will be encouraged and not met with

²⁸ Senge, 9.

²⁹ Schneider and Goldwasser: 42.

³⁰ Bill Breen and Cheryl Dahle, “Field Guide for Change,” *Fast Company*, December 1999, 384.

³¹ Kanter, 231.

disapproval, workers and members can generate creative solutions to innate problems.³² Workers are more inclined to bring their best ideas to the table when they trust those ideas will be given a fair hearing. Strong leadership is critical to the creation of this atmosphere: “In making it safe for people to experiment you must also make sure it’s safe for them to challenge authority.”³³ In a time of seismic change in the world around us, the ability to take risks is often what separates those companies that will survive from those that will not.³⁴

For congregations, trust is often assumed, simply because they are a faith-based organization. Though faith is a form of trust, that trust is not always extended to the people involved in the institution of the church! Mistrust lurks between age groups within the congregation; between lay leadership and staff; between the congregation and the denominational hierarchy. Small steps nurturing trust within the congregation are necessary prior to the institution of any significant change.

Shared Vision

To understand the role of an organizational vision, let’s begin with what a “shared vision” is not. A shared vision is not

- an organizational mandate from leaders or managers. Kouzes and Posner remind us that “visions seen only by leaders are insufficient to create an organized movement or a significant change in a company.”³⁵

³² Alan Deutschman, “The Fabric of Creativity,” *Fast Company*, December 2004. This article offers a view of the Gore-Tex corporation and its culture of trust. While many corporations or organizations cannot hope to achieve this level of trust, it provides a unique study in what is possible when workers are trusted with the life of the corporation.

³³ Kouzes and Posner, 227.

³⁴ Ibid., 205. Kouzes and Posner state, “We must be willing to take risks. Particularly in times when innovation is required, we must do the things we think we cannot.”

³⁵ Ibid., 15.

- a replacement for strategic planning. Strategic planning is a management process that leads to specifically defined tasks and responsibilities. While important, Kouzes and Posner hold that “strategic planning simply doesn’t capture the imagination.”³⁶
- what an organization wished it had in the *present*.
- a means to control employees or manipulate the future.
- “a ‘solution to a problem.’”³⁷

Visions are “about hopes, dreams, and aspirations. They’re about our strong desire to achieve something great. They’re ambitious. They’re experiences of optimism.”³⁸ A vision gains its power from the future. To be sustaining it must fit the organization’s history and current reality, as well as its potential future.

Powerful visions that guide the future of a particular organization are at their best when they do not vision against another organization. For instance, “Congregation A” may define its vision as “doing youth ministry better than the Methodists.” But the target for grading success in this situation is external. What happens if the youth ministry at the local United Methodist Church collapses? What happens if the resources for that youth ministry are well beyond what Congregation A can ever afford? A vision must challenge the internal workings of an organization to align their available resources—human and financial—to meet a need as it emerges. A better vision for Congregation A may be something along the lines of “offering a growing, transforming, Christ-centered youth ministry for and with the youth of our area.” A vision must push the internal reality of an organization into the future.

³⁶ Ibid., 208.

³⁷ Senge, 214.

³⁸ Kouzes and Posner, 125.

Vision also serves to align the resources, energy, and personnel of an organization. When the vision emerges, the organization must allow it to guide all decisions. Tom Bandy warns,

Change cannot be diluted by irrelevant goals like the survival of a community, the preservation of a heritage, the maintenance of historic or sentimental property, the perpetuation of an institutional polity, the observance of specific ceremonies and rites, or the guaranteed salaries of authoritative officers. The vision has the power to supersede any obstacle.³⁹

If congregational heritage, the use of historic property, institutional polity, or the observance of specific ceremonies and rites enable the congregation to move toward the vision, then they should be maintained; if not, then the congregation, or any organization with a long history, must face the difficult decision of whether or not to allow the vision to move them forward or remain bound to the past. The vision should provide the litmus test for new ventures, the continuation of previous programs, and the acquisition of new personnel or resources. Rather than asking “Can we afford this?” or “Who will be responsible for this?” the guiding question in our decision making should be, “Does an action align with the current vision of the organization?”

When there is no shared vision or when businesses or groups do not fully align with a vision, conflict emerges. Peter Senge asserts,

To empower people in an unaligned organization can be counterproductive. If people do not share a common vision, and do not share common “mental models” about the business reality in which they operate, empowering people will only increase organizational stress and the burden of management to maintain coherence and direction.⁴⁰

³⁹ Bandy, *Moving Off the Map*, 21.

⁴⁰ Senge, 146.

Without adherence to a shared vision, each employee, constituent, or manager is free to determine his own “best vision of the future” and work in that direction. At best, results are mixed. In contrast, when everyone from the top of the organization to the bottom aligns with a shared vision, then people can better understand how their efforts fit with the work and accomplishments of others, rather than working extremely hard only to find they are at cross-purposes with one another.

Perhaps the least understood aspect of a vision is that in order to be effective it must be truly shared. Everyone with a stake in the organization must not only own the vision, they must take an active part of arriving at the shared vision. Senge, in reflecting on discerning a shared vision, states, “The practice of shared visions involves the skills of unearthing shared ‘pictures of the future’ that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance.”⁴¹ The process of “unearthing” occurs as people are in genuine dialogue about the future, bringing to the table their own hopes and dreams; their own personal vision of what the organization can accomplish.⁴² Their discussions deal with their current reality as well as valid possibilities. This process is unstructured and non-linear. It is organic and flowing, revealing more discernment than programmed progress toward a vision.

When the vision emerges from a shared process of discernment, it provides “a common identity” for employees, customers, leaders, management, and investors to rally around.⁴³ Questions about purpose and possibilities are part of the vision of

⁴¹ Ibid., 9.

⁴² Ibid., 211. Senge contends, “Shared visions emerge from personal visions. This is how they derive their energy and how they foster commitment.”

⁴³ Ibid., 208.

where the group wants to move. The shared vision “motivates people to take action in the right direction, even if the initial steps are personally painful.”⁴⁴ People are willing to sustain short-term losses or endure significant reorganization if they believe the end result will point them to the preferred, shared vision of the future. The sense of commonality built by a powerfully shared vision “permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities.”⁴⁵

Shared visions also reorient the organization away from the realm of rules and policies. This is particularly important in our fluid culture. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter points out,

In a world of change, it is impossible to rewrite the rules fast enough to take account of every new situation that employees are going to face. So, the new systems which organizations are putting into effect in a world of change are controlled through shared values, through shared understanding of the focus of the organization.⁴⁶

When constituents of a system are committed to the vision, their activities will align with it in a way that enables and fosters trust throughout the system. This, in turn, allows for fewer governing rules and policies creating an organization less bound by procedures and bureaucracies than by a common focus. The energy normally expended to maintain complex procedures can now be directed toward meeting the needs of the organization’s shared vision.

Two primary ways of sustaining the shared vision throughout any process of renewal are through communication and small victories. Communicating the vision

⁴⁴ Kotter, 68.

⁴⁵ Senge, 206.

⁴⁶ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “Mastering Change,” in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow’s Workplace*, ed. Sarita Chawla and John Renesch (Portland: Productivity Press, 1995), 78-79.

simply, repetitively, and through multiple channels is critical, not only in the early stages of offering the shared vision, but throughout the process of transformation.⁴⁷ Celebrating small victories along the way allows constituents, employees, or members to see the vision as achievable. John Kotter warns, “Running a transformation effort without serious attention to short-term wins is extremely risky.”⁴⁸

Working toward a shared vision is critically important to declining congregations. Without a common sense of purpose and hope, members will lack motivation and passion for ministry and continue following patterns that feed into the current malaise. A shared vision provides needed focus and a spiritual center for the work and ministry. However a congregation chooses to live out a specific shared vision in its context for ministry, it must ultimately confront whether or not the vision “helps people experience the transforming power of God and walk daily with Jesus.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, authentic visions for ministry come from God. But, if a church’s vision is not enabling people to encounter the transforming power of God, then it must revisit the vision and its adherence to it.

Transformational Learning and Growth

How can people see a different future if they have never seen anything other than their present? How can an organization move creatively if there is no experience or history of creativity? For an organization to transform effectively, it must have

⁴⁷ Kotter, 85-100. Kotter offers several “key elements” for effective communication of the vision.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁹ Bandy, *Moving Off the Map*, 21.

insights beyond just its own experience. According to Bolman and Deal, “Managers are imprisoned only to the extent that their palette of ideas is impoverished.”⁵⁰ To broaden the “palette of ideas,” transformational learning and growth must be encouraged and resourced by the organization and intentionally sought out by members, employees, or constituents of the organization—anyone who contributes to the ongoing visioning and transformation. This type of investment is critical because “an increasingly turbulent, rapidly changing environment requires contemporary organizations to learn better and faster just to survive.”⁵¹

Transformational learning has interior and exterior aspects. As one looks to the interior workings of an organization going through a renewal, there are new skills to be learned and mastered. For instance, the buzzword in the corporate world for more than a decade has been “team” yet often committees are simply renamed “teams” and continue to work as they have before. Without training and continued development to understand the important differences between a committee and team, the move to teams will appear to have failed because it did not produce anything significantly different.⁵² Similarly, when a shared vision is driving changes to core components of an organization, leadership must offer training that not only addresses skills but also mindset and outlook. As Bolman and Deal warn, “Countless reform initiatives falter and fail because managers neglect to spend time and money on developing necessary knowledge and skills.”⁵³ Any time an organization embraces a

⁵⁰ Bolman and Deal, 6.

⁵¹ Ibid., 24.

⁵² Ibid., 132.

⁵³ Ibid., 321.

new vision that changes the system, everyone needs to be prepared for the new way of working and collaborating.

The external focus of transformational growth and learning presents itself as employees or stakeholders look beyond their own boundaries to see what can be learned from other sources within their discipline or beyond. Kouzes and Posner encourage organizations to “send everyone shopping for ideas.”⁵⁴ Another writer claims, “If the organization is to be renewed, managers have to get outside the context.”⁵⁵ While organizations may not have the financial resources to provide employees with continuing education, they can encourage a culture of innovation by offering rewards (extra time off, bonuses, promotions, etc.) to employees who improve the company through new ideas and improved techniques. Since new ideas can and will come from different places, the organization must give responsibility for generating new ideas to all stakeholders. Peter Senge, who has written extensively on “learning organizations,” states, “Organizations only learn through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs.”⁵⁶ The creative force of employees, congregations, investors, and board members must be harnessed to drive the transformation of the business or corporation. Giving people “the knowledge, skills and tools they need to contribute to the generation of new ideas” must be a priority for organizations seeking renewal.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Kouzes and Posner, 202.

⁵⁵ Hurst, 152.

⁵⁶ Senge, 139.

⁵⁷ Kouzes and Posner, 201.

If an organization is going to embrace and encourage the creativity of its employees or members, then it must also create a system in which failure is an accepted option. The speed of today's culture does not allow for long drawn-out development periods. With less time spent on development, there will be more mistakes and failures in the creative process. Kanter encourages this mentality: "A culture for change does not mean doing everything perfectly; it means doing everything quickly and learning from it, and then doing it differently."⁵⁸ If an organization can learn from its mistakes and failures, then the "failure" can be viewed as an important part of the organizational story as it continues to move creatively forward.

Finally, a word of warning: organizations seeking to create a culture of learning, creativity, transformation, and growth must ensure employees and members are learning applicable skills and engaging useful ideas. Robert Dilworth attests, "Many organizations today are learning disabled or cause workforce members to learn business practices ill-suited to the times. Antiquated formal training practices are a prime contributor. The key is to produce organizations that learn naturally and effectively."⁵⁹ Organizations themselves may need to redefine what it means to learn and grow. If their models are steeped in old, ineffective systems, then training based on those models is only reproducing the same system.

For declining congregations, transformational learning is one of the easiest places to begin the change process. Encouraging people to search for ideas beyond

⁵⁸ Kanter, *Evolve!* 232.

⁵⁹ Robert Dilworth, "The DNA of the Learning Organization," in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, ed. Sarita Chawla and John Renesch (Portland: Productivity Press, 1995), 254.

their immediate environs can bring new life to a congregation. One writer believes, “Lay leadership development is the key to congregational ownership.”⁶⁰ When a congregation begins to own the transformative process through transformational learning, good things can happen.

Defining Reality

Understanding an organization’s system or crafting a shared vision requires an accurate understanding of both internal and external reality. Peter Senge believes “an accurate, insightful view of the current reality is as important as a clear vision.”⁶¹ Without a deep understanding of organizational identity and context, framing a clear vision is impossible. Groups need an accurate perspective of what has been and what is in order to make careful decisions about the future.⁶² For churches, “The beginning of all visioning for the future is a thorough understanding of both the importance and context of the congregation’s unique story.”⁶³

Internally, an organization must grapple with issues of identity—who they’ve been and who they’ve become. The process of defining internal reality is unique to different organizations. For businesses, an in-depth review of sales over decades may be necessary; for some corporations, a timeline of new products and innovations, as well as failures might be a basic step; for nonprofits, a review of their founding narrative and significant community contributions may be needed. Internal reality is

⁶⁰ Bandy, *Moving Off the Map*, 25.

⁶¹ Senge, 155.

⁶² Weems, 47.

⁶³ Ibid., 63. Weems provides thorough background on the importance of defining reality, particularly for congregations.

often defined by asking questions concerning “who we are and how we do things around here.”⁶⁴

Organizations may struggle to understand their mental models—“the images, assumptions, and stories” that guide decision-making and define what is possible and impossible.⁶⁵ Mental models serve as filters, or even gatekeepers, allowing certain ideas in and preventing others from being heard. Senge notes, “New insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting.”⁶⁶ When we recognize and name our mental models, there still may be new ideas we do not like, but we tend to be more open to them and less likely to rule them out immediately.

An organization’s external reality is the context in which it functions and works. The external reality can include population and census information, market forces at work, cultural issues, economic data or any information germane to a specific organization. Each organization must look for the particular information and data that enables it to see its external reality. Identifying both internal and external realities will give people “a common and reasonably accurate understanding out of which decisions and actions can emerge.”⁶⁷

The process of defining reality should involve many people within an organization. For best results, outside sources that can assist the group or business in

⁶⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁵ Senge, 174.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Weems, 47.

understanding external perceptions and realities should also be utilized. Weems believes that “many people need to be involved in the process of defining reality. Different eyes will spot different things.”⁶⁸ A wide array of information gatherers ensures a more accurately defined reality—information that allows the group to move forward with an eye to the work to be done and the resources needed to accomplish the tasks.

Besides painting an accurate picture of an organization’s present situation, defining reality helps eliminate organizational denial. Without an accurate picture of the present, organizations—businesses or congregations—can easily deny any perceived threat and deflect new initiatives that do not fit their outdated understanding of reality.

Crises may occur as an organization realizes its accurate reality—a disconnect from their market; a significant loss of reserves over a period of time; a severe drop in young adults attending services. A crisis can be debilitating if it results in apathy or panic. However, a sense of crisis can also lead to an urgency that makes change and transformation more appealing. A crisis can “break the harmful constraints that bind the organization.”⁶⁹ John Kotter, who offers a more linear view of change, contends that “reducing complacency and creating a sense of urgency is always the first step.”⁷⁰

For congregations, defining their reality means telling their story honestly and truthfully. When have the successes been most frequent? What enabled those

⁶⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁹ Hurst, 138.

⁷⁰ Kotter, 49.

successes? What brought on the “dark days” for this church? How many children do we really have? What is the age of our congregation? Are our buildings well maintained? For some, exploring these issues brings pain and even sadness.

But even beyond the congregation’s narrative, members must accurately see what is beyond their doors. What are the new opportunities? What defines life for the average member of their area? What are the interests of people around the church? What are the emerging needs? Connecting the congregation’s story with its external reality opens the eyes of members to new and creative opportunities. As Weems reminds us, “The proclamation of God’s reign is meaningless unless framed within the realities present at a particular time.”⁷¹ By defining current reality, a congregation has the opportunity to proclaim God’s reign anew.

A Collaborative Ethos

Rosabeth Moss Kanter offers this interesting insight: “Pacesetters and laggards describe no differences in how hard they work, but they are very different in how collaboratively they work.”⁷² Collaboration is the cornerstone for effective work in the emerging world; it provides organizations with the synergy necessary to bring effective transformation to the fore.⁷³ Organizations looking to the future are finding ways to enable workers to collaborate on projects through flattening their hierarchies, restructuring work environments, and using computer networks.

⁷¹ Weems, 44. Lovett Weems, Tom Bandy and Bill Easum provide great resources for helping congregations assess their current reality—both internally and externally.

⁷² Kanter, *Evolve!* 169.

⁷³ For a detailed discussion of collaboration, the forces that brought it to life, and the ways it is transforming our world, see Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

This factor, most acutely felt by those previously positioned at the top of the hierarchy, represents a significant change for organizations. While it is true that “our conventional notions of leadership are embedded in myths of heroes,” organizations no longer profit from leaders set up as heroes.⁷⁴ Even the leadership of the organization must be a collaborative effort, allowing others to serve as leaders when they are needed. The specific type of leadership required, another necessary factor for transformation, will be discussed more fully at a later point.

Collaboration works because employees, members, and stakeholders invest more when they feel their voices are heeded. They offer more ideas, energy, and are more likely to promote rather than resist change. Further, collaboration brings more ideas and creativity to the table. According to John Kotter, “No one individual is ever able to develop the right vision, communicate it to large numbers of people, eliminate obstacles, generate short-term wins, lead and manage dozens of change projects, and anchor new approaches deep in the organization’s culture.”⁷⁵ A collaborative ethos gives power and responsibility to large numbers of people to accomplish the work of transformation. Kouzes and Posner point to this truth:

The new capital of the Internet Age isn’t simply intellectual capital, it’s social capital—the collective value of the people we know and what we’ll do for each other. When social connections are strong and numerous there’s more trust, reciprocity, information flow, collective action, happiness—and by the way, greater wealth.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Fred Kofman and Peter M. Senge, “Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations,” in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow’s Workplace*, ed. Sarita Chawla and John Renesch (Portland: Productivity Press, 1995), 34.

⁷⁵ Kotter, 51.

⁷⁶ Kouzes and Posner, 260.

Networks of people accomplish great things. Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, repeatedly points to the power of “weak ties” and people who serve as “connectors, mavens, and salesmen.” Working with a wide-ranging group of collaborators who bring different skills to bear on any given project or effort is critical to the formation of a network with real power to accomplish tasks. Gladwell stresses that “acquaintances represent a source of social power, and the more acquaintances you have the more powerful you are.”⁷⁷ Utilizing the power of networks becomes a primary task of organizations seeking renewal. According to Rolls, “The assumptions in a learning organization are that everyone can be a source of useful ideas, learning flows up as well as down in the organization, new ideas are valuable, and a mistake is simply an opportunity to learn.”⁷⁸ Networks are a powerful asset in any significant change effort. People within an organization, and others connected to it, have the resources to move the business, corporation, or nonprofit toward a shared vision if they are allowed to work free from inhibitors that limit their networked power.

Organizations must remove inhibitors that prevent true collaboration and networking from occurring. Inhibitors can be a lack of trust, outdated hierarchical structures, or even the arrangement of workspace. By removing these barriers, companies can encourage community building and network expansion. Kanter believes this is necessary in order to “reconstruct the organization as a community.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 54.

⁷⁸ Rolls, 103.

⁷⁹ Kanter, *Evolve!* 10.

Though framed in different language, the idea of collaborative ethos and networks should be familiar to congregations. The primary image the Apostle Paul offered for the church was the Body of Christ.⁸⁰ His image of the Body was of people willingly offering their specific spiritual gifts, talents, and skills to the work of the whole. When this collaboration happens, the work of Jesus Christ happens. In fact, according to Paul, the point of the collaboration of the parts of the Body of Christ is to “equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”⁸¹ As one pastor says, “To be committed to Christ is to be connected and functioning with his people.”⁸² The challenge in many congregations is to encourage people to break from systems of fragmented committees or programs so they can join in the collaborative work of the whole Body of Christ.

Evolutionary Bias

For an organization to exhibit an evolutionary bias means it is always willing to focus on what it will become and what it must add or subtract in order to make possibility into reality. In writing about learning organizations, Rolls claims, “The cornerstone of the successful learning organization is its ability to repeatedly become . . . to move from ‘change fragile’ to ‘change agile.’”⁸³ For corporations burdened with debt, history, buildings, and established chains of command, becoming “change agile” is a tall order. However, becoming agile and adaptive is necessary in our

⁸⁰ See 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4.

⁸¹ Ephesians 4:12.

⁸² Michael Slaughter and Herb Miller, *Spiritual Entrepreneurs: 6 Principles for Risking Renewal*, Innovators in Ministry (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 79.

⁸³ Rolls, 103.

current business environment “because it is impossible to know which model, which standard, which concept will prevail.”⁸⁴ Flexibility, a willingness to evolve, and a penchant for adaptation of structure and personnel are necessary in today’s environment.

Most companies want plans that are solid and stable, as evidenced by the immense resources invested in strategic planning. However, in reality, “Plans are often just best guesses. Strategy emerges and is revealed through action because when outcomes cannot be known in advance, the action itself creates the goal.”⁸⁵ Without the ability to know the outcomes in advance, businesses and nonprofits must focus on each move, allowing plans to change and morph over time. To solidify plans is to miss an opportunity in the fluid world. Flexibility, then, becomes a key component to an enduring organization.

The flexibility of an organization extends to its structure, personnel, and outlook. In previous generations, every institution’s organizational chart looked very similar. A few managers at the top of the chart controlled the masses at the bottom. Responding to a world in a constant state of change requires a different attitude toward structure. Organizations with an evolutionary bias realize “there is no one best way to organize. The right structure depends on an organization’s goals, strategies, technologies, and environment.”⁸⁶ The resources available and the shared vision of a group provide the working tools for creating a viable structure. Structures, though, even when perfectly fitted for a given moment, must remain fluid. Kanter reminds us,

⁸⁴ Kanter, *Evolve!* 9.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁶ Bolman and Deal, 57.

“A given resolution of structural tension may be right for a particular time and circumstance, but changes in the organization and its environment will eventually require some form of structural adaptation.”⁸⁷

Flexibility in how personnel are used within an organization calls for great adaptability from the perspective of the organization and the employee or member. “[Fast-moving organizations] are much more likely to have broader rather than narrower definitions of jobs, to treat every employee as a professional who knows and understands some disciplines and, therefore, to give them professional tools which can be used to solve problems and get results.”⁸⁸ Trusting employees and members to work as invested professionals allows organizations to more fully utilize their gifts and talents, even beyond job descriptions. Given this opportunity, workers may discover that their gifts and passions lead them to new tasks within the company, or they may offer innovations well outside their defined job. Living with an evolutionary bias allows people to define jobs, rather than jobs defining people, all so that the work of an organization may be more fully accomplished.

Once an organization achieves an evolutionary bias in terms of their outlook, structure, and personnel, the challenge is to maintain that bias. According to Kanter, to accomplish this “requires a culture with momentum to seek constant innovation and productive change.”⁸⁹ Any type of significant change is “not a one-shot affair but an ongoing process—a continual struggle.”⁹⁰ Therefore, the evolutionary bias must

⁸⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁸ Kanter, “Mastering Change,” 79.

⁸⁹ Kanter, *Evolve!* 253.

⁹⁰ Hurst, 71.

become ingrained in the culture of an organization—an unspoken ideal that encourages and rewards flexibility and innovation.

Churches with long histories and fixed structures are not known for their ability to be flexible or adaptive. However, an evolutionary bias can emerge if congregations are willing to take small steps, such as only assigning people to committees that are functioning, allowing the others to go officially dormant. Small changes that give the congregation some flexibility create a situation that allows it to be more adaptive in the future.

Committed Leadership

The final factor providing the climate for change is leadership. Effective leadership is mandatory in any significant transformation. Even in an organization with efficient networks, mass collaboration, and deep levels of trust, leadership is essential. Kouzes and Posner affirm this, stating, “As paradoxical as it might seem, leadership is more essential—not less—when collaboration is required.”⁹¹ The critical issue is the shape that leadership takes.

In this new era of networks, collaboration, and flexibility, the leader is decidedly not a hero. Organizations often seek a charismatic, powerful leader to guide them, but “modern organizations are far too complex to be transformed by a single giant.”⁹² While the leader of any organization is highly visible and is accountable for its success or failure, the leader as hero may not be the most effective working model in today’s collaborative climate.

⁹¹ Kouzes and Posner, 243.

⁹² Kotter, 30.

Leadership in the past was seen as “command-and-control,” with leaders at the helm dictating and delegating work to subordinates. Kanter, reflecting on the current setting for leadership, states, “You certainly do not win this game the old-fashioned way with top-down chains of command, with all decisions having to flow to the center, to the headquarters, before anybody in the field can act.”⁹³ When everything must “flow to the center” the creativity and innovation of others is reduced, and the amount of time necessary to accomplish a task is greatly increased. In effective, fast-paced organizations, power is no longer centrally located but spread throughout the organization. This creates tension for leaders steeped in traditional models: “The learning organization is not a comfortable place for its leaders. It is an upside-down sort of place, with much of the power residing at the organization’s edge.”⁹⁴

New images are needed. More effective images for leadership are that of environmentalist, coach, and servant. The environmentalist is aware that a primary leadership task is to create a climate in which people in collaboration can grow to achieve the goals of the business. Leadership is “the creation of conditions under which self-organization or learning can occur.”⁹⁵ Rather than simply delegate and dictate, the environmentalist is keenly aware of the systems impacting work; the interpersonal issues affecting output; the flow of work through the building. The work of the environmentalist also includes reducing barriers to effective work and communication. Leaders in this era “create an environment that facilitates the open

⁹³ Kanter, “Mastering Change,” 75.

⁹⁴ Hardy, 48.

⁹⁵ Hurst, 148.

flow of ideas and information, which in turn will generate shared understanding, credibility, respect, and trust.”⁹⁶

Leaders also serve as coaches, helping workers develop new skills, find more efficient and effective ways to work, and recognize their best place within the organization. Each worker brings a specific set of skills and gifts to the workplace that is less likely to go unused or underutilized when effective coaching takes place. Rolls views leadership as more than delegation, believing that great leaders “invite subordinates to interpret the ideal future in terms of their roles and to determine how to close the gaps between current and future states.”⁹⁷ Coaching begins with building relationships.⁹⁸ Through an investment in the lives of members and co-workers, the leader-coach creates a sense of ownership and responsibility to the organization. Leader-coaches, rather than directing workers, facilitate work through relationships. Through these relationships leaders develop deeper trust among all employees, as well as a common focus and vision for the organization.

Because of the collaborative nature of work in this era, leaders must reexamine notions of power. Previous generations viewed power as centralized within a particular group—management. However, the era of shared visions and systems thinking calls for a leader who is comfortable with shared power—people who are “egalitarian, collective, and non-exploitive.”⁹⁹ This type of leader is a servant. Kouzes

⁹⁶ Schneider and Goldwasser: 43.

⁹⁷ Rolls, 103.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Rolls claims that “The new leader is relationship-driven and creates a work intimacy that unleashes the human spirit.”

⁹⁹ Hurst, 147.

and Posner attest that “leaders accept and act on the paradox of power: we become most powerful when we give our power away.”¹⁰⁰ This works beyond mere “empowerment” and moves leaders into the role of working alongside others to determine visions, direction, and organization. Organizations need this type of vital leadership during any period of change and transformation.

Servant leaders do not impose their ideas of what an organization can be or should do on others. Rather, because they believe and trust in those around them, they offer opportunities for shared leadership and decision making. Through these actions a leader is responsible for “developing a shared sense of destiny.”¹⁰¹ When leaders are focused on the environment, coaching, and serving, there is little time to micromanage the affairs of staff, employees, or members. Leaders maintain a strong grip on the vision and systems of the organization. Their task is not “managing change directly. They are managing the organization’s ability to change rather than change itself.”¹⁰²

There are two primary considerations for congregations looking for leaders who are environmentalists, coaches, and servants. First, they must provide learning opportunities for their leaders—clergy and lay—in order to free them from past dependency on command-and-control structures and the myth of the hero-leader. If leadership is going to adopt new ways of working, then the congregation as a whole must support that and encourage the transition. But just as importantly, congregational leaders, including clergy, must be willing to rethink their use of

¹⁰⁰ Kouzes and Posner, 284.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰² Hurst, 136.

power. Churches talk openly about serving and servanthood, yet leaders within congregations have a difficult time leading in this manner. Kofman and Senge assert that leaders are “people who lead because they choose to serve, both to serve one another and to serve a higher purpose.”¹⁰³

Conclusion

Change is a difficult and, at times, painful discussion for most organizations. Any type of significant change means giving up what has been and admitting that the present and future could be better. There is no one way to effect change, but when the factors of systems thinking, a trusting environment, shared vision, transformational learning and growth, an acceptance of reality, a collaborative ethos, evolutionary bias, and committed leadership are present, they create a setting in which real change can happen. None of these factors, by themselves or collectively, will guarantee that dramatic transformation will happen, but they set the stage. Their power comes from their interrelatedness. Without committed leadership working as a servant, trust cannot be built; without trust, crafting a shared vision becomes an impossible task; without a shared vision, there is no reason to adapt or evolve. Change is a task involving many distinct factors that create the environment for a significantly hopeful future. Our next chapter calls us to consider another necessary approach to effecting change.

¹⁰³ Kofman and Senge, 35.

CHAPTER 5

WORKING ON OUR IMAGE

Our exploration of change and transformation from the perspective of business and organizational leaders offered important factors necessary for renewal to occur. However, for an organization to thrive in our current culture, it must also come to grips with the different signposts of postmodernity in order to understand why the work of the church has become so difficult. As discussed in Chapter 1, the modern metanarratives of privacy, progress, and unity collapsed with the emergence of postmodern culture.¹ The church, closely tied to these overarching themes, failed to recognize or recover from this collapse. Decades later, the church still speaks in the language of modernity, seeking social progress, claiming cultural power and voice, offering a linear view of spirituality, and seeking unified structures and beliefs with little response beyond indifference or ridicule from those immersed in postmodern culture.

Not surprisingly, most attempts to change continue to be rooted in the modern worldview envisioning the church as a machine with parts to be fixed and replaced. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, discussing how we understand the world, observe, “The mechanistic image of the world is a very deep image, planted at subterranean

¹ For an understanding of modernity and the emerging transition to the postmodern era, the following books offer a detailed overview of the salient issues: Bosch; William M. Easum, *Leadership on the Otherside: No Rules, Just Clues* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 47; Lukacs; Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*; Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999). Several “signposts” of postmodernity were discussed in Chapter 1.

depths in most of us. But it doesn't help us any longer."² Through the machine image, we have spoken the language of "leverage" and "repair," as if finding the right new part will make the cogs turn efficiently again. Modernity's "mechanical assumptions gave us specialization, compartmentalization, and a reliance on 'proof.'"³ Robert Dale, in reviewing the structure and mindset of established, mainline denominations, reports, "Their structures are machinelike, and programs have dominated their ministries. . . . Industrial congregations tried to be one-size-fits-all, full-service, multigenerational organizations."⁴ As discussed in Chapter 1, churches entrenched in modernity have found it difficult to break free from the predominant mechanistic images.

Though the familiarity of the modern world is gone, the mission of the church—to "make disciples of all nations"—continues in this new age.⁵ Robert Webber submits that the church is "to be regarded as a kind of continuation of the presence of Jesus in the world."⁶ This new day calls us to a different understanding of "church," one that embraces the new culture while living as a "continuation of the presence of Jesus in the world." Individuals are still searching for purpose, meaning, and the divine. As one author states, "People are searching for spirituality that goes

² Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996), 1.

³ Robert D. Dale, *Seeds for the Future: Growing Organic Leaders for Living Churches* (St. Louis: Lake Hickory Resources, 2005), 24.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matthew 28:19. Chapter 2 presents a synopsis of Jesus' closing commands to the disciples, sending them to "make disciples."

⁶ Webber, 70.

beyond the safe norms of a congregation.”⁷ In order for congregations to address this spiritual searching, they must utilize the “signposts” of postmodernity in their work. A different age requires a different metaphor for the life, working, and growth of the church.

Organic renewal taps into the power of image and metaphor in the postmodern understanding. David Bosch, noted author concerning the mission of church, states, “Metaphor, symbol, ritual, sign, and myth, long maligned by those interested only in ‘exact’ expressions of rationality, are today being rehabilitated; they create forms that ‘synthesize and evoke the integration of the mind and will.’”⁸ In order to live fully as the Body of Christ, the church must embrace new metaphors or images by which to understand its mission. Written descriptions of church, wordy mission “statements,” and even strategic plans are modern in that they do not appeal to the sensibilities of the postmodern world. Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer point clearly to the transition that has occurred: “What principles and points were to moderns, metaphors and images are to people in the emerging culture. Images are now the narrative, words the declarative. . . . Visual ideas rather than scripts set today’s story lines.”⁹ “Visual ideas” are now needed to guide the church’s work and mission of “making disciples.” Robert Dale encourages leaders to think in terms of images and metaphors because “the pictures we have in our heads are reflected in the words we use about leadership and the way we act as leaders.”¹⁰

⁷ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 91.

⁸ Bosch, 353.

⁹ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive*, 153.

¹⁰ Dale, 27.

Fresh metaphors and images free the creativity of members of the Body of Christ as they attempt to live out their mission in the world. This chapter will explore three possible metaphors for the life and work of the church in the postmodern world: *gardener, storyteller, and local artist*. The images will overlap and connect and, as all metaphors do, will break down if pushed too far. But each will offer points of beginning, creativity, and innovation for churches seeking to “make disciples of Jesus Christ.”

The Gardener

A gardener is one who is primarily concerned with the cultivation of life and the fruit it bears.¹¹ This image has connections to the parables of Jesus (Luke 20; Matthew 13, 21), and as metaphor for the mission and ministry of the church serves to remind Christians that their work is ultimately concerned with cultivating life, and not just any life—the life of Christ working in and through all people. Jesus states his mission clearly: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”¹²

Thorough preparation allows a gardener to provide the best possible environment for fruits and vegetables to grow to maturity, but the actual growth of a garden cannot be scheduled or programmed. After the initial work, multiple variables beyond the gardener’s control will impact the final harvest—heat, rain, drought, pests, etc. The gardener remains concerned about conditions but accepts that growth will occur at its own pace. In the same way, if the church is to be understood as a living organism, then its growth cannot be systematically programmed or planned.

¹¹ One dictionary benignly defined a gardener as “somebody who tends a garden or lawn.” While accurate, this definition misses the heart of what defines the work of a gardener: cultivating life.

¹² John 10:10b.

Robert Dale, in *Seeds for the Future*, reminds us that churches are “living, breathing, believing” and cannot be programmed like machines.¹³ Preparation remains vital to create conditions for growth, but the gardener will not be able to manufacture results. Instead, the work becomes about **nurturing new growth** and **pruning the old**.

Nurturing New Growth

In order to nurture new growth, the gardener must have a keen awareness of the area’s climate, soil type, annual rainfall, temperature ranges, etc. In the same manner, the church must have a firm grasp on the cultural conditions surrounding it. George Hunter, in his book *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, describes St. Patrick’s work to evangelize Ireland:

The fact that Patrick understood the people and their language, their issues, and their ways serves as the most strategically significant insight that was to drive the wider expansion of Celtic Christianity, and stands as perhaps our greatest single learning from this movement.¹⁴

Rediscovering cultural conditions—language, metaphors, issues, and ways—may be the first work for most churches as they address the disconnect between the “modern” and “the now.” As one emergent leader proclaims, it is time for us to “stop the busyness of church and take a look at what is happening in our towns and communities.”¹⁵ “Taking a look” requires Christians to once again familiarize themselves with the culture and the language of the world around them—the place in which it is called to grow disciples and cultivate life.

¹³ Dale, 23.

¹⁴ George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West—Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 19-20.

¹⁵ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 68.

Rather than divide the work of the church into distinct modern categories (program ministries, evangelism ministries, stewardship ministries, etc.), the image of gardener reminds us that all of our work has a common goal—the cultivation of life. While “twentieth-century evangelicalism failed to develop any patterns of ministry that integrated the various disciplines of Christian formation into a coherent whole,” postmodern ministry sees the life of the church more organically, with multiple living systems working together to grow and bear fruit.¹⁶ These living systems will include the work of discipleship, outreach, stewardship of resources and more.

The effort that goes into a garden is unified around the goal of allowing life to emerge. If “making disciples” is the ultimate goal we are “gardening” toward in the church, then any notions that separate the work and life of the Body of Christ into distinct programmatic “work areas” must be closely examined. While the need to grow faith in new Christians, children, youth, and adults, remains, churches grappling with the metaphor of gardening must decide how to best live this out in their context, without seeing their work as a loose-knit conglomeration of disconnected programs. This is a great challenge for modern churches that have faithfully segregated children, youth, adults, and senior adults into compartmentalized and competing ministries for generations.

Thinking as a gardener, though, we realize that gardeners choose among different options for laying out their plots, allowing the season and desired crop to dictate garden layouts, even rotating crops across the years as the soil dictates. Likewise, churches that commit to growing disciples must discern the season and the

¹⁶ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 33.

resources available to achieve that goal. Joseph Myers reminds us, “Organic order suggests there are *many* patterns we can use to connect to God and others.”¹⁷ The church must sense possible patterns for disciple-making: maybe grouping Christians of all ages together for mentoring and discipling; or meeting specific community needs through short-term women’s groups; or opting to end a children’s ministry for a season because volunteers are needed elsewhere. Gardening means laying out the plots intentionally, but with the final goal—making disciples—in mind. This perspective focuses us on the power of the gospel rather than the power of specific programs or work areas.

Dan Kimball, in his discussion of the emerging church, points the church beyond its present “emphasis on programming and presentation for the purpose of evangelism.” Instead, he sees that “in the emerging post-seeker-sensitive church, making disciples needs to be the lifeblood of the church from the beginning.”¹⁸ Worship, evangelism, Bible study, and fellowship/networking moments can be seen as pieces of a much larger whole. John O’Keefe, discussing the issue of the church defined as a conglomeration of programs, says, “The problem is the program does nothing—nothing—it changes nothing as I see it. I believe the gospel message changed the people, but we give credit to the program and the author of the program, but it is the message of Christ that changes lives and church cultures.”¹⁹ The

¹⁷ Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 41.

¹⁸ Kimball, 214-215.

¹⁹ John O’Keefe, “The Problem I Have with ‘Programs.’” <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=864> (accessed March 10, 2005).

gardening metaphor allows churches the freedom to focus on the ultimate goal of cultivating life.

Pruning the Old

Pruning, a labor-intensive process, is nonetheless an essential task for any successful gardener. The need for some pruning is obvious due to dead or diseased branches. However, Roy Biles reminds us that there is another reason to prune: "In the case of some roses and many bushes and vines, the blossoms are borne upon new wood only. In this instance we remove the worn out branches to stimulate the growth of the new ones."²⁰ In nature as well as in churches, pruning is a necessary exercise for new life and beauty to emerge. After centuries of modern overgrowth, pruning may be one of the most difficult acts for churches to execute. The necessity of seasonal pruning impacts the whole of the organization. One writer calls churches to "let out-of-date programs or committees die with dignity instead of propping them up."²¹ Another reminds us, "The way we organize church may be inherited, but it is not preordained."²² Collier asserts that "most churches try to do too many ministries, programs, emphases, and events to do all (or any) of them well."²³ Pruning allows churches to expend energy and resources on aspects of the organism that contribute to the emergence of new life.

²⁰ Roy Edwin Biles, *The Complete Book of Garden Magic* (Cincinnati, OH: J.G. Ferguson, 1940), 82.

²¹ William M. Easum, *Unfreezing Moves: Following Jesus into the Mission Field* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 50.

²² Ward, 8.

²³ Bryan D. Collier, *Becoming an Orchard* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2006), 81-82.

Pruning is distinctly different from “reorganization” or “fixing” a structure. Pruning is the organic understanding that sometimes even parts of an organism that evince life may be beyond their natural lifespan. Therefore, the most faithful and loving thing to do is to prune the vine or bush so that a fuller life can happen. Each church will have to faithfully and prayerfully consider what must be pruned in their particular setting. Locally, pruning may impact leadership/organizational structure; specific ministries that are no longer bearing fruit; or even fruitful ministries so resources and energy can be directed toward an emerging need. Michael Slaughter offers this guideline for pruning (or “unlearning” as he calls it): “The postmodern church focuses on two ancient markers: the mystery of the powerful Jesus, and the mission of love.”²⁴ If ministries are not effectively embodying these markers or if a church’s organization is not fully allowing these markers to be made known, then it is time to prune.

The metaphor of gardening is an invitation to consider the overall health of the church to ensure that it is thriving and will bring forth new life and fruit. Michael Horton, discussing the role of the protestant reformers, states, “We must find ways to avoid slavery to both human traditions and human innovations, preferring to anchor both our faith and practice in God’s word.”²⁵ The church prunes to return to what is needed and necessary in order to sustain life. As gardener, the church must “remove

²⁴ Slaughter and Bird, *Unlearning Church*, 60.

²⁵ Leonard I. Sweet, ed., *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2003), 128.

as many barriers to innovation as possible,”²⁶ yet hold fast to the heart of the call to “make disciples.”

Gardening is ultimately an art and, like art, as much an expression of the inner soul as outer reality. It is the convergence of fertile soil and a fertile mind working together to bring forth new life and fruit. As a metaphor it provides the church a distinct vision of life and lifecycle within the Body of Christ.

Storytellers

In North America much of the predominant theology revolves around a belief that Scripture is nothing more than a collection of nuggets, arbitrary proof-texts—smaller stories isolated from their larger context and reduced to a message customized around the meeting of individual needs, personal fulfillment, self interest, or the pursuit of happiness and inner peace. Unfortunately, in this light, the grand story of a loving and gratuitous God whose mission is to reclaim and restore the whole of creation becomes drastically reduced, largely obscured and buried in our smaller stories.²⁷

Mark Priddy’s assessment of the state of the church calls us to consider one of the crucial metaphors for ministry in the postmodern era: The church as storyteller. In Scripture—from the Creation and Fall in Genesis to the affirmations of God’s power in Revelation—we are offered the continuous “grand” story of God’s redemption of humanity. If this “grand story” has been obscured by the church’s adherence to modernity’s metanarratives of progress, unity, or reason, then finding new ways to share the fullness of the story with postmodern audiences is of utmost importance. Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmyer offer the storytelling church great hope:

“Postmoderns might not like metanarratives, but they love narrative.”²⁸ Stories

²⁶ Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, 56.

²⁷ Mark Priddy, “Church as Community: Story, Identity, Mission,” <http://www.dtour.com.au/articles/article.cfm?id=67> (accessed March 10, 2005).

²⁸ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive*, 205.

(narratives) connect with people and, rightly told, intersect the stories people live.

One noted theologian believes, “The crucial question is how we can make the story we believe to be true not only compelling for us, but for the whole world—a world caught between such unhappy alternative stories.”²⁹

The *National Organization of Biblical Storytellers* understands storytelling as a twofold event:

We have discovered biblical storytelling as a spiritual discipline that involves first committing a narrative text of scripture to deep memory (not memorizing but “internalizing” the story as images and feelings) and then engaging with the text in a lively “telling,” a sacred act that binds teller and listeners in community.³⁰

The National Organization of Biblical Storytellers views storytelling as an act that welcomes teller and hearer into community as a trained craft. During the modern era, the preacher, as the highly trained expert, was the primary storyteller. Today all Christians become storytellers—collectively and individually, trained and untrained, each utilizing individual giftedness.³¹ Through storytelling, we are able to “bind” the listener to not only the Christian community but to Christ—the head of the Body. Learning to live as storytellers means recovering the ministry of Jesus, whose parables and stories communicated the truths of the Kingdom. Further, becoming storytellers in the postmodern world returns us to our roots. Throughout the history of

²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 148.

³⁰ Network of Biblical Storytellers, “About Us: Biblical Storytelling 101,” <http://www.nobs.org/aboutus.html#bs101>, (accessed August 15, 2008).

³¹ Kimball, 171-172.

faithful people storytelling has been an essential means of witnessing to the power and grace of God.³²

Christians begin sharing the fullness of the grand story by rooting themselves in the story of salvation, God's great narrative of grace. Storytelling begins by "committing a narrative text of Scripture to deep memory." The story must be learned through worship, study, prayer, service, and community. Robert Webber believes the emerging Christian narrative "forms us as a community, gives shape to our ethic, and makes us eschatological people."³³ If this story shapes the Christian life, then it should be known fully and well.³⁴

The telling of the story is an art that happens collectively as the gathered Body of Christ, and also individually through the networks within which Christians live and work. As one author states, "The future belongs to the storytellers and the connectors."³⁵ The church in this age must be about effectively telling the story to a generation largely unfamiliar with or hostile to Christian narratives.

Worship may be the most obvious venue for churches to collectively tell the story of God's gracious work of redemption. Worship is the place people come to seek and experience God. "In postmodern settings, as in the early church, truth that is embodied by the community is rehearsed in worship and symbolized in the rites and

³² Hunter, 73.

³³ Robert Webber, "The Crisis of Evangelical Worship: Authentic Worship in a Changing World," in *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden*, ed. Thomas C. Oden, Kenneth Tanner, and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 148.

³⁴ Priddy. Priddy calls Christians "to recapture the profound story lines that Scripture contains—creation, fall, redemption, and re-creation."

³⁵ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive*, 205.

symbols of faith. This kind of worship calls for participation in the truth it proclaims and acts.”³⁶ As the church tells the redemptive story, worship offers a place to invite others to share personal life stories.

Communicating in the postmodern world calls the church to tell the story differently through worship, and to move away from dependence upon the stand-alone sermon as the primary means by which the story is communicated.³⁷ According to Brian McLaren, a primary challenge for the church “is to make our symbols understandable for new people so they can bond to the meaning of the symbols.”³⁸ The church must be willing to use the “visual, mystical, spiritual” to draw people into the story.³⁹ This may mean the use of art, music, drama, and aesthetics to communicate the message, rather than to simply prepare the gathered congregation for a sermon. At times the message may work with these elements; at other times these elements become the message. In Romans 10, Paul, quoting the prophet Isaiah, reminds the believers in Rome of the importance of people’s willingness to become messengers and storytellers:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”⁴⁰

³⁶ Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 63.

³⁷ Joel Scandrett, “Reclaiming Eucharistic Piety,” in *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden*, ed. Thomas C. Oden, Kenneth Tanner, and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 163.

³⁸ Kimball, 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁰ Romans 10:14-15.

The metaphor of church as storyteller affirms this calling by acknowledging that all are sent. All have gifts to offer so that the proclamation may be made clearly and effectively.

Storytelling involves the use of image and metaphor, allowing diverse people to engage the story. Sweet reminds us that in the postmodern world, “Images come as close as human beings will get to a universal language.”⁴¹ Again, this is a return to the ancient. Jesus used images of bushes, birds, and plants in his teaching and preaching. St. Patrick and the Celts found creative ways to use the prevailing culture to engage the masses with the gospel, often integrating local festivals, stories, and images into worship.⁴² Orthodox Churches continue to depend on iconography to tell the story of salvation. In today’s world, the use of image is only limited by the creativity of those participating in worship. Movies, lighting, paintings, art, dramas, displays, and the use of everyday items all can serve as ways to connect worshippers to the gospel.

The postmodern sensibility also calls the church as storyteller to engage an ethic of participation in its worship and work. Mark Pierson, formerly the pastor of Cityside Church in Auckland, New Zealand, believes that participation in worship and the life of the church is key to emerging congregations: “I reckon participation is what church life should be about. Participation rather than performance.”⁴³ Participation is a new standard in our culture.⁴⁴ People no longer expect or want to be

⁴¹ Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 86.

⁴² Hunter, 74.

⁴³ Mark Pierson, “Fractals (CD-ROM),” (Self-Published).

⁴⁴ Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 61. Sweet informs us, “Postmoderns don’t give their undivided attention to much of anything without its being interactive. It is no longer enough to possess

bystanders. They desire participation.⁴⁵ Again, this is a rediscovery of an ancient understanding of worship. The Greek roots of the word *liturgy* literally means “the work of the people.”⁴⁶ In the ancient Greek state, a liturgy was something done by a group of people for a larger entity, such as a state. Returning to a healthy understanding of participation offers people an opportunity to engage and experience Christ in a deeper, more personal way.

If worship experiences are to reflect the image of storyteller, they must allow people to participate in real ways and on their own terms. Paul, in his letters to the Romans, Corinthians, and Ephesians, uses the image of the body to encourage Christians to participate in the life of the church, according to their giftedness:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.⁴⁷

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.⁴⁸

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of

things or to enjoy positive events. People want to participate in the production of content, whatever it is.”

⁴⁵ Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams in *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York: Portfolio, 2006) effectively trace the growing emergence of participation and collaboration in our world as it impacts technology, businesses, and human interaction.

⁴⁶ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, Revised ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 31.

⁴⁷ Romans 12:4-8.

⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.⁴⁹

Paul sees the gifts of individual followers of Christ as necessary for the “common good.” Adding this insight to the metaphor of storytelling means that understanding giftedness becomes a critical step in telling the story. For some, sharing the story will happen naturally through teaching; for others, through their generosity; still others, in compassion. Regardless of giftedness, individual disciples are needed to complete the story and to offer it in ways different people can understand.

One possibility for encouraging participation to enhance the storytelling of worship is the recovery of the sacraments as participatory symbols in worship. One pastor notes that “nothing is more powerful or more naturally and beautifully designed for experiential participation than communion.”⁵⁰ Communion is not just a reminder of a 2,000-year-old sacrifice but a visual image of the love of God in Christ Jesus. This participatory symbol offers multiple levels of meaning--the offer of grace, the invitation to union with Christ, and the invitation to union with fellow disciples and seekers. The sacrament of communion can offer a high sense of mystery or transcendence, which is highly valued by the emerging church and the postmodern culture.⁵¹ Offering the sacrament in the emerging church is a crucial way, when offered with timely explanation, for sharing the story.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ephesians 4:11-13.

⁵⁰ Kimball, 162.

⁵¹ Slaughter and Bird, *Unlearning Church*, 45.

⁵² Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 115.

Telling the story through worship requires that we offer an experience, not a learning lab. As Dan Kimball asks, “Since emerging generations really want to experience the spiritual, shouldn’t our worship gatherings provide that for which they crave?”⁵³ In a culture of access and experience, where advertising is less about specifics and more about a consumer’s experience with a product, storytelling must reflect this shift. This does not dismiss the church from its role as teacher. Jesus gave his followers the directive of “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”⁵⁴ Embracing the role as teacher in a culture of access and experience means we may couch the teaching differently or offer additional opportunities to explore deeper—gatherings, Web-based discussions, or resources for personal study.

The real promise of storytelling, though, goes beyond worship. Worship can only be the end chapter of the story that those beyond the reach of the Body of Christ hear in the places where they live and work. Storytelling is an image that informs not just what the church does as a gathered body but the acts of disciples as they move through work, recreation, and home. Storytelling as an image for living must become something more than what we try to do occasionally and become an image for who we are. We know the story of hope, grace, forgiveness, and salvation. It is a message and a story that can only be lived. Weber points us to the incarnational life of the church in our age when he says, “The church and its life in the world will become the new apologetic.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Kimball, 144.

⁵⁴ Matthew 28:20.

⁵⁵ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 72.

Life as a storyteller means that the laity can fully take hold of the call to be “a royal priesthood,” understanding the call to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”⁵⁶ The laity must be brought out of patterns of passivity and apathy into the work of embodying the story in the world. “Real liberation would be this: To see every believer as a minister commissioned to serve God in his or her neighborhood, workplace, classroom, and circle of friends.”⁵⁷ The story must be lived and told through words and actions in the places that Christians live. Conversion and evangelism in this new era is through the conversations that occur well beyond the walls of the church. The liturgy—the work of the people—for this era may never take place inside a building. This de-centered understanding of church offers the Body of Christ the most hope in terms of storytelling in our age. This may be the most accurate manifestation of Jesus’ words to the disciples: “you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.”⁵⁸

This will mean re-visioning the way discipleship and groupings (small groups, Bible studies, Sunday School classes, etc.) are structured for Christians. If the hope for storytelling is beyond the walls of the established church, then churches that embrace this metaphor will, by necessity, empower and free their members to live outside the bounds of “church,” trusting them to tell and retell the sacred story they have encountered and now know. Pete Ward even suggests that the postmodern church may not need the congregational gathering at the center of its life. Instead it

⁵⁶ 1 Peter 4:9.

⁵⁷ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive*, 183.

⁵⁸ Acts 1:8.

should be replaced by communication and connections.⁵⁹ While seemingly out of step with the book of Hebrew's appeal of "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another," Ward's suggestion is worthy of reflection, particularly as we define the need and purpose of congregational gatherings, including worship.⁶⁰

Randy Frazee, in his influential book, *The Connecting Church*, encourages Christians to "make it a goal to find favor with your neighbors because of the kindness and character of your life."⁶¹ Being a storyteller means Christians will be open to living their faith in the day-to-day connections of life. Within those connections, the story of faith can be lived and discussed, rather than within the bounds of a church or church-sanctioned events. Ward reminds us, "Whereas once people expressed their faith through membership in religious organizations, now they do so through a pursuit of connections."⁶² Christian storytelling centers on the networks and connections each disciple has and makes on a daily basis, as well as the gathered life of the congregation.

Local Artists

Though art may have global appeal, it is most understood and appreciated at the local level. William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and its denizens are best appreciated after a long visit to the corners of Lafayette County, Mississippi, and the

⁵⁹ Ward, 43.

⁶⁰ Hebrews 13:25.

⁶¹ Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House: Willow Creek Resources, 2001), 146.

⁶² Ward, 57.

Oxford Square. Emeril's fine food is best tasted within the confines of the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. Muddy Waters' blues are heard with greater depth after a summer in the heat of the Mississippi Delta. The Official Muddy Waters Web site says this about Muddy's locality:

It is scarcely surprising then that the Delta region has nurtured a tradition of blues singing and playing that reflects the harsh, brutal life there, a music shot through with all the agonized tension, bitterness, stark power and raw passion of life lived at or near the brink of despair. Poised between life and death, the Delta bluesman gave vent to his terror, frustration, rage and passionate humanity in a music that was taut with dark, brooding force and spellbinding intensity that was jagged, harsh, raw as an open wound and profoundly, inexorably, moving.⁶³

The local artist has the ability to convey the truth, the hope, and the pain of a place with depth and brilliance. An artist's work is valid in the local community because it reflects the values and language of that place.

In the same way, the local Body of Christ must become a local artist reflecting the values and language of their place. In a time when the world is accessible through the nearest computer, postmoderns have a newfound appreciation for the local. Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmyer indicate that "the world is becoming more global and more tribal at the same time."⁶⁴ The local congregation, therefore, must reject models of ministry, governance, or worship that are imposed upon it from outside the local community.⁶⁵ The church as local artist understands that while the traditions of a denomination can inform the work of a local body, they cannot be the determining

⁶³ The Official Muddy Waters Website, "Biography," <http://www.muddywaters.com/bio.html> (accessed March 30, 2005).

⁶⁴ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive*, 283.

⁶⁵ Kimball, 32. Mark Oestreicher, in running commentary within Kimball's book, writes, "Extracting a ministry model from one church and injecting it into another without thought of context is one of the primary flaws in ministry practice today."

factor. The flavors, smells, tastes, and eccentricities of a congregation's locale inform structure, place and time of meeting, how truth is shared, the shape of worship, and even architecture of buildings. The ancient Celtic Christians reflected the notion of "local artist" in their work, preferring to maintain as much continuity as possible with the local people's culture as they introduced the Christian message, even integrating local language and symbols into their worship and work.⁶⁶ The days of one model of doing "church" have passed. Now the emerging church is as unique as the particular place it arises. Michael Slaughter, after visiting many innovative and growing churches, came to the conclusion that "their commonality is that they all excel in local implementation."⁶⁷

Local implementation is particularly important for worship. It is important to hear Bill Easum's words in any discussion of emerging worship: "We must ask, 'What is the right thing to do in this particular part of the mission field?'"⁶⁸ If the church views itself as living within a "particular part of the mission field," then it will value the input of local musicians, songwriters, authors, and other artists in preparation for worship. The church will also value innovation and change as it opens itself to the input of those who live within the local culture. A church living as a "local artist" can empower those within and around it to claim their giftedness and creativity. Enabling the creativity of the Body of Christ will connect it to the larger culture where "the creative impulse is now being let loose on an unprecedented

⁶⁶ Hunter, 92-93.

⁶⁷ Slaughter and Bird, *Unlearning Church*, 24.

⁶⁸ Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, 21.

scale.”⁶⁹ Creative and contextual worship is truly indigenous, meaning “it is in the language, the technology, and the culture of the people that the congregation is trying to reach.”⁷⁰ This fluid, open, creative worship speaks more truthfully to the spiritual needs of the locale.

The image of “local artist” also speaks to the structures and organization of the local church institution. Reflecting the local culture also means there is no one-size-fits-all structure. Each locality will lend itself to different modes and methods of organization. This perspective opens the church to the fluidity necessary to constantly move in response to the emerging culture and local concerns. Smaller manifestations of the church, such as the cell church and the house church, “are teaching us the power of decentralization, smallness, mobility, pilgrim mentality, and organic and relational understandings of the church.”⁷¹ While established churches cannot claim the level of adaptability of these expressions of the church, the church can see the importance of becoming more responsive to the needs of members and surrounding environments. Working as a local artist, attuned to the heartbeat of the local context, means structure must allow the church to function fluidly within its environment. Yes, “culture is changing quickly and there are many unknowns,”⁷² but living *within* that culture allows a church to move beyond its fear of the unknowns.

⁶⁹ Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 4.

⁷⁰ Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, 96.

⁷¹ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive*, 219-220.

⁷² Kimball, 38.

Above all, living as “local artist” reminds the church that they are about “art,” not “science.” Art is future-centered, never knowing which way the brush will move next; science is historically centered, looking to the past to define the future; art is spirit-led; science is governed by immutable laws. Living as an artist allows the church to “embrace the ambiguity of the work of God,”⁷³ trusting that God will work, not only in the church at large, but within the local manifestation of the Body of Christ.

Conclusion

No one metaphor can ever be complete, and no set of images or metaphors can ever capture all that God can do through the church in any time or place. However, as we move into this new day for the life and ministry of the church, finding relevant metaphors and images to guide the work of the church is important. Each image and metaphor will invite people to participate in new ways and to see the mission of the church in new ways. Our task is to bring life (gardener), to preach the good news (storyteller) and to embrace the place the church lives (local artist). We live these images so we may fully “be the presence of a transcendent reality here on earth, the embodied community that draws others to Christ through participation in his incarnate presence, the church.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Ward, 86.

⁷⁴ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 83.

CHAPTER 6

THE ELEMENTS OF AN ORGANIC LIFE

The problem addressed in this paper is: How can congregations rediscover what is intuitive to the Body of Christ in all ages and allow that to lead them to life in this new cultural environment? The claim is that many existing and declining congregations have chosen “church-growth” strategies and new programming in an attempt to find new life. However, if we look to Scripture, history, and even basic biology, a different possibility is revealed—one that is organic in nature. In order to respond to their current environment, churches do not need to add anything new; they need to reveal a part of them that lies within, waiting to be released. The basis for this claim is the content of Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5. Throughout these chapters, we explored how existing congregations can “arouse and reengage” the power within them to sense and respond to their continuously evolving environment.

Chapter 2 examined Biblical material from the book of Acts showing how the church as an institution changed and evolved throughout its early history, particularly in moments of stress. The story of the church after Pentecost is one of ever-expanding reach, guided by the work of the Holy Spirit. Acts 15 presents a critical moment in the life of the early church when leaders met to resolve “the Gentile problem”—specifically whether Gentile converts must adhere to Jewish law. The decision made in this moment of stress determined the fate of the Gentile mission. The decision of the Jerusalem Council affirmed that they would be guided by an evolutionary paradigm, trusting the Holy Spirit to lead and guide their growth; trust their leadership to choose a faithful path; and commit to a missional lifestyle. In this

moment, the church acknowledged the power of God continuing to move in unexpected ways. The church leaders did not develop a strategic plan or program of evangelism. Instead, affirming the Gentile mission allowed the leadership of the church to naturally and organically claim a missional and evolutionary paradigm as normative for its life.

Chapter 3 presented materials from Christian history and thought focusing on two distinct eras. These materials reveal how the church has developed and flourished in different cultures throughout history, adapting and changing its approaches to ministry in seasons of decline while maintaining a clear vision of the hope of the Gospel for its age. First, we looked at renewal through the lens of John Wesley's Methodist movement in England and the United States. A review of his life and ministry shows the movement motivated by several key factors. Above all, Wesley consistently viewed his Methodist Societies as a movement, not an established church or organization. This mindset allowed him to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit and to develop a functional and adaptable approach for his movement. Wesley focused on practical theology, ensuring that everything was done in order for people to receive and respond to the grace of Jesus Christ; utilized laity as preachers and leaders, eschewing the need for ordained clergy; organized around small groups, allowing the Holy Spirit to work through accountability and study; and maintained his single-mindedness about remaining connected to his context for ministry.

In our review of today's emerging church, we learned that this movement mirrors Wesley's renewal in several significant ways. Today's emerging churches center around a strong sense of identity—they are clear about who they are as well as

who they are not. Central to their sense of identity is their missional stance—they clearly define their existence in terms of their relationship to those around them. Like Wesley, the practical nature of these congregations allows them to be consistently adaptable in methods and organization. Additionally, the posture of these emerging congregations, as a catalyzing force igniting passion, healing, service, and mission within the lives of their congregants, is reminiscent of Wesley's consistent use of laity on the front lines of the movement. The most significant alignment between the Wesleyan movement and today's emerging church comes in the incarnational understanding of ministry. Both groups understand the location of ministry to be where the church is located—the block, neighborhood, or city in which the people live. The commonalities between these church movements offer declining churches an understanding of what is necessary to reveal life and bring about new fruit.

Current materials discussing the process of change and transformation within systems were outlined in Chapter 4. Business literature, systems theory, even contemporary science offer important observations about the nature of change and the role of leadership in bringing about change. We identify no single factor necessary to instigate lasting change within organizations; rather, we submitted a set of common factors that enable an organization to adapt and grow within their environment. The factors that recur in research and business literature are systems thinking, trusting environment, shared vision, transformational learning and growth, defined reality, collaborative ethos, evolutionary bias, and committed leadership. These factors are interrelated, not independent. When present they create a setting in which change is

possible. Understanding and employing each factor is important for congregations seeking transformation.

A discussion of the use of new metaphors and images as congregational guides for ministry formed the basis of Chapter 5. The postmodern era (discussed in Chapter 1) relies on images to communicate meaning and experience. Therefore, in order to see the work of the Body of Christ in new ways, the church must claim new metaphors or images by which to understand its mission. Written descriptions of church, wordy mission “statements,” and even strategic plans are modern in that they do not appeal to the sensibilities of the postmodern world. A process of change must take the prevailing metaphors guiding a congregation into account. Through the chapter, we viewed the church as gardener, storyteller, and local artist. Each image brings different understandings to the life of a congregation. For instance, the image of the gardener highlights the importance of pruning in order to cultivate life. The metaphor of storyteller speaks to the calling of all followers of Christ to know and tell the story of redemption. Thinking as a local artist prompts the body of Christ to find its voice from within its context. Claiming a primary image or metaphor can release new life within a congregation, as it grows its image-driven awareness.

In this chapter, we will integrate our learning from Scripture, history, research on change, and the use of metaphors to guide established congregations in cultivating an understanding of what must be present or absent in order to find new life out of times of stress or decline. In Chapter 1, we referenced the “second spring” that occurred in South Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina as a model for church renewal. The stress of the hurricane revealed in plants an innate ability (and a tenacious spirit)

to release life in times of stress. This image offers churches hope as they seek to “go green” in the midst of decline, institutional anxiety, and “a harder mission field than it once was.”¹ For existing churches, finding life is not about doing certain things, following a complex plan or copying the work of a “successful” church. Instead, churches must rediscover what is natural and native to the Body of Christ and allow that to provide the impetus for renewal.

Ultimately organic renewal is about the sustainability of the church’s primary purpose—to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Using what we have learned from Scripture, history, transformational practices, and metaphors, we will explore “green features” necessary for organic renewal of existing congregations. The “green features” that release life are matching plant to place, breaking seasonal patterns, letting the wildflowers grow, and living beyond the current season.

Matching Plant to Place

Plants have preferred locales. Citrus grows in South Florida; apples grow in Washington; cotton is perfectly suited for the Mississippi Delta’s soil and heat. Fruitful harvests require knowing the makeup of a plant and its environment. Gardeners and farmers must answer basic questions: What does a plant need to grow? Sunlight? Shade? What does a certain flower bed or orchard provide in terms of rainfall or soil composition for plants? Knowing the plant and the place is essential to produce healthy and fruitful plants.

In the same vein, churches must understand their own makeup while developing an awareness of the available environment for their mission. What we see

¹ Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 5.

in Paul's process of working from the local synagogue into the wider Gentile world, as well as in John Wesley's skill for tapping into the lower- and middle-class mindset, is that the church discovered fruitfulness when utilizing its internal strengths and connection to its locale. Matching plant to place enables congregations to claim an identity in terms of who they are and what God is calling them to do in their particular place.

The Plant

Understanding its makeup calls a congregation to examine the power and gifts of the laity. This requires particular processes—something beyond the “build it and they will come mentality” that layers on additional levels of programs disconnected from a congregation's makeup and giftedness. Joseph Myers, in *Organic Community*, reminds us, “In our worship of ‘how-to’ pragmatism, we have in some cases treated the church as an object and programmed the life out of it.”² Pursuing an organic path allows the church to understand that programming is never the starting point for renewal.

Our study shows that these processes must include intentional prayer and spiritual formation. In Acts, Paul's life moved from persecutor to primary proclaimer of the Gospel. The decision of the church in Acts 15 to move boldly into the Gentile mission was made through the discernment of leaders who had spent years with Christ and then after Pentecost experienced the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. John Wesley grew from his failure in Georgia through a continual encounter with the Spirit. Historically, the ability to discover God's renewal happened in the midst of

² Myers, 27.

people who were attuned to the workings of God in the world. Tim Conder, a leader and writer within the emerging church, writes about the need for spiritual formation in these critical days, yet sees spiritual formation as a process distinctly suited for this postmodern age:

Instead of a compartmentalized spirituality that focuses on personal choices, we are seeing the growth of a new approach to spiritual formation that emphasizes a rule of life and rhythms of spiritual practices drawing from a vast array of Christian traditions.³

Spiritual formation is best understood as woven in and through our daily existence, impacting decisions and actions. This type of spiritual formation trusts that God is working through the Holy Spirit in every moment of life.

For Conder, spiritual formation does not lead to greater certainty or an improved life. Instead, within it we find “experience and knowledge of God and God’s kingdom [which] create and shape hope.”⁴ In order to reach a world that is, at best, apathetic to the message of the Gospel, we need hope to sustain the mission of the church. To unearth its strengths, a church begins by building spiritual formation into its life. In Chapter 4, we discussed the necessity of transformational learning and growth within the life of an organization. For the church—God’s people—our transformation and growth begins with the ongoing expectation of the Holy Spirit’s work to bring change individually and corporately. Spiritual formation nurtures the expectation that God desires to grow, teach and lead the hearts and minds of all those who claim to know Christ.

³ Conder, 111.

⁴ Ibid., 110.

These systems of spiritual formation are woven into worship, work with children and youth, times of play, even meetings and decision making, through intentional focus on God's movement in our midst. According to Robert Schnase, author of *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, the work of spiritual formation must be intentional; otherwise, it becomes inconsistent and is therefore perceived as a non-value for the community of faith. In differentiating fruitful and unfruitful congregations, he believes that fruitful ones see faith development "as absolutely critical to their mission and . . . consistently offer opportunities for people of all ages, interests, and faith experiences to learn in community."⁵

Flowing from spiritual formation comes the recognition that God's people are powerful, gifted, and necessary to do the work of the Kingdom. Ed Stetzer and David Putman, in their discussion of the transition from the Church Growth Movement to the Missional Church, include the following on their list of Missional Church characteristics: members as missionaries, missional living, people empowerment, personal mission, releasing.⁶ They clearly comprehend that the movement of Christ in our present age will occur through the missionary lives of *all* followers of Christ. Reggie McNeal observes that the modern church has "failed to call people out to their true potential as God's priests in the world" and presses the church to see followers of Jesus not as ministers but as missionaries.⁷ Spiritual formation allows the people to experience the calling and enabling power of God.

⁵ Robert C. Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 68.

⁶ Stetzer and Putman, 49.

⁷ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 48.

In moments of great renewal the church has lived in this manner. Wesley's revival depended on lay preachers and class leaders that carried the movement through England and across the great empty spaces of the North American continent. Barnabas, Paul, Timothy, Peter and other first-century disciples had little training other than their experience of the Holy Spirit and sense of mission in their lives. There were no seminaries to teach; no mission boards to certify candidates; no guidebooks; and certainly no *Book of Discipline*. History and Scripture remind us that when the people of Christ have claimed their mission, amazing renewal and growth has occurred.

Rediscovering spiritual formation as a critical feature of our makeup calls the church beyond the "pastor-as-expert" mentality. For too long the church has taught that quality ministry can only occur through properly trained and ordained pastors. The people in the pews learned the lesson well, forsaking their mission and gifts and allowing the "experts" to set the course and define values for the congregation. Conder reminds us that the communal and experiential attributes of the emerging culture call for "leadership structures that are more inclusive and participatory."⁸ On this point the church can learn from the currents moving through the postmodern world. Recent works such as Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams' *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* and James Surowiecki *The Wisdom of Crowds*, point to a new reality in which people accept and even expect collaboration and participation. They conclude that, typically, the more people involved in processes and decisions, the better the outcome. Pointing to the World Wide Web as

⁸ Conder, 132.

an example, Tapscott and Williams underscore that fact that “if there is one overarching principle that defines what the new Web is, it’s that we are building this thing together.”⁹ As discussed in Chapter 4, the postmodern collaborative culture encourages and enables people to add their knowledge and giftedness to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

A healthy process of spiritual formation encourages this type of culture within the life of the church. Paul knew this collaborative culture as the “Body of Christ.” Living as a collaboratively functioning Body uncovers the combined gifts, abilities, and influence a congregation can have where it is planted. Trust is a by-product of such a group. In her conversation about a simpler way to organize, Margaret Wheatley states that in healthy systems connecting people to one another, “people support one another with information and nurture one another with trust.”¹⁰ Processes centered around spiritual formation allow the laity to value their own strengths and identity and to move confidently into their mission environment.

The Place

As important as understanding a plant’s nature is to a farmer or gardener, knowledge of the environment is just as essential. Tim Conder believes that most existing churches have been built to thrive in a culture or environment that no longer exists.¹¹ Therefore, rediscovering the church’s environmental makeup is a priority. Failure to do so will leave the church as a “colony in the midst of another culture.”¹²

⁹ Tapscott and Williams, 45.

¹⁰ Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*, 39.

¹¹ Conder, 13.

¹² Stetzer and Putman, 5-6.

The metaphor of “the local artist” found in Chapter 5 pushes the church to a fuller exploration of the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and textures of its place.

Both Condor and Stetzer and Putman believe discerning the cultural makeup requires a church to embark on “cultural exegesis.” Condor defines cultural exegesis as the “passionate, wary study of our surrounding culture” and “one of the most critical tools the church can use as it moves into the future.”¹³ Trips to the ballpark, to local restaurants, and to neighborhood-association meetings become moments for the church to uncover the leading issues and concerns of its environment.¹⁴ To proclaim good news and to discern where the Holy Spirit is already at work, the church must relearn the cultural language and metaphors that define its place.

Exegeting culture has no defined plan, just a perspective—that the environment around the church has much to teach us about where we are called to serve and how God is at work. The work of exegesis is never done, though, as the environment around us continues to evolve and shift. The story of the church as it unfolds in Acts depicts a church consistently attuned to what God was doing around it. That awareness of the Spirit allowed church leaders to modify and adapt their approach to ministry. For some, this meant re-evaluating who they believed even could experience God’s grace.

If a congregation can discern its internal and external makeup, then it can begin to claim an effective identity unique to its talents and environment. Congregational identity, identified in Chapter 3 as an imperative for emerging

¹³ Conder, 54-55.

¹⁴ Stetzer and Putman, 219.

churches, allows the church to clearly define its capabilities to produce fruit in its current context. The church can “match plant to place” by faithfully investing its resources—financial, human, facility—in ways that naturally offer the Gospel in its particular context for ministry. Ministry flows from identity. Matching plant to place is an ongoing green feature, sustaining a church’s ability to make disciples as well as establishing a foundation for other green features.

Breaking Seasonal Patterns

In Chapter 1, we noted that in times of extreme stress, plants have the ability to break free from established seasonal patterns of growth and dormancy in order to sustain life. This green feature, known as “whole plant stress response,” enables plants to modify internal structures and processes to correspond to their environment. In this manner plants reveal agility and adaptability. For existing congregations to live organically, the same willingness to modify internal structures and processes is required.

In all realms, at all times, things just work better when agility and adaptability are in play, as evidenced by the Methodist Movement of the 18th century. John Wesley was adept at modifying structures and processes to meet the needs of his movement’s mission. Through the years he adapted his small-group structure, how his pastors itinerated and, ultimately, his role as leader of the movement. The latter evidenced in setting Thomas Coke apart for ministry in America. In Chapter 2, the early church relinquished its predilection for structures and adopted an evolutionary paradigm—a willingness to follow the work of the Holy Spirit into the world. Today’s business world offers another example, in that successful businesses hold an

evolutionary bias that allows them to adapt to rapidly changing markets and technology.

Breaking free from seasonal patterns calls churches to a prayerful and earnest examination of their organizational structures. While structure is necessary within the life of any organization (or organism), it is the configuration of these structures that determines a congregation's ability to respond quickly and effectively to changing needs and values. When confronted with adaptive challenges, churches, like organisms, have a choice— according to Alan Hirsch, they either adapt or decline and die.¹⁵ Christensen reminds us that inflexible structure and processes hinder an organization's adaptability: "Processes and values are not flexible. The very processes and values that constitute an organization's capabilities in one context define its disabilities in another context."¹⁶ Congregations, in order to claim this green feature, must address the very processes that create disabilities in their present environments.

For existing congregations this requires a careful look at the organizational constructs that, although once effective, may inhibit the agility necessary to do ministry in the present. For many, this examination is an opportunity to choose simple structures over the complex labyrinth of committees and approval processes that have grown through the years. Andy Stanley, pastor of North Point Community Church in Atlanta, reminds us that "the shift toward complexity is usually subtle and it's rarely

¹⁵ Hirsch, 183.

¹⁶ Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*, Collins Business Essentials ed. (New York: Collins Business Essentials, 2006), xxvii.

intentional.”¹⁷ Through the years the shift toward complexity adds layers of weight, negating any hope of agile movement or timely response.

Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, in their book *A Simpler Way*, offer organizations great guidance in this matter. They remind us that, if given full rein, an organization will naturally create structures and processes necessary to sustain its life. From years of research, they show that “life cannot resist organizing. Self-organization is occurring all the time, everywhere. Because of this natural and innate desire to organize, life continues to explore more complex forms of organization.”¹⁸ She disagrees with the notion that structures should be imposed on groups because “if order is for free, we don’t have to be the organizers. We don’t have to design the world. We don’t have to structure existence.”¹⁹ The thought of removing control from the organizing process can be scary. Denominational requirements, congregational history and tradition, and human preferences all play into the overlay of structure for any given congregation. There are three building blocks that lead congregations to a simpler and more agile structure.

Congregational identity, which is defined by abilities and environment (discussed in the prior section), is a primary building block. Needed organization, according to Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, will form around the organization’s identity, which offers people a point of alignment and accountability.²⁰ Alignment,

¹⁷ Andy Stanley, Reggie Joiner, and Lane Jones, *7 Practices of Effective Ministry* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 101.

¹⁸ Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*, 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

which according to Rainer and Geiger provides for “the arrangement of all ministries and staff around the same simple process,” helps people work with a common purpose. Accountability sets boundaries of what can and cannot be done. Identity provides a healthy center, allowing the structures and processes necessary for effective ministry to develop.

Second, significant collaboration among people within a congregation grows productive structures. According to *A Simple Way*, “discovering what works in the particular universe of any organization is the task of everyone in that organization.”²¹ Chapter 4 identified the collaborative ethos as a primary factor allowing change to occur. This ethos allows organizations to emerge from the people who are living out the mission of the church. The combined wisdom, passion, and experiences of faithful members working together will create structure that is valuable and necessary to live out their congregation identity. Again, Paul’s writing concerning the church as a “body” provides the appropriate image for us. In Ephesians 4:12, Paul states that the task of every member is “building up the body of Christ.” “Building up” implies providing a structure that allows every member to function fully within the living, growing body.

Third, discovering needed organization requires one step beyond simple collaboration—it requires relationships built around ongoing and deepening trust. Acts 15 reflected the ongoing trust within the life of the early church as the leaders met to decide an explosive issue. Advocates of multiple positions gathered, spoke, and waited on the discernment and decision of the leadership of the church, primarily

²¹ Ibid., 22.

Peter and James. Following the decision, Acts 15:22 reports the Council communicated the decision, “*with the consent of the whole church . . .*” A volatile issue was ultimately settled by followers of Jesus Christ, who trusted their leaders to be led by the Spirit in setting the course for the growing mission of the church.

Trust provides the context for conversations about what is important to the ministry and mission of a congregation as well as how to best group people and resources for the work of making disciples. Conversations regarding an unseen future are never effortless, never final, and never painless. To withstand divergent opinions and viewpoints and still move forward requires high levels of trust within the congregation. When trust lives within an organization, “The system expands to include those it had excluded. . . . People decide to work with those from whom they had been separate.”²² Deepening trust permits more people to claim the identity and build systems and structures needed for a church’s mission.

Let the Wildflowers Grow

A rising movement among landscape architects involves the use of native plants and wildflowers. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, native plants, including wildflowers, improve the environment by returning an area to a healthy ecosystem. Further, wildflowers and native plants are beautiful, hardy, and, once established, require fewer pesticides and less maintenance (including watering) than conventional landscaping.²³ The movement allows plants to grow freely, rather than restrained by borders in traditional flower beds. This organic trend, recently

²² Ibid., 83.

²³ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Landscaping with Native Plants,” <http://www.epa.gov/greenacres/> (accessed August 21, 2008).

featured in a *New York Times* article, offers the church a hopeful glimpse into an important green feature.²⁴

In this landscaping movement, wildflowers may grow chaotically across a landscape. Living this feature invites churches to welcome Spirit-led chaos as a guiding ingredient of an organic life. Rather than the imposition of alien processes or “tried-and-true” outside programs, the church is called to trust in the God who promises, “See, I am making all things new.”²⁵ Leaders accept risk and chaos as normal, even desirable, workings of congregational life. As the early church learned to trust the movement of the Spirit within and beyond their expectations, so we are called in these days to trust that God is moving among us. Alan Hirsch believes valuing chaos is critical for living systems, as “chaos is not necessarily a negative thing but can be the context for significant innovation. However, [chaos] does pose a threat to living systems that fail to respond to the conditions of chaos.”²⁶ Responding to the chaos requires congregations to hold a particular understanding of risk and failure, two elements that sustain a healthy sense of chaos.

Risk management and failure avoidance are driving forces in many established organizations and churches. Christensen, in writing about the difficulty established businesses have in dealing with disruptive technologies, states, “the larger and more successful [established firms] become, the more difficult it is to muster the

²⁴ Stephen Orr, “A Sustainability That Aims to Seduce,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/21/garden/21sustainable.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=style (accessed August 21, 2008).

²⁵ Revelation 21:5.

²⁶ Hirsch, 276.

rationale for entering an emerging market in its early stages.”²⁷ Effectively, previous success works against future innovation because safety and stability become the tacit motivations driving decisions. In such an atmosphere, denying risk and failure leads groups away from chaos. In Margaret Wheatley’s understanding, “chaos’ great destructive energy dissolves the past and gives us the gift of a new future. . . . Only chaos creates the abyss in which we can recreate ourselves.”²⁸ Embracing chaos calls the church to understand risk as necessary to the creation of new life.

Learning to accept chaos takes into account the fragmentation of the postmodern world. As discussed in Chapter 1, fragmentation means the church ministers in a plurality of belief structures and rationales. Successful mission in such a context will require multiple attempts and multiple failures before effective modes of being and ministering are discovered. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers refer to this as “tinkering and discovery,” and offer that life is about “unending trials and errors to find what works.”²⁹ Churches accustomed to easy and successful launches of ministries or those that habitually live in denial about effectiveness will find the fragmented world difficult to navigate because it necessitates frequent efforts, “squandered” resources, and recurring failure as the price of doing ministry. Living in chaos means we are willing, like wildflowers, to grow where we can, not necessarily where we plan. Realistically, this does not call a church to try anything and do everything. Instead, the church, guided by its identity and a willingness to break

²⁷ Christensen, 147.

²⁸ Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 119.

²⁹ Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*, 13 and 38.

seasonal patterns, stays on the move trusting the Holy Spirit to bring new life as it risks, fails, and finds a way.

One specific way to encourage risk-taking and failure is to live with a bias to action. Rather than work through drawn-out planning processes and strategic plans, a risk-taking church has the willingness to appropriate resources quickly to meet a need or opportunity. As Wesley saw emerging needs in his day, he moved quickly to organize and deploy ministers. The church, in a time when the rate of change is accelerating exponentially, is no longer afforded the luxury of endless cycles of discussion and decision-making. Because disruptive change surrounds the church, “action must be taken before careful plans are made.”³⁰ Living with an action bias enables the faithful to follow the leading of the Spirit into their local context offering their gifts and calling and, by example, encourages others to do the same.

Seeing Beyond the Current Season

Successful farmers know their success does not hinge on one growing season. Like life, success is subject to many seasons of planting, harvesting, and preparing. The final green feature reminds us that beyond any given moment of success or failure in ministry—there is more going on than meets the eye. Who could have foreseen the impact of John Wesley after his dismal failure in Georgia? Who would have believed that Saul/Paul’s passion would lead the church into a new understanding of its mission? The prophet Habakkuk, writing about a difficult season of life in 3.17-18, proclaims:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;

³⁰ Christensen, 180.

though the produce of the olive fails,
 and the fields yield no food;
 though the flock is cut off from the fold,
 and there is no herd in the stalls,
 yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
 I will exult in the God of my salvation.

These words call the church to see beyond the current season in which it finds itself.

This green feature is sustained by two habits: living the missional impulse and practicing patience.

Living the Missional Impulse

Alan Hirsch defines the missional impulse as “an outwardly bound movement from one community or individual to another. It is the outward thrust rooted in God’s mission that compels the church to reach a lost world.”³¹ The missional impulse reminds us that our work is more than “getting people to church” or “working for the church.” We are at all times, regardless of the season, a sent people. Ed Stetzer and Dave Putman challenge us when they say, “God wants us to be on mission with him, to be sent to some group of people somewhere, and to minister in a way that meets their needs, not promotes our preferences.”³² The church is to be defined in terms of this mission above all other claims on its existence. In *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch states that in our present cultural context, “One can no longer talk about church and mission, only about the mission of the church.”³³ In this light, our efforts at matching plant to place, breaking seasonal patterns, and letting wildflowers grow, all serve the Spirit-given impulse of being sent in mission with God to make disciples of

³¹ Hirsch, 129.

³² Stetzer and Putman, 32.

³³ Bosch, 372.

Jesus Christ. Living the missional impulse serves a unifying function within the Body of Christ, reminding us that our combined presence is needed on the mission field—whether that field is at home, at work, in a foreign land, or across the street.

Practicing Patience

The missional impulse is important because it serves as a constant reminder that our calling is always here and “not-yet.” We minister in our present moment but believe that God is not done with the mission of redemption and reconciliation. Ultimately, God’s mission does not hinge on our achievements or even institutional survival. We believe God works through moments of great victory and failure and trust that what we experience as barrenness in one moment may soon transform into abundance. Therefore, we live faithfully in our moments, unburdened by worries about success and failure. Jesus preaches to the current church when he says, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”³⁴

The early church was a place of great creativity in expanding the reach of the church, but also a place of mistakes and failures. The church at Corinth was a flash point for division; the church at Galatia was easily led away from the truth of the Gospel. Still, despite any one moment, God’s mission flourished and grew.

Ironically, practicing patience enables congregations to risk and fail—to live with chaos. When we understand that God’s Spirit is alive and moving in spite of our success or failure we find great freedom—freedom to live missionally, to risk greatly,

³⁴ Matthew 6:33-34.

and to live within the chaos of the present moment. We can live with a bias toward action because we do not fear our own failure.

The day in which we minister is not easy. Established churches are anxious and stressed about what will or can be. As one pastor says, “In this transitional time, leaders still experience the expectations of the waning modernity as well as the expectations of the growing emerging culture.”³⁵ Living in these in-between days creates stresses that other generations of churches and leaders never experienced. Ultimately, as farmers experiencing a bad crop, or as Habakkuk despairing over a difficult season, we look and live beyond the present moment.

Conclusion

The postmodern world is not easy for modern churches but it need not be as hard as they make it. Finding life is not a matter of trying the latest organizational fad, programmatic trend, or marketing gimmick. Rather, in days of great stress and anxiety a simpler approach is needed: living organically. In chapter 2, the struggles of the early church, particularly with the Jerusalem Council’s resolution of the “gentile challenge” in Acts 15, revealed hope for churches in the midst of conflict or stress. In chapter 3, the renewal movements of John Wesley and today’s emerging church were shown to share important aspects—ones that transcend time and place and point the church to a basic understanding of who it is. Through a thorough examination of writings for businesses and organizations, chapter 4 identified specific factors that provide the possibility of newness for organizations of any type. The postmodern preference for image and metaphor explored in chapter 5 provide opportunities for us

³⁵ Conder, 129.

to examine new understandings of the work of the church that give significant depth to our mission. Last, combining common threads revealed through Scripture, history, business change theory, and metaphor, we identified “green features” that allow the church to discover a new, organic life.

Several years ago the Dave Matthews Band had a hit song, *Where Are You Going?* about the struggle to help a friend find direction in life. The chorus reminds us of the church’s organic role in these often anxious days:

I am no superman not at all
But I have no answers for you
I am no hero, and that’s for sure
But I do know one thing
Where you go, is where I want to be.

Churches living in this moment of time must admit that we don’t have all the answers—for what’s ahead; for how to live; or, in some cases for what to do in a given moment. We are not heroes sweeping in to save the world. What the church does have is a mission—a mission that takes it into the world.

For a church struggling to regain balance and life, living organically will come down to a choice. Can it look at the world and say, “Where you go, is where I want to be”? The church does not have to give up or quit. It does not have to abandon Jesus’ commission or allow the inevitability of change to overcome the “ministry of reconciliation” entrusted to the church.³⁶ Some churches will decide that they prefer where they are rather than where the world is going. For many congregations it will be a choice that will lead to death. But it is not the only choice.

³⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:18.

As plants recovering from the aftermath of a great storm choose life, the church must do the same in these days. Now is the time to boldly trust that we can rediscover what is essential and fundamental to living faithfully. Christians taking this path are certain to discover renewed life—life that is bursting with promise and hope for this new age, life that will not be denied.

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