

CHAPTER 3

TRANSFORMATIONAL TRANSITIONS: HOW TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

The Internal Harvest of First Lutheran Church

In order to craft biblically and theologically sound strategies to make, mature, and mobilize apostolic disciples, the internal church membership needs to be assessed. First Lutheran Church (FLC) was founded in 1868 as the “First English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cedar Rapids.” This bold move opened the door and reached multiple ethnic groups who spoke English in common, but the context has changed since then. The population in the 1860s included people of primarily northern European descent; however, current demographics are far more complex. The majority of congregants still reflect white or northern European ancestry, and there are a few African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and recent African immigrants. Social demographics indicate a much higher ratio of married people to single people, and professional and managerial professions dominate, with an abundance of engineers, teachers, health-care workers, and business owners.

From 2000 to 2004, a period when most downtown, mainline churches suffered decreases in membership and ministry outreach, First Lutheran’s adult membership grew 6 percent and average worship attendance increased nearly 8 percent. Regular and designated giving by members grew 11 percent during the same period, to a 2004 total of

\$1,658,000. To equip members for ministry as programs expanded, personnel costs increased to 60 percent of the 2004 operating expenditures, up from 48 percent in 2000. Benevolence to ELCA, neighborhood, and wider-Christian community projects in 2004 received 13.5 percent of the congregation's regular and dedicated member giving.

First Lutheran's worship attendance had plateaued for approximately forty years. Based on statistical data collected from 1962 to 2003, FLC has fluctuated from roughly 730 to 900 in worship attendance throughout that period (see figure 2 on the next page). Despite the addition of services including one on Saturday evenings and one more on Sunday mornings, the 900 barrier remains unbroken. Each of the later two services on Sunday morning average 300-400 in attendance, and each service uses 80 percent of the sanctuary's capacity, giving a feeling that it is full. "A worship service will tend to stop growing when 80 percent of the desirable seats are occupied on a regular basis."¹ FLC will need to consider alternative worship locations or facilities for additional services times to reach a broader population of people.

During the 1990s, FLC's ministry included important highlights. In 1990, internal church leadership sought God in specific prayer about the future, and this led to calling Pastor Dan Kolander in 1991 as the new visionary leader. In that same year, thirty cottage meetings were formed and explored the future direction of the church. This sparked a Mission Statement preparation phase and the development of a Facilities Task Force in

¹ Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2001), 10.

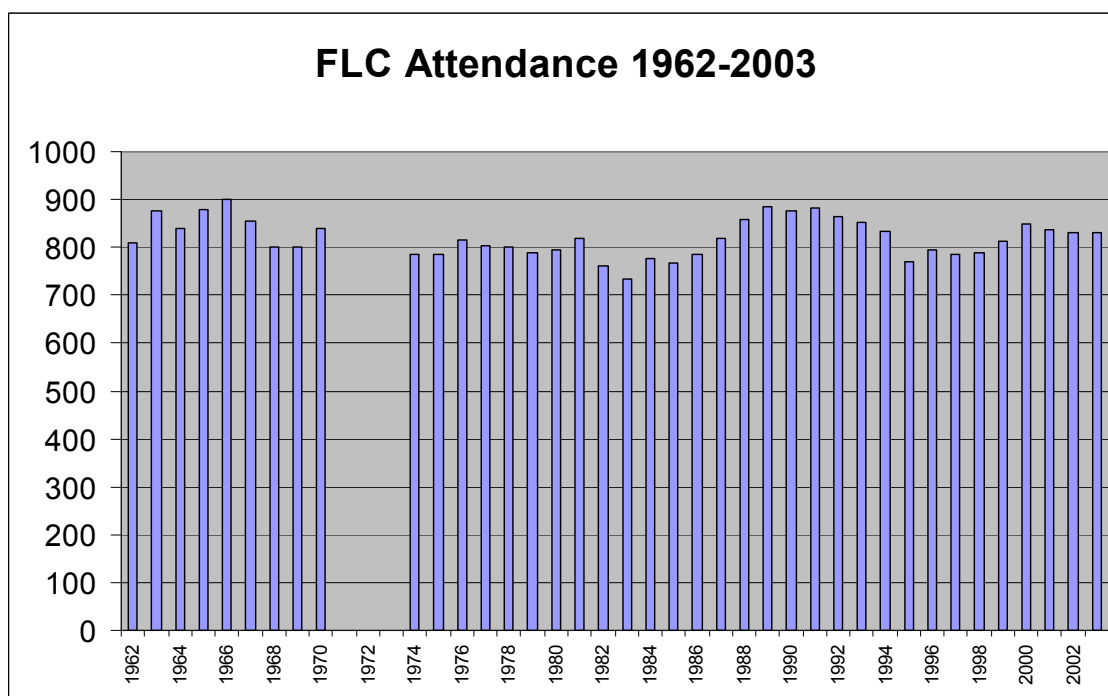


Figure 2. Attendance at First Lutheran Church, Cedar Rapids

1992. From 1994-1997, the development of more functional structures became the focus regarding the Council and adding facilities to the existing building. The church spent 1997 exploring its essential characteristics, and this led to a clear vision, mission statement, and core values that were adopted in 1998. The decision to focus on small group ministries was made in 1999.

In 2000, the Ministry Development Team was founded and explored and prepared the way for breakthrough ministry exploration. During 2000-2001 the church experienced a period of staff transition, position revisions, and addition of new staff including: a part-time small groups coordinator, an Associate Pastor overseeing small groups, evangelism, youth, and family ministries, a Director of Teen Ministry, and a Director of Children and

Family Ministry. This was a significant transition for a staff of over twenty people employed part-time to full-time.

In 2001, FLC experienced a significant turning point towards greater health. Two pastors, including the author of this paper, began their Doctorate of Ministry programs through Fuller Seminary. This involved the immediate use of a yearly evaluation tool called the Natural Church Development Survey (NCD) used with Kotter's change process. NCD provided FLC with the concrete tools, framework, and theological foundation to move the congregation toward action step adoption to increase the church's organizational and community health.

As FLC began its assessment process in January 2001, the council and staff separately identified passionate spirituality as FLC's greatest growth potential. The following themes of obstacles emerged: tradition, vision and approach, lack of confidence and education, mobilization of spiritual gifts, and quality choices and ownership. Comments under "tradition" referred to a passive, comfortable or coasting faith walk among FLC members with the explanation that Scandinavians are reserved and Lutherans "don't do the spirituality thing." Regarding "vision and approach," respondents identified specific needs: to practice corporately and personal prayer, grow the number of small groups, and create concrete goals. For "lack of confidence and education" leaders indicated a lack of discipleship training, lack of emphasis on spiritual disciplines, lack of prayer and devotions practiced at home, and prayer often assigned only to the pastors. Within the theme of "mobilization of spiritual gifts," it was clear that people do not understand these gifts and have not identified their personal gifts. Under the theme of

“quality choices and ownership,” a cultural Christianity mindset was identified that believes “spirituality is for Sunday only.” This result demonstrates that for FLC congregants, few have been encouraged and equipped to practice their faith daily.

As a result of identifying these themes and using the NCD survey to assess FLC’s health regularly for the last four years, four primary transforming transitions have become FLC’s focus. The courses the pastors took at Fuller concentrated on particular discipleship and evangelism strategies to make these transitions and move FLC toward greater health. It is important to understand the problems facing FLC and other mainline congregations, and to discern how the churches can respond and move toward greater health. Ultimately, as churches understand the broader post-Christendom dynamic and their specific church contexts, and reflect on their specific church’s core values and biblical foundations, potential strategies or solutions can be explored and implemented successfully. This supports this paper’s thesis that biblically and theologically sound strategies can be used to mature, mobilize, and equip Christians for apostolic discipleship.

Transformational Opportunities

This paper has described many symptoms of an ailing and declining mainline church and has shown that the ELCA and FLC are not any different. Based on the decline or plateaued status of mainline churches, the ELCA, and First Lutheran Church of Cedar Rapids, the following transitions (see figure 3) will describe transformation opportunities designed to move traditional American mainline churches into effective disciple-creating

congregations. This chapter discusses the primary ailments First Lutheran has addressed and will describe a vision for health and remedies for institutional ills. These particular institutional solutions were used in the creation of past, current, and future FLC strategic planning considerations.

Transforming	Transitions
<i>FROM:</i>	<i>TO:</i>
Incremental Change	Chaotic Change
Passive Membership	Passionate Spirituality
Barn Mentality	Harvest Heart
Hierarchical Organizations	Apostolic Networks

Figure 3. Transforming Transitions for First Lutheran Church

Transition 1: From Incremental Change to Chaotic Change

In the early part of the twentieth century, the rate of societal change was relatively slow compared with current rates of change. In earlier times, small incremental changes were effective and aligned the institutional church with societal change. As the rate of change increased dramatically in the latter half of the twentieth century, the incremental change methodology could not keep pace, and change became more chaotic and unpredictable. In today's environment change is local and global in nature, and there is no safe haven for the status quo. The church, at a local and institutional level, can function in a world where change is constant. This adaptation involves improving

information retrieval and review, constant review of programs and approaches, a willingness to try new things, and the adoption of a mindset that adapts to constant change.²

There are numerous examples of individuals in the modern world who have adapted and thrived in rapidly changing world conditions.³ A common factor among these individuals is the adoption of core values that allowed them to chart their course through changing times and pressures. The church can determine its focus and core values, and emulate these individuals. Absent a focus and core values, the church will be unable to adapt consistently and effectively, and the outside world may wonder why the church exists. The values, like all viewpoints, must remain flexible and adaptable to changing social conditions and worldviews.⁴ The adaptation process includes change based on intuition. Farson wrote, “Planning is built upon the flawed idea that it is possible to predict the future. Yet the future almost always takes us by surprise. Since there is simply no good way to predict future events, there is no sure way to plan for them.”⁵

It is impossible to predict the future precisely, but the church can stay constantly aware of changing conditions, make preparations, and respond to change. The church can learn to identify signs of coming societal change, make preparations, adapt to change, and

² Gibbs, “Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World,” 1.

³ Collins, *Good to Great*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

⁵ Richard Farson, *Management of the Absurd: Paradoxes in Leadership* (New York: Touchstone Simon and Schuster, 1996), 38.

respond constructively and energetically. Some churches, however, may not embrace new ways of thinking or new paradigms due to centuries old hierarchical command and control structures, which will be discussed in transforming transition four of this chapter. Other churches may be too inflexible or may have lost their sense of mission and values, and must be renewed and re-educated.⁶

Although no single change technique works universally, some successful approaches have been identified and stagnating or declining churches can use them in their revitalization efforts. The transformation into a change-embracing church often involves multiple efforts, not all of which will work.⁷ Handy adopted the Sigmoid Curve (figure 4) and emphasized the case for significant, ongoing change.⁸ The S-shaped curve charts the trajectory of most successful human systems. An initial period of experimentation and learning is followed by a period of growth and development (slope 1). Ultimately every curve plateaus and turns downward in decline (slope 2). The only elements that vary are the length (total time), slope (rate of change), and duration of each part of the curve.

⁶ Morris, *The High Impact Church*, 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸ Charles Handy, *The Age of Paradox* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994), 23.

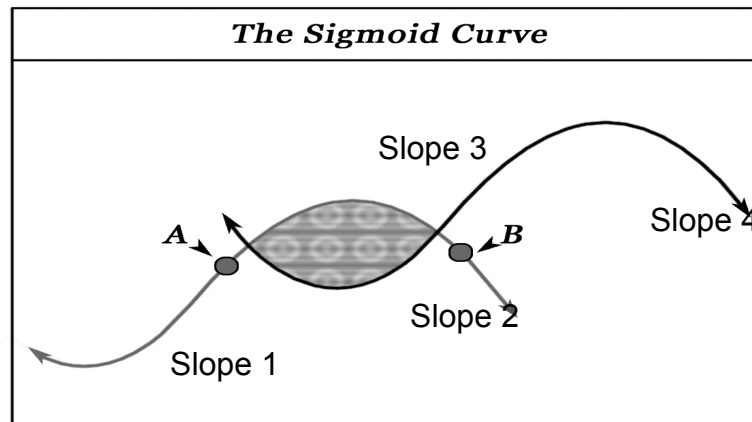


Figure 4. Handy's Sigmoid Curve

At the present time, the slope/speed of every curve seems to be increasing (slope 3).⁹ To keep growing, the successful industry, organization, or individual must develop a second curve that emerges from the first curve (upper line in figure 4). The new curve, however, must begin before the first one peaks (Point A) when it appears there is no need for change. Most organizations do not change until they face decline (Point B), which is often too late. By this point, the leaders have lost credibility, resources are depleted, and the energy for creative thinking is low.¹⁰ The shaded area in Figure 3 represents a time of confusion and possible competition for resources within the organization. If new methods are introduced to deal with decline and do not immediately yield results, they are abandoned for more familiar past methods.

If the organization fails to experiment, it will never get beyond a plateau or a declining state. The challenge of the second curve is to implement a curve that builds

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

upon the success of the first curve and involves constant learning and maturing over time. As the leadership introduces multiple changes with a fluid process of transitions, the leadership needs to monitor people's responses and how they deal with the changes.

Bridges wrote, "It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions."¹¹ He defines a transition as a psychological process that people experience as they internalize and deal with what the change will mean in their lives.¹² This is an important point to consider as an organization moves through the change process because some may equate transition with change. Bridges warns against this:

The starting point for dealing with transition is not the outcome *but the ending you'll have to make to leave the old situation behind*. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place. Organizations tend to overlook that letting-go process completely, however, and do nothing about the feelings of loss that it generates. And in overlooking those effects, they nearly guarantee that the transition will be mismanaged and that, as a result, the change will go badly. Unmanaged transition makes change unmanageable.¹³

As these transforming transitions occur, therefore, it is vital to identify signs of people letting go and manage these transitions well during a potential period of uncertainty, confusion, and loss.¹⁴

¹¹ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2003), 3.

¹² Daniel A. Kolander, "Becoming An Equipping Church: A Plan to Transition First Lutheran Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Into a Serving Community" (D. Min. Course Paper, Fuller Theological Seminary, September 2004), 37.

¹³ Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 3.

¹⁴ Kolander, "Becoming An Equipping Church," 37-38.

Institutional Solutions

Specific steps can be taken as a mainline church transforms itself from a change-resistant entity to one that adapts to change. Reformation can take place in the church. The first step is a frank assessment of current programs and approaches, with an honest appraisal of whether the efforts are effective. Eddie Gibbs proposed the following considerations as part of the assessment process:

The church needs to recognize that old ways are no longer working. Involvement by people with different viewpoints will open possibilities up. Affirmation of new leaders will provide insight and courage. Encouragement of experimentation produces results. Remember that good ideas may not work the first time. Ask, “What did we learn?” and “What would we do differently next time?” Examine the data, weigh the evidence, and back hunches because sixty percent of leadership decisions are built on hunches. Cultivate inner strength to survive chaos. As a point leader, remember that one’s total personal well-being and balance are important to sustain in a time of change. Take time and listen for repeat messages that come from different resources. Emphasize strategic actions because success is not about planning but about crucial decisions. Reallocate resources so they respond to priority needs.¹⁵

Gibbs’ insights are wise counsel for churches in a state of plateau or decline.

For First Lutheran, the Natural Church Development survey and Kotter’s *Leading Change* are both important in evaluating FLC’s overall ministry and addressing changes through particular processes.¹⁶ Leading change and creating a picture of what a healthy church looks like are critical in the transformation of a stagnant church culture. A summary of insights from both resources aid in understanding the significant transformation FLC makes from a declining or plateaued church to a healthier, more thriving congregation.

¹⁵ Gibbs, “Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World,” 10.

¹⁶ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

Natural Church Development

"What happens *below the surface* is the strategic focus of Natural Church Development."¹⁷ Schwarz studies the laws of organic growth and interprets that understanding to theology in profound ways. NCD focuses on God's creation to understand what hinders and what accelerates the growth of organisms. In biblical terms, NCD interprets the parable of the growing seed, "All by itself the soil produces grain" (Mark 4:28). NCD examines the processes and ways of thinking below the surface that may hinder or enhance with the production of grain or fruit.

Schwarz and his colleagues identified six principles of nature that aid plants or churches as they grow naturally. Logan defines these "kingdom principles" as follows: "The biotic principles encourage leadership to look at the whole church and its environment and not just 'the fruit' as an indicator of health. They focus on the way a church 'does church.'"¹⁸ These principles serve as a checklist that addresses issues within a congregation, but churches implement change using previously held ideas. Logan warns churches:

The greatest danger with NCD is to implement change with new ideas, focus and enthusiasm but use old modes of thinking and practice. This produces the Paradigm of Insanity: doing the same thing over and over and over...and expecting a different result.¹⁹

¹⁷Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1996), 8.

¹⁸ Robert E. Logan, *The Challenge of Implementing the Biotic Principles* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2000), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

An understanding of Schwartz's and Logan's language clarifies its influential, catalytic impact upon church life:

Biotic Principles

Interdependence. Interdependence is concerned with the dynamic whereby "the decision you make in one area of church life will impact, for good or ill, other areas of church life."²⁰ In other words, no ministry runs in isolation, but is rather connected to others within the church life. A key question to ask is, "Does this step benefit other areas in the long-term?"²¹

Multiplication. Multiplication is defined as "like produces like."²² This concept of multiplication can be seen in the passage of 2nd Timothy 2:2 in which it says, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others." A key question is, "Does this step multiply growth or just add to it?"²³

Energy Transformation. This involves maximizing a congregation's expenditure of energy toward generating growth in the church's health. "How can we best use this situation for the advancement of God's kingdom?" is its defining question.²⁴

Multi-usage. Logan defines multi-usage as "developing processes and resources which can be used more than once". A great example of this is having a co-leader, apprentice, or leader-in-training for all ministry positions. "Does this help ministry sustain itself?"²⁵

Symbiosis. Symbiosis about asking the basic, yet critical question of "What do I enjoy?" alongside the question "What will help our church

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

grow?" Ultimately we ask, "How can we work together to enhance ministry effectiveness?"²⁶

Functionality. Functionality refers to the gospel of John, the fifteenth chapter on The Vine and The Branches. That is it examines ministry to see if the way things are being done function in such a way to bear much fruit. Or, it may rather need some pruning done in order to increase the harvest. The defining question for the biotic principle of functionality is as follows: "Is this ministry producing fruit for the kingdom of God, or is it missing its purpose?"²⁷

Schwarz's research identified eight distinctive characteristics prevalent in growing churches, as compared with non-growing churches:

Empowering Leadership. Effective leadership begins with an intimate relationship with God, resulting in Christ-like character and a clear sense of God's calling for leader's lives. As this base of spiritual maturity increases, effective pastors and leaders multiply, guide, empower and equip disciples to realize their full potential in Christ and work together to accomplish God's vision.²⁸

Gift-oriented Ministry. Church leaders have the responsibility to help believers discover, develop and exercise their gifts in appropriate ministries so that the Body of Christ "grows and builds itself up in love."²⁹

Passionate Spirituality. Spiritual intimacy leads to a strong conviction that God will act in powerful ways. It is not something you "have" but a journey in which you are continually learning from and growing closer to Christ through prayer, Bible study, and other forms of corporate and individual spiritual disciplines.

Functional Structures. As the church is the living Body of Christ, so it is like all healthy organisms, it requires numerous systems that work

²⁶ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 75.

²⁷ Logan, *The Challenge*, 28.

²⁸ Robert E. Logan and Thomas T. Clegg, *Rest and Reflection Action Plan* (www.coachnet.org, 1998), 2-1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-1.

together to fulfill its intended purpose. Each must be evaluated regularly to determine if it is still the best way to accomplish the intended purpose.³⁰

Inspiring Worship. Inspiring worship is a personal and corporate encounter with the living God. Both personal and corporate worship must be infused with the presence of God resulting in times of joyous exultation and in times of quiet reverence. Inspiring worship is not driven by a particular style or ministry focus group--but rather the sacred experience of God's awesome presence.³¹

Holistic Small Groups. Are disciple-making communities which endeavor to reach the unchurched, meet individual needs, develop each person according to their God-given gifts and raise leaders to sustain the growth of the church. Like healthy body cells, holistic small groups are designed to grow and multiply.³²

Need-Oriented Evangelism. It's about intentionally cultivating relationships with pre-Christian people so they can become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who are actively participating within the life of the church and community. Using appropriate ministries and authentic relationships, believers can guide others into the family of God.³³

Loving Relationships. Are the heart of a healthy, growing church. Jesus said people will know we are his disciples by our love. Practical demonstration of love builds authentic Christian community and brings others into God's kingdom.³⁴

Kotter provides important resources for business and church contexts, and he outlines an eight-step process required for successful organizational transformation:

Establish a sense of urgency. This involves examining the market and competitive realities. Key research is used to identify and discuss crises, potential crises, and major opportunities.

³⁰ Ibid., 5-1.

³¹ Ibid., 6-1.

³² Ibid., 7-1.

³³ Ibid., 8-1.

³⁴ Ibid., 9-1.

Create a guiding coalition. Develop a leadership group with enough power to lead the change and able to work together as a team.

Develop a vision and strategy. Create a vision that directs the change effort and develop strategies for achieving the vision.

Communicate the change vision. Use every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies constantly, and role model the behavior expected of the people.

Empower broad-based action. Empowerment requires removal of obstacles and alteration of systems or structures that undermine the change vision. Encourage risk taking and present nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions.

Generate short-term wins. Plan and achieve visible improvements in performance through “wins.” Create the wins, and recognize and reward people who made the wins possible.

Consolidate gains and produce more change. Build upon gains. This involves using increased credibility to change systems, structures, and policies that do not fit the transformational vision. Hire, promote, and develop people who can implement the change vision. It is vital to reinvigorate the process with new projects, themes, and change agents.

Anchor new approaches in the culture. New approaches create better performance through customer- and productivity-oriented behavior, more and better leadership, and more effective management. Articulating these connections between new behaviors and organizational success affirms the change. This in turn develops means to ensure leadership development and succession.³⁵

The use of Kotter’s stages and the NCD process that has moved First Lutheran Church forward are described in detail in Chapter 4.

A clearly defined change process does not create change automatically.³⁶ The transformation will not occur unless the change process incorporates flexibility, good

³⁵ Kotter, *Leading Change*, 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

communication, constructive cooperation, and collaborative efforts. Karpa wrote, “The spiral model or iterative design for decision-making presumes that unknown or untried elements, such as new church strategies, are the dominant factors in a project.”³⁷ In the pre-project stage the main objectives are reviewed and key questions asked: “What will success look like?” “How do we think we can achieve it?” The unknowns are reviewed and prioritized: “What do we need to know, answer, or prove before we trust the solution?” “Which of these will have a major impact on the path to success?” It is important to attack the big unknowns using trial attempts that may create a cyclical process of: build, test, evaluate, and recalibrate. The last two stages essentially repeat the planning activities: success vision, path, needed-knowledge, and risks.

As a church transitions from past patterns of behavior, it must consider the climate and impact of potential chaotic change. This involves experimentation combined with constant evaluation and recalibration. Understanding the processes of change and using decision-making skills are essential elements for transformational success.

Transition 2: From Passive Membership to Passionate Spirituality

Michael Foss describes the transition from passive membership to passionate spirituality:

We are long overdue for a paradigm shift in American Protestantism—a shift from a membership model of church affiliation to a discipleship model. As important as the notion of church membership may have been in years past, it no longer works. Churches are losing members in droves. All too many folks whose names still fill churches’ membership rolls have long since slipped out the back door. The two most common reasons given: burnout and boredom.³⁸

³⁷ David Karpa, email to author, July 8, 2004.

³⁸ Michael W. Foss, *Powersurge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 5.

Foss identifies a reality: the compromise of mainline churches that confuses church membership with minimal expectations and few opportunities for discipleship growth. Numerically growing churches mature and mobilize disciples, present high expectations, and provide a clear discipleship development process. Barna asserts they also define what a mature Christian looks like.³⁹ Healthy, growing churches provide multiple opportunities for spiritual development among congregants.⁴⁰

The passive membership church has identifiable characteristics. Foss wrote, “In the Protestant explosion of the 1950s, membership implied obligation. In today’s cultural context, membership has come to imply prerogatives.”⁴¹ Church member commitment has plummeted as cultural expectations for church attendance have atrophied. On the other hand, expectations remain high among members for full service ministry designed to meet members’ needs. This assertion is important: stagnant or declining mainline churches require little of their members regarding marks of discipleship, yet members expect the pastor to be constantly available in time of need. Similar to European and Canadian clergy, mainline American pastors perform basic church rituals such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals, but often lack relationships with the participants prior to the rite. An increasingly unhealthy disconnected relationship and one-sided expectations exist between many mainline members and their churches.⁴²

³⁹ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 89.

⁴⁰ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 18.

⁴¹ Foss, *Powersurge*, 15.

⁴² Ogden, *The New Reformation*, 86-95.

Membership standards for mainline churches today are typically established through baptism and/or attending a brief membership or orientation class. In the ELCA, for example, a single communion attendance and financial contribution signify membership. Some mainline bodies practice the pattern: once on the rolls, always on the rolls. Foss names this as a health club mentality.⁴³ Pay the yearly dues and membership status is maintained, even though the member exercises only occasionally, if at all.

The mainline membership malaise may be due to a low commitment and low discipleship maturity level among congregants. The church, however, may not have high expectations nor provide intriguing and spiritually edifying discipleship opportunities. Warren's five circles of commitment illustrate this point. Warren identifies community members who are unchurched or occasional worship attendees.⁴⁴ He suggests a shift for mainline church leaders that admits "the crowd" that regularly shows up on Sundays is not necessarily made up of believers or disciples.⁴⁵

Mainline churches may lack rigorous membership requirements, and this lack allows the inclusion of uncommitted and poorly educated members. It's the next circle, the congregation, in which the major step of belonging deepens the commitment. In contrast Saddleback Community Church in California, located in a largely unchurched or dechurched culture, operates a rigorous membership process. The process begins with individuals who make public professions of faith demonstrated and sealed through

⁴³ Foss, *Powersurge*, 15.

⁴⁴ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 131.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

baptism. The new members attend discipleship-based membership classes sign a covenant listing specific behavioral expectations. Midwest mainstream churches tend to receive previously churching people who have baptismal certificates, and membership transfer forms in hand, and there are few commitment steps. Lutherans invite visitors to membership, but typically not to discipleship. Mainline churches can adopt demanding membership processes that challenge traditional church culture and equip people who choose a passionate faith in Christ. Warren suggests that if a church has fewer people worshipping weekly than on the church's membership rolls, a church should redefine the meaning of membership and include a covenant commitment.⁴⁶

The established mainline churches have done little to feed the interest of those who seek authentic spirituality.⁴⁷ The mainline church, typically moderate to liberal in its thinking, has embraced the modern era's rationalistic philosophy, blended with the culture, become more secularized and pluralistic, and reflects contemporary cultural values. Smith wrote:

Postmodernists want to *see* Christianity. They are not interested in reading a book on Christianity. They do not require lengthy apologetic lectures. They simply want to see a real, honest-to-goodness Christian, someone who truly follows the merciful, compassionate, healing example of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

Barna wrote, "The stumbling block for the church is not its theology, but its failure to apply what it believes in a compelling way ... Christians have been their own worst

⁴⁶ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁷ Gibbs, "Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World," 13.

⁴⁸ Smith, *The End of the World*, 196.

enemies when it comes to showing the world what authentic, biblical Christianity looks like.”⁴⁹ This passivity can be overcome with a zeal for Christ and a sense of accountability to the world Christians serve, but churchgoers must be disciplined. Mainline churches can equip the saints with the basics of discipleship and send them out exemplifying a passionate spirituality.

The results of Natural Church Development surveys indicate mainline churches commonly identify passionate spirituality as their minimum factor or greatest growth area.⁵⁰ People who take the survey report their congregations often lack faith and biblical knowledge, and are anemic in the exercise of the personal and corporate spiritual disciplines. According to the research, individuals who explore Christianity seek a passionate, genuine spirituality built upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.⁵¹ Authentication of this relationship is established by Christians who live a committed, Christ-centered life exemplified through faith practices and joy in good and difficult times.⁵² Signs of this passionate spirituality include the practice of personal and corporate spiritual disciplines. If a church does not demonstrate its relationship and faith in Christ through genuine joy and intentional spiritual disciplines, some may visit once but may not return.

⁴⁹ George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998), 5.

⁵⁰ Robert E. Logan and Thomas T. Clegg, *Releasing Your Church's Potential* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1998), 4-1.

⁵¹ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 29.

Discipleship Through Relationships

Ogden wrote, “Disciples are made in ‘iron sharpens iron’ intentional relationships.”⁵³ Many who worship in mainline congregations lack loving, accountable, faith-based relationships.⁵⁴ Corporate worship experiences are insufficient in making disciples. Essential to discipleship are regular, weekly, or even daily experiences of authentic biblical community. The path of passionate spirituality involves people in frequent, meaningful, face-to-face faith conversations throughout the week.⁵⁵ Ogden cites the Eastbourne Consultation, Joint Statement on Discipleship to describe the experience of discipleship as “a process that takes place within accountable relationships over a period of time for the purpose of bringing believers to maturity in Christ.”⁵⁶ Discipleship leads to discovery of one’s gifts and service in a ministry of personal importance. The church can help transform its people from a passive membership mentality to an active passionate spiritual journey through deep, consistent friendships centered on Christ. According to Donahue, authentic biblical community is a people to know and be known by, to love and be loved by, to serve and be served by, to admonish and be admonished

⁵³ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁵⁵ Randy Frazee, *Making Room For Life: Trading Chaotic Lifestyles for Connected Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 63.

⁵⁶ The Eastbourne Consultation, Joint Statement on Discipleship, (Eastbourne, England: September 24, 1999); quoted in Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003).

by, to celebrate and to be celebrated by.⁵⁷

The author of this paper believes the problem of the church is not that North Americans lack interest in spirituality, but that many of the spiritual offerings they pursue are unrelated to Jesus Christ. The problem may be rooted in the philosophy and goals of much contemporary spirituality. As people seek self-realization based upon a prosperity gospel, they have forgotten the theology of the cross and the concept of dying to self. Authentic Christian communities have a unique opportunity to receive into their fellowship those who seek authentic spirituality and join with them in their search for a deeper meaning in life.

A basic question is, “If North Americans have this desire to pursue spirituality, why are there fewer and fewer people moving through mainline church doors?” Many who turned to Christianity seeking truth and meaning have left empty-handed, confused by the apparent inability of Christians to implement the principles they profess. Fenton Johnson describes this as “the ‘comfortable mediocrity’ of congregations that feed on a diet of religious consumables that never touch the heart of their longings.”⁵⁸ People do not come to the church because they believe the church cannot meet their needs, or because people see church members who do not practice what they preach. Mainline churches, therefore, could benefit from an evaluation of how well they meet people’s needs.

⁵⁷ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 57-65.

⁵⁸ Fenton Johnson, quoted in Herb Knudsen, “Five Keys to Discovering 21st Century Church: 5th Key—Practicing Misional Community,” *The Christian* 53, (November 2001): n.p..
<http://cciwdisciples.org/Letters-Herb/FiveKeys21stCenturyChurch5.pdf>

Barna suggests that the church evaluate its current discipleship situation. He defines discipleship as “activity that guides individuals to become spiritually mature zealots for Christ who then reproduce equally passionate and mature followers of Christ.”⁵⁹ Barna identifies nine reasons revealed through his research that explain why the American church has difficulty igniting authentic passionate discipleship spirituality:

- (1) Few churches or Christians have a clear and measurable definition of “spiritual success”;
- (2) We have typically defined “discipleship” as head knowledge rather than complete transformation;
- (3) We have chosen to teach people in random, rather than systematic, ways;
- (4) There is virtually no accountability for what we say, think, do or believe;
- (5) When it comes to discipleship, we promote programs rather than people;
- (6) The primary method on which churches rely for spiritual development – small groups – typically fails to provide comprehensive spiritual nurture;
- (7) Church leaders are not zealous about the spiritual development of people;
- (8) We invest our resources in adults rather than children;
- (9) We divert our best leaders to ministries other than discipleship.⁶⁰

Barna’s nine points have been a common pattern for mainlines for decades. Recently, however, ELCA and other mainline churches have demonstrated a growing trend towards discipleship development and strategic planning practiced at effective denominational and non-denominational churches.⁶¹ Naming reality, discovering what needs to be developed, leads to practical institutional solutions.

Institutional Solutions

Schaller and Barna believe that churches must raise the bar of membership (discipleship) expectations from low to higher levels. As the expectations are raised,

⁵⁹ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 73.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 74-81.

⁶¹ Mike Regele and Mark Schulz, *A Denominational Comparison Report for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (Rancho Santa Margarita, CA: Percept Group, 2003), 4.

people are challenged to be dynamic disciples rather than passive observers. These higher expectations may become uncomfortable for those focused on church membership numbers. As Schaller relates:

For many congregations that had been drifting toward the low expectation end of the spectrum for several decades, the big surprise came when the new pastor arrived and began to move that congregation in a reverse direction toward high expectations. Frequently this was accompanied by (1) an increase in the worship attendance, (2) the replacement of the aging and long-tenured volunteer leaders by younger people, (3) a drop in the median age of the membership, and (4) the exodus of thirty or more longtime, but now unhappy, members who left in protest—and six months later were not missed.⁶²

Lewis argues that church culture can change through the higher expectations of new members, while retaining established members and minimizing church conflict.⁶³

Schaller summarizes a variety of approaches churches have taken to meet people where they are as individuals search for authentic spirituality:

The huge increase in the number of weekend spiritual retreats designed for the laity; . . . the recent rapid growth in the number of congregations launching off-campus ministries designed to reach people in the ‘pre-Christian stage of their faith journey’; the growth in the number of high school students engaged in regular in-depth Bible study; the increase in the time allotted to a period of intercessory prayer in the typical Sunday morning worship service from a couple of minutes to a quarter to one-half hour; the emergence of the spiritual growth movement; the classes for believers designed to help them improve their skills in articulating and sharing their faith; . . . (a growing number of congregations have raised transforming believers into disciples as the top priority at the old campus and have launched several new off-campus ministries where the top priority is persuading inquirers, skeptics, doubters, searchers, seekers,

⁶² Lyle E. Schaller, *Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999, 46.

⁶³ Robert Lewis, “Building Bridges of Irresistible Influence to Your Community,” (main session, The Church of Irresistible Influence Conference, Little Rock, AR, May 11, 2005).

pilgrims, agnostics, and self-identified disillusioned ex-church members of the truth and relevance of the Christian gospel).⁶⁴

Whether people are church attenders, have never attended church, or left the church long ago, they seek something authentic, proven transformed lives. The church's primary purpose is the transformation of lives through the gospel of Jesus Christ into mature disciples who can become disciples leading others to discipleship.

Ogden and Cole agree that personal discipleship is most productive when practiced making a few disciples at a time and can have a multiplying effect. Both suggest a triad as the ideal discipleship group size that promotes extensive discussion, instills core values from the start, and encourages prayer and outreach to others. Cole wrote, "A strong church begins with a strong disciple who makes more strong disciples, who then go on to make more, and so on and so on and so on."⁶⁵ On a city-wide scale, Lewis' Men's Fraternity ministry uses accountability groups of men who meet weekly in Little Rock, Arkansas. They center their activities on biblical teaching in a large group, then disperse for deeper discussion in small groups. This produces disciples who in turn, make disciples of Christ.

Barna describes five effective discipleship models that lead to passionate congregational spirituality. Two models in particular are potential solutions in the FLC context. Barna describes the lecture-lab model which:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 32-33.

⁶⁵ Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1999), 29.

Focuses upon delivering content through sermons (i.e., lecture) and using small groups as the means of exploring the content further to conceive of, and follow through on, applications (i.e., the laboratory). The bottom line in this model is gleaning knowledge and building faith-based relationships that lead to godly character and Christian service.⁶⁶

Everything in this model is Word-centered: the teaching, the relationships, the accountability process, and service emphasis.⁶⁷ Energy is concentrated on principle-centered, expository sermons with small group resources provided for deeper study and practical application.

The missional model is the second model, FLC has explored it extensively, and it is used in the church's mission statement and core competencies.⁶⁸ A Personal Development Plan (PDP) helps people determine which of the six outcomes they desire to develop. Every person who becomes a church member is required to be in a small group, and the small group chooses what studies, classes, or service they do together. All specialty classes are based on the six core, missional qualities, and missional ministry through service is expected and facilitated by group consensus or individual pursuits.

A Missional Model Illustration

Janiese Karpa, Director of Small Group Ministries at FLC, paraphrases Robert Lewis' work that illustrates Schaller's points:

Fellowship Bible Church of Little Rock, Arkansas, started out with a desire for authentic, God-indwelt Christian lives. They came up with a mission statement that would offer identity and direction:

⁶⁶ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 119.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

“We exist to manifest the reality of Christ to the world by equipping Christians to live lifestyles of spiritual integrity.”

The thought was that if our lives don't look changed, what good is our claim about a life changing God? If we can't outlive the world at every point- in our marriages, with our children, at work, with money, in our relationships, in the use of our time- why dare to speak of salvation and the abundant life? Incarnation of the Word must precede proclamation of the Word. Changing lifestyles became the driving big idea, they preached it and their small groups practiced it. Of course, this emphasis on lifestyle is constantly being challenged with divorce, fear, immorality, desire for success, need to be liked etc. Their path was, by choice neither easy nor safe. But it would still take several years to make the picture come clear. Fellowship Bible Church discovered that equipping Christians to live lifestyles of spiritual integrity was not wrong, it simply was not enough. Therefore, they added to their mission statement the following: “and to equip Christians for influential works of service in our community and the world.” It was the idea that the church should be and must be, at the core, a compelling force of influence- first in lifestyle, then in good works.⁶⁹

Finally, Schaller says there is the demand for congregations that:

Clearly understand the questions, the agendas, the needs, the yearnings, the concerns, and the fears that people bring to the church; communicate to people that this congregation understands them and their questions; provide relevant, meaningful, high-quality, and biblically based responses to those agendas; consistently offer a note of hope and a word of comfort to all worshipers; challenge people to continue their personal spiritual journey; offer a broad range of challenging opportunities for people to progress in that pilgrimage; recognize the differences between the self-identified believer and the committed disciple and expect to enable people to move from the believer stage to discipleship; challenge both believers and disciples to be engaged in doing ministry and offer many meaningful opportunities to be involved; present to people a wide variety of opportunities to find a sense of community in a smaller group within that congregation and to be nurtured and supported by that community of Christians; place a high value on learning; offer an expanding range of choices in everything from worship to learning to involvement in doing ministry; are highly intentional in planning all aspects of ministry; offer a variety of attractive entry points to inquirers, agnostics, seekers, searchers,

⁶⁹ Lewis and Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, 59-62.

pilgrims, and others on a self-identified faith journey; and place a premium on competence and quality.⁷⁰

Mainline churches can explore several effective discipleship models based on their context and theology, and then draw up a discipleship plan. This supports the thesis that biblically-based strategies informed by a specific context can be effectively employed to make, mature, and mobilize Christians for apostolic discipleship.

Transition 3: From a Barn Mentality to a Harvest Heart

As mainline Protestant churches succeed in vital ministry and transform the church into a passionate priesthood of believers, it is not enough if it remains contained within the church walls. The transformation of passive and complacent Christians to those with passion is still focused on self-improvement. The congregants may still be contained within church walls, albeit as healthier Christians. Contagious Christians can be given tools and training and become disciples of Christ who are sent apostolically into the field. Using the agrarian metaphor, passionate Christians who do not go into the mission field are like farmers with bags of seeds who have no idea how or where to scatter seeds.

The first step in this transition is to help congregants stop thinking about the church as a place. Church leaders can facilitate transitions from maintenance-modes to missional communities, from generic congregations to incarnational communities.⁷¹ This

⁷⁰ Schaller, *The New Reformation*, 66.

⁷¹ Gibbs, *Church Next*, 217-239.

will be a paradigm shift from the church as a place, to church as a moving presence.

Guder writes:

“Church” is conceived in this view as *the place where* a Christianized civilization gathers for worship, and *the place where* the Christian character of the society is cultivated. Increasingly, this view of the church as a “place where certain things happen” located the church’s self-identity in its organizational forms and its professional class, the clergy, who perform the church’s authoritative activities. Popular grammar captures it well: you “go to church” much the same way you might go to a store. You “attend” a church, the way you attend a school or theater. You “belong to a church” as you would a service club with its programs and activities.⁷²

Many current congregations are fixated on the church building, and established churches have become immobile, fixated in a building location mentality. Churches have become another consumer’s marketplace facility with weekly advertisements and sales to draw people in for services. To be apostolic, however, is to be sent out and to lead by example.

Cole has documented this building-centric mindset, which he summarizes as: “Buildings, budgets, and big-shots”.⁷³ Since the Middle Ages and the building of great Cathedrals in Europe, Christians have viewed the building as the House of God. Proper maintenance of God’s house and God’s staff required increasing financial resources.

Like the many farmers who could no longer keep a sustainable way of life farming after the Farm Crisis described in the Introduction of this paper, many churches are unable to sustain building maintenance, extensive budgets, and the rise in cost of a pastor’s complete package. It is necessary to break this model and mentality for churches to modernize and survive. The author has observed churches that adopt a missional model

⁷² Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 80.

⁷³ Cole, “Church Multiplication Movements.”

often gain resources, draw people from stagnant, unsustainable, or dying churches, and expand building space, land, and personnel.

To become a church focused outward, the elimination of debt and of maintenance costs must be managed. This leads to refocusing of church resources including, people, property, time, and education, toward the transformation of the surrounding community. It involves a shift from an inward, edifice-focused viewpoint, to a viewpoint focused passionately on the lost. The congregation becomes compelled to witness in its community and embody the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Scattering seeds (Matt 13:3-9) involves the bold acts of inviting the seeker and seeking the unbeliever, curious, or interested outsider. It is a missional mentality that leads Christians into the harvest fields (Matt 9:37). Church leadership can urge its disciples to be missional and help them understand the nature of a missional community. In relation to physical assets, some churches live by the philosophy: “If we build it, they will come,” but this concept is rooted in the notion that the community should come to the church. Inviting prospects to experience worship is important, but the desired endpoint is that Christians walk a missional, outreach, discipleship journey and bring others with. This requires the church to equip maturing disciples, teach them skills for the harvest field, and coach them in conversations around faith issues.

Missional hearts will emerge when church members move from the stationary edifice-focus to disciples who are sent on a mission. Cole uses the acronym DNA in reference to a church’s central tenets: D stands for Divine truth, N stands for Nurturing relationships, and A stands for Apostolic mission. Cole defines apostolic mission in these

terms: “By ‘apostolic’ we mean sent. The church is to be a sent agency, not a sending agency. Jesus said, ‘as the father has sent me, so send I you.’ (John 20:21)”⁷⁴ Gibbs develops this concept in figure 5.⁷⁵

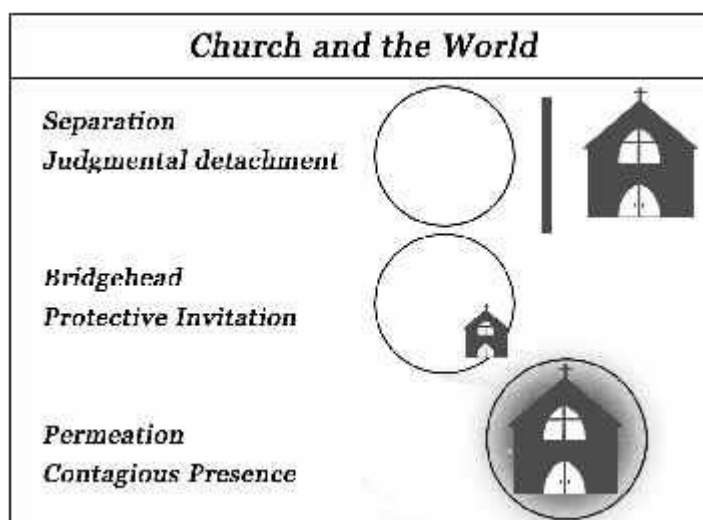


Figure 5. Gibb’s Conceptual Model of the Missional Church

Many churches function and promote themselves as entities separate from the world and operate with “judgmental detachment.” Consequently, 80-85 percent of mainline churches stagnate or decline because isolated separatists can have no real impact on the culture. The bridgehead concept depicts the church moving into the culture, although still hesitant to shake some salt or shine some light in the places that need the seasoning and illumination. The radical, more effective concept is the church immersed

⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁵ Gibbs, “Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World,” 12.

in the world, permeating and transforming the culture, a contagious presence that leaves its mark everywhere. The church is in the culture as an irresistible influence.

Randy Frazee's ideas challenge Christians to reverse the pattern of cultural isolation by focusing on natural relationships that are close to the culture and offer opportunity for frequent interactions. Frazee challenges Christians to approach their neighbors and create relational networks by freeing up activities that involve travel in the evenings. He calls this convivium and post-convivium time based on a Hebrew Day Planner.⁷⁶ In order to permeate the culture, Frazee argues that, "The (dinner) table is the centerpiece and heart of community."⁷⁷ For example, convivium is time for a home-cooked meal when each person shares the day's activities, describes the past, and relates future dreams. This relational, connecting time with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers creates links and becomes an opportunity for the contagious presence of Christ.

Institutional Solutions

The institutional church can move beyond the edifice fixation, institutional isolation, and costs of staff and building maintenance, and mobilize the workers for the harvest. Here are some examples:

⁷⁶ Frazee, *Making Room For Life*, 45-68.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

First Lutheran Church, Blooming Prairie, Minnesota

This concept describes a partnership of small churches with larger congregations.⁷⁸ This model was developed in the Dakotas and depends upon the largest church in the area as the hub for surrounding country churches. The Pastor, Christian Education Director, Youth Director, and lay ministers equip and organize area ministries. Each church may have its own Sunday school, but there may be a unified youth and family ministry if churches are located in the same school system. Resources are shared rather than confined to one church. Bridges are built as people see themselves as Christians in partnership, not as separate churches competing for members. A collaboration of hearts, minds, and efforts is the goal of this model that joins hands in service for wider community impact.

Fellowship Bible Church (FBC) in Little Rock, Arkansas

The following is an extended paraphrase of Lewis' ideas:

A vision through the grid of the New Testament Church leaves the idea of the church being a “club” or church “success story” becomes noxious. The leadership of the church must envision for their people the church as profiled by Jesus and the church of the New Testament: a church passionately committed to Jesus Christ and to the proclamation of the gospel; a church of winsome lifestyles punctuated by high moral standards; and a church of radical love and selfless good deeds that amazes the world around it.

A vision of a church that loves its enemies and moves courageously out rather than retreating comfortingly “in” and in that process proves its authenticity. *The New Testament vision must find its way back into our congregations!*

⁷⁸ Richard Hegal, telephone conversation with author, March 18, 2003.

Fellowship Bible Church was experiencing uninterrupted growth and its members were actively serving and supporting one another. But they were forced to ask: Now what? Should we plan on more of the same? Should we consider a different path?

Over the option of ever expanding institutionalism they chose a biblical vision of influence. This immediately translated a shift through three major decisions, resulting in specific and dramatic changes: (1) Finish the church campus and halt their never-ending construction. The facility that they had with its fairly balanced distribution worship, education and office space, would be *used* more but would not significantly *grow* more. (2) Chose to eliminate all debt to help maximize their ability to give large amounts of money and resources away. (3) Chose to hire “specialty staff” to help maximize bridge building efforts to the community through strategic initiatives. The new staff members would be community focused, not church focused.⁷⁹

These changes led to viewing influence as the priority and growth as merely a by-product.

Churches may prioritize the care of individuals currently participating in the church. When the church focuses intently on this internal care of its members, it may neglect those who are not connected to the church, but need the Lord. A transformation from an edifice mentality to a missional heart involves a shift from thinking primarily about church people’s particular needs, to the needs of the wider community.

Transition 4: From Hierarchical Organizations to Apostolic Networks

As a seed must die in the earth to bring forth new life (John 12:24), so must mainline denominations die to bring forth a fruitful yield. As stated previously, one problem has been that the church has neglected Luther’s vision of the “priesthood of all believers” due to the church’s emphasis on a professional, and clergy-centered system.

⁷⁹ Lewis and Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, 74-75.

Some congregants may believe themselves undereducated spiritually compared to the pastor, and this fosters the belief that “I can’t do that, only the pastor is equipped to do it.” Another mentality is, “we hired the pastor to do the ministry *for* the people.” The dying process involves reversing this pyramid with the concept that bishops, pastors, staff, and leaders of the church serve by equipping congregants to do the work of ministry. Leadership plays this role by equipping the saints for apostolic mission.

Martin Luther had the servant leadership role in mind. Although Luther was a devout student and rising in authority and influence in the church of his time, he challenged the hierarchy to create a more level or ecclesiastical organization. He said, “Everyone who has been baptized may claim that he already has been consecrated a priest, bishop or pope. . . . Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian be assured of this, and apply it to himself- that we are all priests, and there is no difference between us.”⁸⁰ Finally, as the hierarchical structure dissipates by teaching congregants the basics of Christianity and discipleship, a grassroots dissemination of apostolic networks can emerge.

Luther’s grassroots notion of a priesthood of all believers did not come to fruition in his time; however, the concept of “every member a minister” has become a major renewal emphasis in a variety of churches.⁸¹ This concept suggests that, as a minister of the gospel, each person is a bi-vocational pastor. Like the apostle Paul, each person

⁸⁰ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1943), 282-283.

⁸¹ Ogden, *The New Reformation*, 74.

works and provides an adequate income. The Christian's primary calling as children of God, however, is as a messenger who carries the gospel.

Gibbs writes that pastors can restructure their ministries and focus on mission, equipping congregants, and the multiplication of ministers.⁸² Congregations with multiple staff members, can expect staff will serve, equip, and mobilize members as lay ministers. The multiplication of ministry is an apprenticeship model that encourages a mentor to take a learner under the mentor's wing and teach the learner effective ministry behaviors.

As mainline seminaries struggle to sustain student enrollment and supply churches with needed pastors, and as churches gradually decline, denominations may hear a wake-up call and re-examine how leadership and ministry function in the church. Leadership development and the process of equipping leaders can take new forms. Innovations have begun to appear. For example, many seminaries make courses accessible online, and others offer immersion programs on vibrant church campuses where practice and theory go hand in hand.⁸³ Personal experience indicates the process of calling a new pastor sometimes by-passes procedures through the bishops or local synod but moves through connections and networks.

Instead of a hierarchical paradigm, post moderns live in an era of networks. "Today's national structures are crumbling not only because they are designed for an utterly different world, but also because they were geared for a world which handled

⁸² Gibbs, "Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World," 14.

⁸³ Ibid., 15.

information, people, and resources in radically different ways.”⁸⁴ This emphasis is on managing an interlocking web of networks where different approaches to organization, control, and leadership are needed. There is a greater focus on communication, cooperation through debate and negotiation, and ultimate collaboration of efforts and resources.⁸⁵

Vital to effective change is the movement towards decentralization, which many businesses have wrestled with over the years.⁸⁶ American businesses have generally been hierarchical in nature, with a clearly defined chain of command. Several layers of interposing management stood between the average worker and the decision makers in power, and it was unacceptable to approach those in power with a problem directly. In the post World War II era, Japanese business adopted a new model that placed the decision making power in the hands of the average worker, and it was considered socially acceptable, and even encouraged, for workers to take difficult problems directly to the leadership of the company. This change was dramatically successful and U.S. businesses adopted elements of this approach to remain competitive.⁸⁷ In the same way, the church must adapt its practices to put the power back in the workers hands.

The decentralization movement from hierarchical organizations to apostolic networks occurs on three levels: national (denominational level), regional (synods), and

⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 143.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 144.

local (individual churches). On the national level, decentralization means ecumenism and the tearing down of boundaries between Christian denominations. The national level church can network with other Christian groups and disseminate information on effective programs and techniques. “In the modern world leadership was about getting *ahead* of others. In the postmodern world, leadership is about getting *along* with others and getting others to go along with you.”⁸⁸ Hence, partnerships are growing between Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans and others who communicate, reconcile, and partner in ministry.

Schaller reports:

The traditional system of congregations relying on denominational structures as the basis for relation to other churches gradually will continue to fade away. The replacement system will be networks of like-minded congregations working together in ministry and mission. Some of these will be intra-denominational networks working across judicatory boundaries. Others will be nondenominational or interdenominational networks,⁸⁹

This is happening among Willow Creek Association congregations, Evangelical denominational networks, and in partnerships of neighboring and like-minded churches in the community.

On the regional level, decentralization requires the church transition from a decision-making body to one where its primary purpose is to train and equip the churches as disciple-makers. Schaller writes, “A third response to that overloaded agenda is being followed by a small but growing number of regional judicatories. One version devotes

⁸⁸ Schaller, *Discontinuity and Hope*, 193.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

seventy to ninety percent of that judicatory's resources to a single goal: enabling congregations to fulfill the great Commission."⁹⁰

Schaller declares that local denominational staffs can return to ground zero and reconfigure how they serve as equipping consultants to increase congregational health and initiatives. Schaller proposes that a denomination's local synod become a mission agency in which it hands over power by offering training and equipping services. They would have a greater role in mentoring alongside missionaries, the churches themselves.⁹¹

On the local level, decentralization requires alterations in power structures, decision-making and planning, and turning the local church from a clergy-centered approach to an empowered body of believers. "Permission-giving churches encourage autonomous, on-the-spot decision making by collaborative individuals and self-organizing teams."⁹² The goal is the empowerment of all people who make decisions at any time or place, no matter the circumstances. It moves the structure from committees that report to the governing council, to frontline task forces without stamps of approval for every action. This does not eliminate the need for communication with the leadership of the congregation, but it allows a fluid, quicker response, unhindered by lengthy decision-making processes. Individuals, groups, and churches band together for broader, united, and irresistible influence.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁹¹ Ibid., 211.

⁹² William Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere by Anyone* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 52.

This ultimately creates a decentralized church. Bill Easum discusses this decentralization:

The pyramid will be inverted, no longer top-down but bottom up initiatives and innovations; the leadership model will be from one of conducting the orchestra to rather, leading the jazz band (Max DePree); the challenge will be to achieve decentralization without causing fragmentation; commitment to mission, vision and values must be ensured; a team-based ministry approach will thrive best; and finally, spiritual gifts do not blossom well in a controlling environment, hence, the freedom to live out one's gifts with few limits will lead to vitality.⁹³

As the church becomes decentralized and is based on networks of relationships between churches and community organizations, it can become a counter-cultural force.

Christianity becomes a powerful influence as passionate spirituality combines with open partnerships in the gospel that transcend previous boundaries or walls. As this happens, the church loses its institutionalism and returns to its roots as a system of networks. A network creates activity, spreads, and multiplies.⁹⁴ Cole defines this dynamic as a Church Multiplication Movement with a "rapid multiplication of indigenous church planting churches within a specific group or population."⁹⁵

Churches based on networking structures are permission-giving churches characterized by these tenets: an organic self-generating structure, a decentralized mode for operation with collaborative task forces, information is freely available and not restricted to a powerful elite, ministries arise out of passion and giftedness, laity do most

⁹³ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁴ Cole, "Church Multiplication Movements," 6.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 6.

of the pastoral work, there is a rapid response or more bottom-up initiatives, and the role of the pastor is primarily to equip, empower and mentor.⁹⁶ The fluid structure and elimination of a management mentality are major adjustments for churches accustomed to hierarchical schemes.

Examples of the leveled playing field and increased networking include: city-wide youth and young adult worship gatherings, associations of pastors and ministry leaders meeting monthly that build relationships and learn about pressing community and ministry issues, city-wide initiatives that involve collaboration among multiple churches in service activities, staff teams interdependently working together and relying on one another's gifts and abilities.⁹⁷ Networking partnerships in the gospel are growing and expand the influence and impact of ministry.

Conclusion

In order to survive and flourish in the twenty-first century, traditional mainline churches including First Lutheran Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, can concentrate on transforming transitions. This focus is critical in a world of chaotic change. Traditional churches can update their worldview, account for chaotic change, and discover and adopt effective ministry methods in the current cultural context(s). It involves new discipleship initiatives, discontent with complacency, provision of opportunities and resources for ministry, and passion for increased spirituality. New life in the church results when God's

⁹⁶ Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*, 49-57.

⁹⁷ Schaller, *Discontinuity and Hope*, 119-123.

people are transformed by the gospel and employ intentional discipleship strategies.

While care for the congregant remains important, the primary people who provide the care are the entire congregation, not only the clergy. A sign of a missional congregation is care given to neighbors, friends, co-workers, the unchurched, strangers, and other community segments.

The missional heart leads apostolic disciples to care for the seekers' needs by going to them, rather than expecting the seekers to seek out the church. The church levels the playing field as bishops, pastors, lay leaders, and congregants live for Christ and the church becomes an apostolic network to the world. The networking partnerships of Christians, congregations, and organizations multiply in the community. The mobilization of the people of God occurs through integrity of loving works of service that demonstrate Christians love and follow Jesus. As the church achieves these goals with the help of the Holy Spirit, the church will move from an edifice focus to a missional mindset for Christ's sake. These biblically sound strategies prove effective in making, maturing, and mobilizing apostolic disciples.

The next chapter describes a theology for spiritual maturation essential in the realignment of an edifice mentality to a missional focus.