

**ADAPTIVE CHURCHES IN A CHANGING WORLD:
The Mission Has Changed!**
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Selected Scripture

When Peggy and I lived in Washington, DC, we were part of a new church start called Washington Community Fellowship. It was affiliated with the Mennonite Church (the shiny bumper kind), but you could keep your membership with your own denomination as well. Forty-five of us huddled in the basement of a Lutheran Church dreaming and scheming about how we could be a church for the poor and the powerful. It was wonderful. We had no Constitution, no By-Laws, no prescribed worship format, no hide-bound traditions, just a bunch of believers who loved the Mennonite accent on service, community, discipleship and following Jesus by our best lights.

We eventually bought an old Lutheran church that a construction company was using as a storage shed. We worshiped there for a number of months sitting on metal chairs, warmed with kerosene heaters, under bear light bulbs. That spring and summer, with forty-five thousand dollars and a construction crew of volunteers from the Mennonite Volunteer Service, we renovated the sanctuary, church offices and the attached parsonage.

We also discovered there were 70,000 new Salvadoran immigrants in Washington, DC, due to the civil war there. One of our worshippers had been a missionary kid in Latin America. He and his wife spoke fluent Spanish and began a ministry with the Salvadoran people called "Casa de la Esperanza" (House of Hope) and helped families with housing, jobs, food, and adapting to American culture.

We also went to the local elementary school and asked the principal how she could use our service. She was thrilled and said she needed tutors. What started out as some young adults helping neighborhood kids with their homework, blossomed into a full-blown independent ministry. In the next few months, the tutoring team investigated computer based

learning, had IBM donate a room full of computers and launched the Neighborhood Learning Center. The program eventually grew to such an extent that they set up a separate incorporation and began setting up centers elsewhere in the city and out-of-state. That ministry is still active today.

We also discovered that we had a high teenage pregnancy rate and low infant birthrate in our neighborhood with few services. So we set up a Crisis Pregnancy Center that provided free pregnancy tests, parenting classes, help with finding housing, baby clothes and furniture, and whatever a young women needed if she decided to carry to term. That ministry too spun off from the church and incorporated separately and is alive and well and flourishing today.

I'm not sharing these stories as a brag-fest, but to illustrate that when a church decides that its purpose is mission and people are free to pursue dreams and meet needs in the world, all kinds of creative activity can happen. It was because of that experience in the church that I decided to go into pastoral ministry. This past March, Peggy, Anna and I went to Washington to help them celebrate their 25th anniversary. But lest you think this is an ideal church, they had their first church fight after about 15 years and had to call in a consultant.

Let's first take a look at many of our churches still do things. Does this ever happen at the First Congregational Church of Reading?

- People are less than thrilled to be on the Nominating Committee.
- There are often "open slots" in the Nominating Committee's report at Annual Meeting.
- People are "exhausted" at ends of terms and don't want to serve again.

How long has FCCR been following this same system wishing for different results?

Many congregations are in this dilemma; our system is not working but we don't know how to change it. For good or for ill, this is the way that most churches work, particularly the historic,

mainline churches. If I am a newcomer and come to a new member meeting, the pastor or church will probably:

- Inform me of all the activities at the church.
- Invite me to serve on a board or committee based on the church's needs and not my gifts or interests.
- Supervise my work with several layers of administration.
- Try to keep me happy and assume my faith is growing.

There is, however, another emerging pattern that many churches are trying given the realities of modern life and spiritual hunger among newcomers. In this model, if I am a newcomer, you will probably:

- Ask me what I need to grow and go deeper in my faith. You will often find a small group to meet my need.
- Over time you will help me to discover my gifts and my calling to use those gifts (again often in a small group).
- You will then train me to utilize those gifts to the best of my ability. Excellence will be valued.
- You will then team me with other like-gifted people so that I may go deeper in my faith in Jesus and utilize God's gift to be a blessing to the community.

Which model makes sense to you? The traditional model tends to lead to burnout and drop out. The transformational model tends to lead to great faith, energy and mission. The traditional model focuses on maintaining an institution. The transformational model focuses on mission and ministry. The traditional model focuses on buildings and programs. The transformational model focuses on building people and making mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

A life-giving church has enough structure to get the job done, yet enough flexibility for people to adapt to the changing realities of the community, the needs of the congregation, and the life circumstances of volunteers. If the goal of any church is merely to maintain the institution then it is missing the main point of the Christian faith, which is to be a church for others by calling persons to faith in Christ, training disciples and being salt and light in the world.

But as we've learned in the past few weeks, the world has changed. In former times it was "the thing to do to go to church." Participating in a local congregation was automatic for a person of faith (and even no faith!). We celebrate the many things that were accomplished during those days of the church culture—buildings, fellowship halls, youth groups, women's circles, choirs, etc.

But the day of the church culture is over and the day of ministry & mission has come. In present times, we live on a vast mission field of un-churched people. Going to church is no longer the thing to do. In fact, in current times North America is among the largest mission fields on the planet. Fifty to eighty percent of every community is effectively un-churched. Foreign countries are now sending missionaries to the United States. Some people estimate that the United States is now the third largest recipient of foreign missionaries.

The implications of this change from a church culture to a mission field have profoundly affected how congregations are organized. Interestingly, many of the structural characteristics that were strengths in the church culture have become limitations to doing effective ministry. There is a long list of differences between church culture churches and mission oriented churches. The differences are all connected, one feeding the next and all related to each other. Let me share just a few:

- A church culture structure focuses on functions to be achieved. Tasks needed to be accomplished and structures were created to complete those tasks. As such, they tend to be top-down organizations. Most will even have a pyramid-type organization chart showing who has authority over whom. There are specific rules that control most decisions. Significant amounts of time are spent dealing with relatively minor matters. While the "voters" may be asked to "approve" ideas, in reality a few people make most decisions that are then "sold" to the voters.
- In missional churches, the emphasis is on the relational aspects. The needed activities are achieved, but the emphasis is on relationships between people and ministry rather than on lines of reporting responsibility. Missional congregations have very open structures. Many different types of groups are empowered to develop and execute

ministry activities. The mission of the congregation becomes the focus of activities. They have a simple and streamlined structure. Mission, not structure, is the central theme. If the structure interferes with accomplishing some ministry, then the structure is changed.

- In a church culture, tasks are accomplished by many committees conducting monthly meetings. In their hey-day, often large numbers of people were on each committee, usually to assure that nobody became too powerful. Members of the committees were there because they felt a sense of responsibility, or “nobody else would do it.” Significant amounts of time are spent dealing with relatively minor matters.
- In a missional church, action teams containing the appropriate number of people accomplish most of a church’s work. They meet when they need to meet and do not meet when it is not necessary. Task force members volunteer for the group and are motivated to serve in the ministry area that matches their gifts and interests.
- Church culture churches spend much of their leadership meeting time and most of their planning time dealing with weaknesses and problems. Commonly, the leadership meetings start with a financial report that indicates to the leaders that money is tight. Perceived lack of money causes leaders to set aside missional activities, or anything new, until income rises.
- Missional churches focus on their strengths and are not intimidated by their problems. For example, a church culture congregation in a low-income area often postpones ministry until others bail them out. The opposite is a thriving missional church in a low-income area that simply refuses to have its ministry limited by lack of money. It uses the gifts God has given it to accomplish realistic, missional goals.
- Church culture churches fear mistakes. They are organized to prevent mistakes. They would rather kill a new idea than take even a slight chance that the new idea will prove to be a mistake. In so doing, they limit themselves to their historical activities—even when those activities are no longer effective. Planning for next year always begins with repeating what was done the previous year, years, or decades.
- Creativity is the heart and soul of the activities of missional congregations. They are eager, not reckless, to try creative new ideas. They empower small task forces and action teams to try new ministry activities and avoid second-guessing their decisions. They will have programs that do not work out, but those failed programs are celebrated as opportunities to learn. These congregations exhibit high levels of trust. The leaders trust others to make effective ministry decisions within the context of the overall ministry direction determined by the congregation as a whole.

Many of you have heard of the “20-80” rule regarding church work and stewardship: 20% of the people do 80% of the work and 20% of the people give 80% of the budget. This is generally true of many of our churches. Kennon Callahan, a church growth and management specialist, puts a different spin on it. He suggests that within congregational decision making,

twenty percent of all decisions generate eighty percent of the ministry results. Conversely, eighty percent of the decisions made by a congregation create only twenty percent of the ministry results. He encourages leaders to spend the most time on twenty-percent decisions, and delegate eighty-percent decisions to one or two empowered people.

Some examples of the questions that generate twenty-percent decisions are:

- Share the primary mission of this church be ministry to children, youth and their families?
- If the primary ministry is to children, youth and their families, shall we create a nursery and a pre-school? What kind of staff do we need to hire?
- Because we previously decided to be a missional church to the different types of people in our community, shall we offer more than one type of worship service each week? Who is the worship service for primarily, insiders or outsiders, seekers or followers?
- Who is God calling us to serve? What are their human hope and hurts?
- What are our gifts, strengths, and competencies? How shall we harness them and structure our congregation to use them to maximum benefit?

Most leadership in congregations spends the vast majority of their time grappling with eighty-percent decisions. While these need to be made, none of them has a major impact on the overall ministry experience of the church. A small group of people can often make these decisions not requiring the input of the pastor, deacons, or council. An example of the questions that lead to eighty-percent decisions and gobble up most of our time are:

- Shall we spend \$300 to repair the photocopier?
- Shall we accept the donation of the artificial Christmas tree?
- What color will we paint the walls of the bathroom?
- Should the ushers have badges with their names printed on them, should they be allowed to take them home, should there be a fine if they fail to bring them back for services, how much should the fine be, and what will we do with the accumulated money?

Sound familiar?

Yes, it's a new day of ministry full of possibilities and potential. But as we have been learning in our groups studying *Unbinding the Gospel*, unless our structures and activities are fueled with a passionate love for Jesus Christ and his work in the world, unless we are having an active and living relationship with God, unless we are learning and living the

disciplines of daily prayer, Bible study, spiritual companionship, meditation, hospitality, worship and Sabbath keeping, discernment and service, we will be dead in the water.

You can't give something you don't have. You can dip into the well of your inner life only so many times before it runs dry. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) Abide means to cling to, trust, depend upon, draw strength and nurture from, and rest in. It doesn't happen automatically. It requires discipline and intentionality. Faith is like a muscle; you've got to use it if you want to strengthen it.

Speaking of muscles, during this past 2007-2008 NFL regular season, New England Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady set the record for most touchdown passes in a regular season, paving the way for his winning the MVP award. At the age of 30, he has already won three SuperBowls—an accomplishment that sets him apart as one of the best quarterbacks to ever play the game.

Brady sat down for a 2007 television interview with *60 Minutes* journalist Steve Kroft. Despite the fame and career accomplishments, Brady told Kroft that it felt like something was still lacking in his life, saying:

Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what [it's all about]. I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, 'It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't—this can't be—all it's cracked up to be."

Kroft pressed Brady as to what the right answer was, and Brady added:

What's the answer? I wish I knew... I love playing football, and I love being quarterback for this team. But at the same time, I think there are a lot of other parts about me that I'm trying to find.

Folks, it's just like Bruce Springstein said, "Everybody's got a hungry heart." And we've got some Good News; our God wants to fill that hungry heart. Let's go find ways to do that.