IMPLEMENTING CHANGE IN THE TRADITIONAL CHURCHES

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IMPLEMENTING CHANGE IN THE TRADITIONAL CHURCHES

Between the cultural shift to postmodernism and the rising problem of membership declines, traditional churches may need to retool or reinvigorate their visions, missions, strategies, and organizational structures. This rapid shift in the popular culture has caused many churches to make drastic changes; unfortunately, some stray from sound doctrine and others retreat into their own traditions. While some churches facing crisis may choose this second option which avoids resistance brought on by change, they will ultimately have to discover what will help them become effective or face future closure.

Frank Viola states that churches “need to rethink [their] entire concept of church and discover it afresh through the lens of Jesus and the apostles.”¹ Churches and their members may need to consider their values and then contemplate their actions based on those values. Churches (their leaders and members) need to take another look at their motivation. Are they motivated to reach the unchurched because of their desires to be successful at growing the church? Should the church focus on the quantity of its membership at the expense of quality? As the cultures continue to shift rapidly from modernism to postmodernism, traditional churches must reaffirm their commitment to the

Great Commission while at the same time developing new traditions that fit the new cultural context.²

The Danger of Tradition

In the days of Christ’s earthly ministry, the keepers of tradition were the Pharisees. In Matthew 15:2, the Pharisees accuse the disciples of breaking the tradition of hand-washing before taking a meal. In response, Jesus says,

> And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Any one who curses his father or mother must be put to death. But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to honor his father with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition (Matt 15:3-6, NIV).

In His rebuke of the Pharisees, Jesus does not condemn the practice of washing one’s hands before a meal; rather, he speaks against putting any such tradition before one of God’s commandments. In other words, the Pharisees should have first made sure that they were living in obedience to God’s Word. Jesus’ response also demonstrates that God’s priority is not on any particular man-made tradition but on His people living obediently according to His word. Perhaps the time has come for the church to reconsider whether or not any of their traditions have taken precedence over the commands of Scriptures. While every church develops traditions, it is important that the church be willing to let them go should those traditions hinder or even impede their obedience to God’s Word.

²This paper is particularly focused on the typical traditional church within the Southern Baptist Convention in America.
Reasons for Change

**Eddie Gibbs** lists several reasons why people who have had at least some exposure to church are quickly filling up the ranks of the unchurched. Many consider the worship service to be unhelpful for their situation, others have great difficulty developing relationships within the church, and still others feel “marginalized from the leadership.”

In modern times, the church must address these considerations if they are to be effective in their outreach.

Gibbs points out that up until the 1960s “a large church population and significant ‘external constituency’ consisting of fringe persons who maintained some kind of loose association with the church and were favorably exposed toward institutionalized religion” existed. People today grow up, move off, and live far away from their roots where they have little connection with others. Now and in the future, the church must learn to excel in helping people within the church develop relationships between each other and the unchurched community if the church is going to continue to be a strong and effective influence for Christ.

Another reason for change is the increasingly diverse population in America. The cultural landscape has become far more complex due to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, illegal immigration, and the constant relocation of Americans themselves. A recent study by the U.S. Census Bureau reveals approximately twelve percent of the population moved from one location to another. If this trend continues,

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4Ibid., 242.

5U.S. Census Bureau, “General Mobility, by Race and Hispanic Origin, Region, Sex, Age,
churches will face a constant problem of reaching out to people who may only be in their sphere of influence for a relatively short time.

Churches are also seeing the average age of their members constantly rising due to a growing absence of younger people. A recent study of the Southern Baptist Convention reveals that the average age of members has increased by approximately five years from 1984 to 2008. Ed Stetzer notes that the difference in the age distribution in Southern Baptist churches in relation to that of the national population became “statistically significant” at the advent of the new millennium. This change is a concern because a church that lacks the presence of young families will run into problems when the older members are no longer serving in its ministries. Young families are a significant pool from which the church can draw people resources from for their future ministry since they include the next two generations. In addition to the aging membership, another study by the SBC reveals that membership growth has gradually stagnated since 1950.

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The Cultural Context

The internal changes within the church have occurred in sequence with the changes to the cultural context. According to Gibbs, “No church is above culture. It is as much shaped by the culture in which it is birthed as by the gospel that it seeks to live by and proclaim to the world.”\(^9\) As more and more churches are facing decline, many observers are pointing to the radical change in the culture at large as the primary factor. Reggie McNeal warns, “The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order.”\(^10\) As these older generations die out, the current problems of many struggling churches will only worsen unless they can find a way to be more effective in the culture at large even if that means making some changes to the traditional church culture.

Even if one agrees that traditional church culture must adapt to the culture at large in order to become effective, one still must consider the degree to which a church must allow itself to embrace the culture of those outside its walls. A church that moves too far toward the popular culture risks losing its biblical foundation. Commenting on these types of churches, Darrell L. Guder observes that “[t]he result is a very pragmatic, results-oriented practice of mission, stressing evangelization that does not force people to cross cultural boundaries, does not impose too demanding an understanding of the gospel, and focuses on the individual benefits of the salvation.”\(^11\) While such criticism is often

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leveled against any church that is affiliated with the Church Growth Movement, it is important for churches who do desire change to avoid the mistake of delivering only those parts of the gospel message which may be well-received by its target group.

Perhaps a good way for a leader to begin the process of transformation would be the development of an appreciation of a church’s history. The traditional church culture is rooted in the history of God’s people and has gradually cemented into its present form. The culture of many committed, church-going Christians has remained fairly integrated into traditional church culture even while the culture of the unchurched around them as well as the culture of their own children has drastically changed in the last fifty years or so. While many faithful, church-going Christians may assume that their church’s traditions find full support in the Scriptures, the reality is that every church contains cultural elements that are integrated with elements that are directly supported by biblical mandates. In the 21st century, the church and its leadership will have to understand which elements of their church’s tradition are biblical and which are cultural. Those practices within the church which are purely cultural will have to be altered to match the culture of the church’s target group in order for the church to be effective.

Until now, the traditional church has been effective at reaching its churched people by maintaining a culture that suits this target group. If their sole desire is to reach this group of churched people, then little change is needed because their current church culture is sufficient. If their goal is to reach beyond the churched community, they will need to become more culturally similar to their target group without sacrificing the truths in Scripture. Anthony B. Robinson notes that during the 1980’s, many churches attempted to deal with membership decline by making technical adjustments to regular
practices: “wear nametags, improve the signage, [and] greet visitors.” While some of the changes may have been helpful, the church should have considered adapting to the culture of those outside its walls by making changes to its culture and not just its modes of operation.

To make appropriate adaptations to the culture at large, churches will need to understand the culture of those around them. Many writers have noted that the culture of Americans (especially the younger generations) has become postmodern. This new age of postmodernism embraces pluralism, relativism, and an accepting tolerance of diverging views. Postmodernists reject the notion of absolute truth and question the reliability of traditional institutions and structures. Instead of seeking an outside source, such as the Bible, history, etc., they choose to rely on their personal experiences as their guide in their quest for truth.13

The erosion of truth in the mind of the postmodernist has been accompanied by a strong aversion to commitments. George Barna, in a survey on commitment, finds that only eighteen percent of Americans believe that a commitment to a church community is necessary for a person of faith.14 Anderson notes that people are less inclined to commit to anything “that will reduce the options for future decisions.”15 Robinson observes that

12 Anthony B. Robinson, Transforming Congregational Culture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

13 Edward H. Hammett and James R. Pierce, Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60 (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007), 70.

14 Barna Group, “Americans Have Commitment Issues, New Survey Shows” (April 2006) [on-line]; accessed 19 August 2009; available from http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/267-americans-have-commitment-issues-new-survey-shows; Internet. Barna also found that only one-third of evangelicals believe commitment to a local church is necessary.

15 Leith Anderson, Dying for Change (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1990), 36.
church leaders can no longer rely on the sense of obligation as a motivational force which worked so well in the past; rather, people in the postmodern world will respond based on their personal experience.\footnote{16}

Other factors which negatively impact American’s willingness to commit include long and irregular work weeks, single parent households, commitments to secular pursuits, and relocation of their households to areas where religious commitment is relatively low.\footnote{17} Jon M. Huegli considers this unwillingness to commit to be the primary element keeping today’s churches from effectively carrying out the Great Commission.\footnote{18} This disdain for commitment makes it hard for the postmodernist to become integrated into the church community. It also causes difficulty for the church leadership who desire to make any plans and preparations for reaching out to postmodernist since they have no way of knowing ahead of time whether or not they will have any commitment from them.

**Some Possible Changes**

After considering the biblical mandates and the cultural context, a church must then look within itself to discover areas in which it could make changes. Malcolm O. Tolbert believes the worship service to be the area most “affected by tradition” within the

\footnote{16}Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, 4.

\footnote{17}Roger W. Stump, “Regional Migration and Religious Commitment in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 (1984): 292. After studying those who had moved, Stump discovered that the strength of the local commitment to religion had a lot of influence on the migrant’s commitment to the same.

He may be correct since the worship service is almost always the primary activity in which all members of a church participate. **Any church that attempts to change its worship faces the difficulty of developing worship that honors God in a culturally appropriate way.** Leaders must not formulate this worship, according to David B. Batchelder, strictly around self-interests; rather, they must lead the people through worship into the presence of God. Some aspects of worship which have been replaced by some churches that are targeting unchurched people include the music, the songbook (hymnal), the invocation, the order of service, the translation of the Bible, the service time and length, the media, and the sermon delivery method. Many churches that are reaching those outside the church are changing their music by replacing traditional hymns that are usually accompanied by an organ with a band or a praise team that plays Christian songs that reflect popular tastes.

Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson observed that most of the churches that made a successful turn-around during their study had transformed their worship service to a more contemporary format. These same churches tend to focus more heavily on the needs of the unchurched by leading the congregation to get involved in the ministry. Whereas traditional churches may still prefer to do evangelism through cold-calling, non-

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19Malcolm O. Tolbert, *Shaping the Church: Adapting New Testament Models for Today* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 143. Tolbert argues that “worship becomes sanctified over the years” and “people feel that changing them somehow goes against God’s will.”


21D. G. Hart, “Post-Modern Evangelical Worship,” *Calvin Theological Journal [CTJ]*30 (1995): 452. Hart points out that many of these elements are changed simply because they are upbeat or “celebrative” enough for the younger generations.

traditional churches are moving toward relational evangelism. A recent survey by LifeWay revealed that over sixty percent of Americans are open to being invited to Church by a friend or family member while only twenty-four percent indicated that they would be responsive to cold-calling.  

Churches that desire to be effective in reaching new generations may have to make changes in their forms of communication. While changes involving the use of modern media may be a start, churches may need to alter the language employed during the service. Sally Morgenthaler observes that “the inherent meaning of any ritual, symbol, or metaphor is often lost between generations.” With the rapid change in America culture, traditional churches may need to reexamine their ordinary practices to make certain that they are sending the right message to the outside world and that the outside world is able to clearly understand their message. By communicating effectively with the unchurched, the church will be fulfilling the Great Commission even if it still faces difficulty in growing numerically.

In a survey of three hundred churches that came back from decline, Stetzer and Dodson discovered the “most common transformations” made by these churches included a renewed, active commitment to prayer and missions, a leadership transformation, structural changes, alterations to the worship service, and a renewed assimilation process. In their study of churches that were effective in reversing their march toward decline:

23David Roach, “Americans Open to Outreach from Churches” (LifeWay Research) [on-line]; accessed 19 August 2009; available from http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0;2C1703%2CA%25253D168974%252526M%25253D200906%2C00.html; Internet.

24Sally Morgenthaler, Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 134.

25Stetzer and Dodson, Comeback Churches, 193.
decline, Stetzer and Dodson found that three values were rated as the most important by the leadership of these churches: the primacy of prayer, the call to mission, and self-sacrificial service. While each church may decide to make changes in regard to some of its traditions, it must never stray from its compliance to God’s Word. A strong commitment to God’s word in both word and deed is a common factor among churches that are successful at reaching the unchurched according to Thom S. Rainer.

Many churches that desire to reach the unchurched struggle with how to meet those who are culturally postmodern where they are at and at the same time introduce them to Christ. Tom Clegg and Warren Bird argue that people today respond when three needs are met: “transcendence, significance, and community.” A person’s need for transcendence is expressed in his/her desire to have contact with the supernatural. The search for significance can be observed in the constant struggle for meaning and purpose. In his article on popular spirituality, Richard Cimino observes that this new spirituality “downplays doctrine and dogma, and revels in direct experience of the divine, whether it’s called the ‘holy spirit’ or ‘cosmic consciousness’ or the ‘true self.’ It is practical and personal, more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological. It’s about feeling good, not being good. It’s as much about the body as the soul.”

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26 Ibid., 55.
27 Thom S. Rainer, Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 225-26. Rainer observes that churches who are effective at reaching unchurched people consistently are “theologically conservative” favoring deep biblical instruction over a more surface-level approach. He reports that “doctrine was the number one issue of importance to unchurched people seeking a church.”
29 Richard Cimino, “Choosing My Religion” (American Demographics, April 1999) [on-line]; accessed 19 August 2009; available from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4021/is_ISSN_0163-
church needs to understand the unchurched are focused on self-fulfillment even as they seek to help realize that fulfillment can only be found in Christ.

Churches and their leaders certainly need to be aware of the mindset of the unchurched culture. But how can they change in such a way that they become more effective at reaching these people while at the same time maintaining proper reverence for God in their various activities? Gibbs suggests that there must be balance within the ministry of the church in regard to the membership and the unchurched. While felt needs may be a central issue for the unchurched, the membership has spiritual growth needs that must be addressed. Perhaps the church can begin to help both the unchurched and the churched by teaching the membership to apply the Bible to their daily lives by ministering to those around them. The Bible will ultimately serve as a link to the unchurched. While churches may need to make some changes in their various activities, perhaps the greatest change that must take place lies in the hearts of God’s people.

Clegg and Bird argue that churches have become irrelevant and ineffective in reaching the unchurched culture that surrounds them because the church members have failed to develop meaningful relationships with those outside the church. These relationships are absolutely critical, according to Rainer’s research, because a majority of unchurched people who become saved list relationships (particularly those with their family) as a major factor in their conversion to Christianity. The church in the 21st century

4089/ai_54624871/; Internet.

30Gibbs, *In Name Only*, 245.


32Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door: Understanding Faith Stages as the Key to Sharing Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 204.
century must become adept in teaching their people how to develop relationships with the unchurched and how to share Christ with them. It can no longer afford to simply rely on the relationships that are already present since people are becoming increasingly isolated from one another. David J. Feddes argues that churches in the New Testament expanded largely through household relationships.\textsuperscript{33} While he may be correct, churches in the postmodern culture that exist presently will not be able to rely strictly on these relationships because families tend not to maintain the same strong bonds that they did in an agricultural economy; people are removed from their families in their pursuit of work, and many families have been broken apart.

Edward H. Hammett sites another reason why the traditional church is becoming irrelevant. He suggests that those who identify with modernist culture are making the decisions and developing a church culture which speaks to their culture even while it remains silent in its witness to the postmodern culture.\textsuperscript{34} The church that desires to be effective at reaching the postmodern culture must include within its leadership structure some leaders who understand the postmodern culture of the unchurched and how to reach them with the gospel.

Gibbs laments that some church leaders and aspiring church leaders who are attending seminary choose the ministry because they see it as a safe haven from the world around them.\textsuperscript{35} This type of leader has a vested interest in maintaining the traditional


\textsuperscript{34}Edward H. Hammett, \textit{Reframing Spiritual Formation: Discipleship in an Unchurched Culture} (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 11.

church culture. At the seminaries, Gibbs claims that ministers in training who desire the
security of the traditional culture find an environment in seminary which only perpetuates
and reinforces the traditional church culture.\textsuperscript{36} He also expresses concern that these
aspiring leaders are being trained to simply maintain current forms of worship and
organization as opposed to developing their knowledge of other alternatives.\textsuperscript{37} Other
writers also argue that the seminary fails in its approach to leadership training.\textsuperscript{38} Rainer
reports that a large majority of those who attend seminary give little if any credit to the
seminary in the area of leadership training.\textsuperscript{39}

Churches that are making effective changes are doing so with the help of
leadership that looks beyond the church’s traditions to find ways to become effective.
Sometimes, these leaders direct their churches to make organizational changes as they
seek to become effective at reaching the unchurched. The process and direction in regard
to changes become complicated because the issue of church structure and organization
was never addressed by Jesus. While the Apostles gave some direction on this topic, even
that direction still leaves many questions unanswered. Instead, Christ and His Apostles
focused primarily on beliefs, behaviors, and values. Churches that focus on these values
first before taking note of their structures may find that they are increasingly effective at
reaching the unchurched despite the constant changes to the cultural landscape. From

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37}Gibbs, \textit{In Name Only}, 243,

\textsuperscript{38}Robinson, \textit{Transforming Congregational Culture}, 123; Brian J. Dodd, \textit{Empowered Church
Leadership: Ministry in the Spirit According to Paul} (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2003), 154; Sue
Mallory, \textit{The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001),
201.

\textsuperscript{39}Rainer, \textit{Surprising Insights from the Unchurched}, 180.
studying churches that have made successful changes, Barna discovered that these
“churches were more committed to Jesus and His people than to procedures or to other
systematic responses to a challenging situation.”

Since Jesus did not give any concrete teaching on structure, one must wonder
about the importance of structure within a church. James E. White observes that a
structure “can energize a community of faith or lead it toward ever deepening levels of
discouragement.” Structure serves as an organizational component for the church by
helping it accomplish its mission and fulfill its vision. Structure only remains biblical so
long as it serves as a helpful agent in the church’s mission and does not detract from its
biblical witness of Christ. Thom Rainer and Sam Rainer III assert “that complex, weak,
or bad structures can become impediments to the church in its most important
functions.” Huegli observes that many traditional churches have organizational
structures which are designed to be “static, routine, and predictable.” This has led to the
traditional church’s difficulty in making changes to cope with pervasive cultural changes.
Since this missionary purpose for the Church still remains in place today, perhaps it
should serve as a starting point before any changes are made. As the leadership begins to
examine their organizational structures and other aspects of traditional church culture,

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40 George Barna, Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring
New Life to an Established Church (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993), 16.

41 James Emory White, Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 111.


43 Huegli, “Riding the Waves of Change,” 286
they can use the Great Commission as a point of reference and the rest of Scripture as a guiding path.

Leith Anderson observes, “[E]vangelical Christianity has done well on revelation (the Bible) but poorly on relevance (the culture).” They should a church decide to become more relevant, they must beware because “[r]elevance can quickly become an end in itself,” “[g]rowth can become the highest measure of success,” and “[r]esponding to consumer demand can distract” them. Perhaps the demand for relevance required of the church by so many unchurched people is a demand not so much for external changes in the building, programs, and worship services; rather, it may be that the unchurched need the church to reignite the evangelistic spirit it had in the earlier days which was characterized by a love for people, a desire for them to know God, and a heartfelt concern for their salvation. While evangelical churches are to be commended for their firm commitment to the Bible, they must not neglect God’s love for the people. So how can a church remain steadfast in its commitment to God’s word and, at the same time, be relevant to the culture around them?

**Barriers to Change**

Before making any attempt to become relevant to the postmodern culture, it may be wise to affirm the traditional church culture which is rooted in the faithfulness of the membership both past and present. Over time, the membership of the church has developed a stable culture that has become dissimilar to popular culture (which is in a

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constant state of flux) that surrounds them. Given the overwhelming numbers of
unchurched people who are now completely disconnected from church, the church now
has to choose whether to remain stable and secure or risk change.46

The older people get the more resistant to change they become. Change is
difficult especially since the results of changes are never guaranteed. One barrier to
change that many church members struggle to overcome is the commonly-held aversion
to risk. It is often far more tempting to cling to the past instead of racing into the future.
Instead of embracing change, “the stalwarts in the collapsing church argue that things
will return to normal if the church can simply continue to do what it has always done but
in greater quantities or with superior quality.”47 Church members may rally around these
stalwarts partly because of their disdain for risk-taking, or because they prefer to avoid
the discomfort caused by change when they are no longer doing business as usual.

Another barrier to change is what C. Peter Wagner calls “koinonitis” where the
church is completely inwardly focused and no longer desires to reach out to those outside
the walls of the church.48 This situation may also be due to a perceived lack of ability or
even fear to reach out to the unchurched. Rick Warren observes that churches that focus
too heavily on discipleship often cause their core members to lose valuable contacts with

that one-third of America’s population has not attended church in six months.

47Barna, Turn-Around Churches, 38.

48C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Be Healthy (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 87.
the unchurched community. Churches that desire to be effective in the 21st century must become more community oriented according to Mike Regele and Mark Schulz. This is not to say that they must maintain a worldly focus nor does it mean that they should relinquish their commitment to God and His word, it simply means that they become less concerned about membership growth and more concerned about their active witness in the community. Many traditional churches may need to consider Warren’s observation since many have done an excellent job of developing their members knowledge of the Bible through the weekly services and the Sunday Schools while, at the same time, finding it difficult to lead members to engage in evangelism.

Effective Leadership During the Change Process

Rainer lists some common mistakes that pastors make when attempting to make changes: failure to communicate, inability to lower resistance, lack of patience, lack of vision, and unwillingness to remain steadfast. Many of these failures can be avoided if the pastor patiently prepares his congregation for change and then makes the changes very slowly. Part of this preparation, which some pastors fail to accomplish, includes developing an organized approach to making the changes. This crucial process

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50Mike Regele and Mark Schulz, *Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 222.


requires a pastor to be steadfast in his communion with God so that the pastor can sense His step-by-step directions.

Some leaders mistakenly focus too much on gathering a large group of people and harvesting new members instead of focusing on winning people to Christ, growing them up in the faith, and building relationships among the membership.\textsuperscript{53} While these three things are biblical purposes of the church, it may be tempting for some pastors to focus just on the self-fulfilling purpose of increasing membership because such an achievement caters to the ego and brings the appearance of success which is sought after and praised in the American culture.

A leader who desires to make changes must begin with prayer. This dedication to communion with God through prayer must continue throughout the change process. Rainer notes that the praying leader can eliminate a lot of resistance to change as the resistant member observes his “humility that comes from dependence on God.”\textsuperscript{54} Unfortunately, some pastors are constantly looking to the latest methodology from Church Growth advocates instead of first turning to God for guidance.

Along with prayer, an effective change agent must be wise as he gradually steers the church according to his vision. He must also be patient because, according to Wagner, leading a church to make significant changes required for effective church growth will take “three to six years.”\textsuperscript{55} According to Bob Russell and Rusty Russell,

\textsuperscript{53}Gibbs, \textit{In Name Only}, 11-12.

\textsuperscript{54}Rainer, \textit{Eating the Elephant}, 153.

\textsuperscript{55}C. Peter Wagner, \textit{Leading Your Church to Growth: The Secret of Pastor/People Partnership in Dynamic Church Growth} (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 194; Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, \textit{Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey} (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2000), 13; E. Stanley Ott, \textit{Transform Your Church with Ministry Teams} (Grand
many churches are never able to make it through a change process because the leadership would prefer to move up the success ladder quicker by taking a better position at a bigger church instead of patiently working with a church as they work through the change process.\textsuperscript{56} This patience and wisdom must be accompanied by commitment to servanthood (expressed through action) whereby the pastor is able to gain the respect of the membership. It would be wise, according to Glen Martin and Dian Ginter, to prepare the leadership (staff and laymen) for the coming changes before preparing the congregation.\textsuperscript{57} The leader must be careful to choose the right timing for the various changes that need to be made while also making sure to avoid making unnecessary changes.

During the change process, Rainer advises leaders to constantly affirm those traditions which should remain.\textsuperscript{58} David S. Young calls this approach an “affirming model” for change because it emphasizes the positive aspects of the church and avoids placing primary emphasis on those areas which are negative.\textsuperscript{59} For example, the pastor may affirm the people’s commitment to Scripture and the Great Commission. These

\textsuperscript{56}Bob Russell and Rusty Russell, \textit{When God Builds a Church: 10 Principles for Growing a Dynamic Church: The Remarkable Story of Southeast Christian Church} (West Monroe, LA: Howard, 2000), 280.


\textsuperscript{58}Rainer, \textit{Eating the Elephant}, 155.

\textsuperscript{59}David S. Young, \textit{A New Heart and a New Spirit: A Plan for Renewing Your Church} (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1994), 10.
traditional values will also help the pastor lead the people to make changes to the structure so that these values can be maintained.

The Leader’s Vision for Change

Before any changes can be implemented, a vision must be set forth.60 **Vision** inspires people to make sacrifices for a commonly held purpose and “gives them a compelling reason to persevere and to stay focused on what really matters.”61 Vision is a picture of where the church is going and what it will become so long as the church remains consistent in its values and active in its mission. It must be more than simply a carefully crafted statement; rather, it must be alive in the heart of the pastor as evidenced through his passion.

While some writers suggest that a group of people assimilate to develop a vision, Aubrey Malphurs suggests that the primary leader should be responsible for the development of a vision.62 **A leader must be able to do more than simply articulate a vision; they must be able to implement it.** In 2008, LifeWay conducted a study of 350 pastors who led small churches and found that while a majority of them have a vision of where God wants them to be, many of them have no clear plans or directions as to how to lead the church toward that vision.63

60C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, 194-95.


62Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry in the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 34. Malphurs assumes that the primary leader is a visionary. He notes that groups that try to develop a vision often fail because of time and organizational constraints.

Implementation of the vision needs to begin by a change of mentality in both the leaders and people whereby they renew their focus on the mission to reach the unchurched as their first priority and allow their structures to undergo any and all necessary adaptations to accomplish their goal so long as God’s word is not violated. The change of mentality must be accompanied by a renewal of purpose. Robinson laments that leaders too often move their vision without first defining the purposes of the church and removing conflicts within the membership that may hinder the church from accomplishing its purposes.\(^6\)

Along with defining the purposes and helping resolve internal conflicts, Rainer suggests that the leadership should seek the permission of the membership, help them learn their spiritual gifts, and make them aware of their responsibility to engage in the missionary purpose of reaching the unchurched.\(^7\) Before leading the church toward the mission, the leader must ensure that the membership has embraced the values that undergird the vision. For example, if a pastor desires to lead his church toward a vision that involves effective outreach to the unchurched, he will need to lead his church to value sharing their faith with the unchurched. Part of training in values will involve leading members to embrace biblical values such as God’s love for the unchurched while at same time letting go of their value for the comforts of some traditions that may impede the Church’s mission to the outside world.\(^8\)


\(^7\)Rainer, *Eating the Elephant*, 42-43.

\(^8\)George Barna, *Turning Vision into Action: Defining and Putting into Practice the Unique Vision God Has for Your Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1996), 93-94. Barna offers a short list of some biblical values that need to be emphasized as the leader leads his church toward the fulfillment of the vision.
During the process of change, the Bible serves as an anchor for the church since it remains the sole unchanging authoritative source of truth. Just as the postmodern culture defines truth by their personal experience, many committed church members tend to allow the church’s traditions and structure to be given the same authority as the Scriptures. For this reason, the leader must reveal the teachings of the Bible and call upon the membership to hold less firmly to those aspects of their church experience which are not directly supported by Scripture.

As he unveils his vision, the leader must demonstrate to the congregation that the vision is supported by the authority of Scripture. In the local church, the Sunday morning service usually affords the best time for the leader to communicate the vision. Effective communication of the vision, according to Malphurs, involves language that appeals to the senses and remains positive along with the leader’s sincere belief in the vision which must be expressed effectively during the presentation. Assuming the people understand the vision, they will then take note of the leader’s credibility before making an active response to the vision. Malphurs states the leader’s credibility depends on his character, abilities, passion, people skills, and past experience.

To enhance the communication process, Dan Southerland, who led a traditional church through the change process, recommends that the leader secure the permission of the opinion leaders and other key members who will be instrumental in the change process. According to Southerland, sharing the vision with the leadership before

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68 Ibid., 90-92.

69 Southerland, *Transitioning*, 68-75.
taking it to the congregation will cause more leaders to unite behind the vision whereas not doing so basically ensures that the support of the leaders will not be given.\textsuperscript{70} Since many of these leaders will be steeped in traditional culture, the pastor may expand their minds and increase their openness to his vision by leading them to visit other churches who have made similar changes. Another option, used by a pastor who succeeded in transforming his church, is to ask the leadership to read books that discuss the need for change within the church.\textsuperscript{71} A visionary pastor may especially want to lead this group to experience some worship experiences in other churches who are doing worship in ways similar to his vision.

If change is to occur in the traditional church under the leadership of a visionary pastor, the church itself may have to begin the process by changing its expectations of its leadership. Many churches desire a leader to help them with the overwhelming burden of the organization including the programs, staffing, current ministry endeavors, etc. Finding a leader who can help them through the process will require them to look for a visionary individual who communicates effectively and excels in team building. It may be that the church itself needs to start the process of change by hiring a pastor who understands the culture that surrounds the church.\textsuperscript{72} Current leadership may be too focused on maintaining the current organizational structures.

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., 86-87.


\textsuperscript{72}Eddie Gibbs, \textit{ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry} (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 33.
The Vision Team

After bringing the leadership of the church on board with the vision, the visionary pastor should take the time to develop a team around him who has bought into the vision before taking the vision to the congregation. Barna contends that “[l]eadership works best when it is provided by teams of gifted leaders serving together in pursuit of a clear and compelling vision.”73 This team of visionaries will provide support that is so desperately needed by the leader during the change process. They can help both in the implementation of the vision as well as offer mutual support and comfort through the process of change that will ensue. Southerland suggests that this team be composed of mature Christians who are faithful and who are filled with optimism regarding the vision.74 This team should include current church leaders as well as opinion leaders who hold tremendous influence with the congregation. Anderson calls this second group of leaders “the informal organization” and observes that creating ownership of a vision among this group is absolutely essential before introducing the vision to the congregation as a whole.75

The process of team building begins with the leader’s belief in the importance of establishing the team. Besides the example of Christ and his disciples, one could also find support for teams from Paul and Barnabas and Paul and Silas among others.76 To build a team, the leader must decide who is going to be on the team. Next, the leader

73Barna, The Power of Team Leadership, 7-8.
74Southerland, Transitioning, 76-77.
75Anderson, Dying for Change, 179.
must secure a commitment to the vision from each of these individuals. While commitment to the vision is absolutely necessary, the willingness of each of the team members to work together for the realization of the vision is also necessary. Developing cooperation among the team members is a process in and of itself. Because all people struggle with being trapped in their own perspective and often have difficulty perceiving the importance of another’s perspective, the leader should begin the cooperation process with an appeal to Paul’s teaching on the importance of all members (cf. 1 Cor 12).

Once team members see the value in each other, Malphurs suggests that the leader must develop mutual respect among the members by delegating authority, seeking their help in the decision process, and remaining vulnerable. As the team members spend time together, the leader will have to constantly monitor the lines of communication to keep division from occurring. Malphurs lists several ways to keep good communication between team members: keep members updated, speak to them in person, and quickly resolve problems. With a leadership team, the strengths of the individual members compensate for their individual weaknesses leading to a better output.

Becoming a team builder may be a change in and of itself for the leader in the average traditional church because many pastors serve more as managers of the church’s programs, ministries, and membership. Kotter highlights the difference between management and leadership: “Management is about coping with complexity,” while

77 Malphurs, Developing a Vision for Ministry in the 21st Century, 137.
78 Ibid., 140.
“[L]eadership . . . is about coping with change.” Since every church has dealt with complexity due to their organizational structures, they must have leadership that is capable of management. The church, however, must have more than managerial leadership. Barna warns, “Management without visionary leadership leads to ministry that is mechanical, passionless, predictable, and limited.”

Ministry Teams

Most traditional churches are managed by committees who make key decisions in how they accomplish their goals. These committees, however, usually only make decisions while leaving the actual work of implementing those decisions to someone else who most likely had very little or no input in the decision process. As White observes, “Authority and responsibility become distant from one another.” Warren highlights the difference between committees and ministry teams: “Committees discuss it, but ministries do it. Committees argue, [but] ministries act. Committees maintain, [but] ministries minister. Committees talk and consider, [but] ministries serve and care. Committees discuss needs, [but] ministries meet needs.” Unlike a traditional committee, 

79 John P. Kotter, “What Leaders Really Do,” Harvard Business Review on Leadership (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998), 39-40. Kotter also states that “management brings a degree of order and consistency to key dimensions.” While his comments are related to the business, one should be able to see their application the traditional church with its long-standing and virtually unchanging institutions.

80 George Barna, Turn-Around Churches, 35.

81 White, Rethinking the Church, 115.

82 Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church, 376-77.
a ministry team takes an active role in accomplishing a vision even while they lead others to act in concert with that vision.\textsuperscript{83}

A traditional church could make an effort to exchange their organization of committees with a plethora of ministry teams whereby each team is expected to make an appropriate and active contribution toward the corporate vision. This change would help members who are steeped in postmodern culture actively experience their faith instead of simply being reduced to consumers sitting in a pew. It may also help increase commitment by developing stronger bonds between members especially if the team members agree to sign a covenant on the front end according to Anne M. Nuechterlein.\textsuperscript{84}

In a study of healthy churches that are effective at reaching the younger generations, Rainer and Rainer III find that these churches have simple structures that place greater responsibility on the membership.\textsuperscript{85} Huegli argues that church structures which organize the membership into ministry teams which are charged with taking an active role in the church’s ministry are far more effective in the postmodern context.\textsuperscript{86} In his research, Barna found several reasons why traditional churches decide against the use of leadership teams: the lack of control, the insecurity of the current leadership, insufficient understanding of team leadership, and the role of pastor as sole authority.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{83}Barna, \textit{The Power of Team Leadership}, 24.


\textsuperscript{85}Rainer and Rainer III, \textit{Essential Church}, 158.

\textsuperscript{86}Huegli, “Riding the Waves of Change,” 287. Huegli prefers the use of ministry teams over the committee structure primarily because ministry teams can constantly change their membership even while they continue work toward their assigned task or goal.

\textsuperscript{87}Barna, \textit{The Power of Team Leadership}, 64-71.
If a leader is going to attempt to replace the committee structure with a team ministry structure, he must be aware that some people will prefer to continue doing business as usual through committees. Ott advises pastors to simply allow these committees to continue forward while at the same time developing ministry teams among the interested membership in the hope that this new approach will catch on as more and more people experience it.\textsuperscript{88} This process will take great patience as well as perseverance from the leader.

When a pastor transitions to team leadership, they have to start relying on the actions of others to accomplish their tasks. Having team members who are responsible and willing to be held accountable is vital for a church to make a successful transition to team leadership. This process can be further complicated through the use of volunteers in leadership. Perhaps the best way to motivate volunteers is for the pastor to focus on the biblical roots of team ministry and the appropriate biblical behavior of team members during the sermon and other teaching events.

If churches are not interested in teams simply because of the leadership’s insecurity or lack of understanding, then the leadership must acknowledge before God that these reasons are unacceptable excuses. The leader should never let their ego prevent them from following the direction God has laid before them. While God may not be calling the leader to make a transition to team leadership, every leader could certainly

\textsuperscript{88}Ott, \textit{Transform Your Church Through Ministry Teams}, 39. Ott also observes that making the transition to team-based leadership works best when churches have good small group structure in place. People who have had the accountability, fellowship, and ministry experiences generated by healthy small groups would be more likely to see the advantages in team ministries.
make the necessary effort to get educated on team leadership and other issues related to effective church leadership.

Another factor that can prevent the formation of ministry teams (especially those with significant authority) is the traditional role of the pastor as sole authority of the church. Since most pastors who desire to implement changes will find themselves in this situation, they will have to decide if and how they will share their authority. For example, the pastor can undertake the difficult task of trying to have their church change their by-laws to include ministry teams. This process may be too cumbersome even if the pastor and the congregation are willing to concede that such a change would be biblical. One other option would be for the leader to decide for himself to create a team around him and share his authority by relying on the team for support, accountability, advice, and even participation in tasks traditionally done by the pastor. The problem with this solution is that it is heavily dependent on the pastor and may revert back to the traditional approach when a new pastor arrives. Even so, a pastor intent on developing team leadership can at least begin here and perhaps lead the church to make further changes to its structure and by-laws in the future after the successful implementation of team leadership.

The Creation of a Network

The effort of the visionary leader to build teams must spread to every member of the church so that a network is created. This network will allow a leader to lead through relationships so long as the leader understands the membership (their values, talents, gifts, needs, and wants) and the membership understands (and complies with) the
In order for a traditional church to become a network, the leader must be excellent at building strong relationships not only between him and others but also between others.

A network must be developed around a purpose so that the church becomes not just a family but a family on mission. This type of authoritative structure becomes increasingly decentralized because the primary leader often communicates through the various relationships of those around him. For example, he may communicate a particular message to a Sunday School class through a Sunday School teacher who got the message from an opinion leader in the church. Despite the decentralization of authority within a network, the leadership still maintains authority by promoting communication within the network, determining the guiding rules for the communication, and ensuring that the rules are followed.

Gibbs notes that despite the decentralization of the authoritative structure that relies heavily on relationship networks, the primary leaders tend to “hold ultimate veto power over individual programs, and they set the vision that defines the institutional culture of the church.” To keep themselves in check, leaders who lead through a network will usually develop an accountability group (vision team) who will “insure

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89 Phillip V. Lewis, *Transformational Leadership: A New Model for Total Church Involvement* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 159.

90 Nathan C. P. Frambach, “Congregations in Mission: Rethinking the Metaphor of ‘Family,’” *CTM* 30 (2003): 212. Frambach expresses his concern the many churches see themselves as families of God without also understanding the missionary purpose.


92 Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 84.
integrity in major decisions,” encourage and pray for the pastor and his decisions, and keep the ego of the leader from leading him astray.”  

As the network expands to include more laypeople, similar accountability relationships are formed through informal mentorship relationships, small groups, and ministry teams. The intimacy and the interaction within these networks allow its members to hold each other accountable for how they live their daily lives. When the members interact with the teachings of the Bible, they are forced to think about the application of those teachings to themselves personally.

The Bible should ultimately serve as a link to the unchurched. But one may ask how someone in the postmodern age will receive the Bible as the authoritative source of truth since they proclaim truth to be relative? Coming from a postmodern perspective, Jione Havea offers a view of the Scriptures that may be helpful for those trying to develop an appreciation for the authority of the Scriptures among postmodernists. He writes, the Bible is “a site of contact that signifies Christian unity,” “contains multiple voices,” and allows for “diversity in unity and unity in diversity.”

Unlike a large group (network) which affords its members the ability to remain anonymous, the small group (network) makes it all but impossible for a person to remain anonymous. This lack of anonymity helps a person apply the Bible’s lessons because he knows that the members of the network will hold him accountable. The accountability


94Ibid., 149-150.

within each small network can be direct, but it is usually indirect. Network members are challenged by the lives of other members and feel challenged to follow the good examples. If the church upholds mission as one of its purposes, each small network can be an effective tool for holding the individual members accountable for the priority they place on mission as evidenced by their daily lives.

Most traditional churches still rely on the Sunday School as their system of member networks. Rainer argues that these systems can still be effective for the church’s mission to outsiders but also acknowledges that they should no longer be seen as serving their traditional evangelistic purpose. Instead, these networks can be seen as places for old and new members to develop strong relationships that lead to mutual accountability while at same time developing deeper commitments to God’s word. To accomplish this change of purpose from evangelism to discipleship, the leadership should begin by training the teachers on their new role as both a network leader and network facilitator. In these roles, the leader will need to guide the discussion that occurs during the biblical lesson in such a way that people feel free to open up while at the same time developing deeper relationships with one another. Along with training the teachers, the church leadership must examine the Sunday School curriculum to make sure that it is written in such a way that facilitates discussion between the network members and leads the network into a deeper knowledge of God’s word.

96Rainer, Eating the Elephant, 144-45.
Conclusion

Change in the traditional church begins with a firm commitment to God’s Word and a desire to share His Word with the unchurched. The challenge for traditional churches is to change the cultural aspects of their ministry which are no longer effective in the postmodern world. While this change will not be easy, the church will be greatly aided by having a visionary pastor who understands the importance of relationships especially during the change process. These relationships and the networks that they form can be very helpful for the pastor who desires to be effective in the 21st century.
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