

## Chapter Two

### "WHY SOME CHURCHES SUCCEED, AND OTHER'S DON'T"

Concerned with the severe erosion of membership since 1965, the Presbyterian Church (USA) undertook a study to discover why it was declining. What that study clearly demonstrated was that not just the Presbyterians but most "mainline" churches in the United States have steadily decreased in number. The rate of loss in church membership between 1965 and 2000 is really quite shocking. The American Baptists have declined by 6%, the Evangelical Lutheran Church by 10%, the Methodist Church by 25%, the United Church of Christ by 34%, the Episcopal Church by 33%, the Presbyterian Church (USA) by 41% and the Disciples of Christ by 57%!<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the study demonstrates that growth is going on in other kinds of churches. It is primarily conservative, evangelical and charismatic churches that are experiencing significant growth. The Roman Catholic Church has grown by 38% between 1965 and 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention has grown by 48%, the Seventh Day Adventist Church by 142%, the Mormon Church by 162% and the Assemblies of God by 350%! Intriguingly, the most significant growth of these denominations has, by and large, occurred not just in suburbia but also in the cities. It is a demonstrable myth that city churches are in decline. City churches are not in decline. Only some churches are in decline.

It is true that more churches that classify themselves as conservative are growing than churches that classify themselves as mainline or liberal. But one must ask, "Is it the political or religious conservatism of these churches that causes them to grow, or is it some other unmeasured factor?" If such a factor can be isolated and found to be present in growing non-conservative as well as in conservative churches, then one would only need to ask why it is that conservative churches seem to be more likely to exhibit that factor.

### **COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE URBAN CHURCHES: A STUDY**

In 1987, I read a study done by the Seventh Day Adventist Church on why some of their urban churches were growing and others were not.<sup>2</sup> That study really intrigued me. The study exposed very distinct trends in the growing urban SDA churches and counter trends in their declining urban churches. The particular value of this study was that the myths normally considered as strategic for church growth could not be used. Because they were all churches of one theologically uniform denomination, there were no significant differences in theology, church polity, or liturgics to "explain away" the growth or decline.

I was very intrigued with their conclusions. And I began to think to myself, "I wonder if these premises hold up in other congregations and in other traditions?" So I began to observe effective, growing churches in the cities in which I was ministering on behalf of World Vision. As I observed, I

began to identify commonalities in ministries of these churches. It was my privilege to observe city churches in the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, Africa and Asia.<sup>3</sup> Here is what I discovered.

First, there were clearly elements these churches *did not have* in common. Their non-commonality is important, because some of these fly in the face of the assumptions many Christians make about church growth.

Theologically, they were not uniformly conservative. Some of the significantly growing urban churches are theologically liberal; still others are quite radical (particularly politically). Some are Anabaptist, some are Reformed in theology, and others are charismatic or Pentecostal. Still others are Lutheran or Thomistic.

Second, the pastors are not uniformly dynamic. Some of them are poor preachers, others are theologically naive and others are highly sophisticated both theologically and sociologically. They are all kinds.

The location and nature of the church building is incidental. In the studies I made, some were centrally located; others were on a side street in the worst possible slum. Some of these congregations worship in beautiful gothic structures; the majority is in converted warehouses or rented buildings. One of them simply meets in houses.

But all these churches had certain common characteristics that I believe significantly contributed to their effectiveness. Let's look at those characteristics:

**First, each effective church operated out of a common focus of mission that was perceived, affirmed and articulated by most of the congregation.**

In his 1995 "State of the Union" address, President Clinton shared about the work of the Revs. John and Diana Cherry who had a concern for the disintegration of the African-American family, and so began a ministry in Temple Hills, MD (a small city on the outskirts of Washington, DC). Since the early 1980s, the Cherry's have organized their church around the preservation and strengthening both of healthy and troubled black families. And the result is a congregation that grew from just a handful to over 17,000 members. This is a perfect example of the power of mission focusing.

Rather than the church trying to do all things equally well and trying to be all things to all people, *each effective church I visited concentrated on a single primary mission focus*. More important was that this mission focus could be both articulated and affirmed by most of the congregation.

When I would go to these churches and meet with the pastor, I would expect that pastor to be able to tell me what his/her church was all about. But then I would go to Sunday worship services, and I would ask the people sitting around me or would talk with people standing in the narthex after worship

or gathering together afterward in the coffee hour, "Tell me about your church." And in situation after situation, these lay people would respond with the same articulation of mission - but in their own words. They, themselves, had inculcated and could articulate with affirmation and even conviction the primary mission focus of that church. And I found in many of the places I visited, the reason why they could do this is because they had been involved in determining that mission focus.

Equally important was that the mission focus of each of these congregations was outside itself. Each mission focus dealt with that purpose for which the congregation believed God had called that church into that community. It was striking that none of these mission foci turned inward. None said, "We are going to be a joyous fellowship of believers" or "We will seek to be the family of God". That is not a mission but is, instead, a state of being; it is life and existence as opposed to purpose, direction and activity.

**Second, each church was committed to outreach which was assumed by the entire congregation.**

How outreach was defined and carried out in ministry was influenced by the particular theological perspective of each church. Some churches saw outreach in terms of evangelism, with the understanding that the job of each church member was to witness to his or her faith and to thus win people to Jesus Christ. Other churches understood outreach as working for social justice in their cities and others as providing social services to people. Still other churches defined outreach as seeking the transformation of the city. The church would define for itself what outreach meant. But the point is that, however it defined outreach, *the effective urban churches were those that saw their church as existing, not for itself, but for the world outside itself, and perceived that as its reason for existing.*

But a commitment to outreach was not the only thrust of these churches. The other perspective these congregations held was that *such outreach was to be assumed by the entire congregation.* In none of these churches did they operate out of the perspective that it was the pastor's or the elder's or the Outreach Committee's job to do outreach. All of them saw it as their responsibility for the implementation of the gospel through their congregation. They saw it as every member's responsibility!

**Third, each effective urban church has created and implemented a means by which church members are both empowered to discover their ministry and equipped to carry out that ministry together with other church members.**

It is not simply that the church has a common mission with which everyone agrees. Nor is it simply that every member of the congregation feels that she or he has a responsibility either to proclaim the faith or to work for social righteousness. It is also that *this church has devised some structure or strategy by which the church members are empowered to discover and carry out their unique and particular ministry* and are able to act out that ministry within the parameters of that congregation.

It is this third factor that I believe is most strategic in enabling these congregations to become effective, growing churches in even the worst of urban conditions.

What are the implications of these three common characteristics for the work of the Body of Christ in today's urban world?

## **THE CHURCH WHICH EMPOWERS MEMBERS FOR MINISTRY**

When I talked with the pastors of the effective churches I observed, most suggested essentially the same thing. In one way or another, they said to me that in order to be effective in the city, they discovered that *their church needed to free itself from seeking to preserve itself as an institution*. Instead, it had to concentrate upon becoming a movement.

### **De-institutionalize the Church**

If a church concentrates on preserving itself as an institution, it will inevitably turn inward. And it will become caught up in maintaining itself. Precisely to the degree that it tries to preserve itself, it will lose itself.

Jesus once said, "He who seeks to save his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Luke 9:24). Jesus was stating something very profound not simply about the individual Christian, but about the Body of Christ. If the Church is caught up in trying to preserve its institution, if all of its energy is invested in trying to preserve itself, then preservation and continuance is exactly what is going to slip out of its grasp!

On the other hand, if it forgets about itself and becomes involved in reaching out to the world around it, then the church will discover that its institution is being preserved! In other words, the very act of ignoring your preservation and concentrating upon your mission development as a congregation will lead to the strengthening of your congregation -- without even trying!

However, if your objective in addressing the needs of your congregation is to cause your church to grow (and thus preserve it), people will see through that very quickly and they will reject your witness. If you are focusing on mission in order to grow, then you are compromising both that mission and the church's growth. If, on the other hand, people feel that you are genuinely concerned for them and the needs of the city, then they will be attracted to your church simply because its witness is genuine! The objective of the church ought to be to give its life away -- to proclaim, live out and practice the gospel in the midst of the city's issues, pains, powerlessness and greed.

### **Abandon Committees**

The second thing these pastors said to me was that if it is to be really effective in reaching out to the city, then *the church must be willing to abandon a structure and model of ministry that concentrates upon the operation of programs.* This, in turn, must mean a willingness to forsake a committee structure and process designed to sustain these programs.

None of these churches I studied -- though some were several thousand in membership -- had a large committee structure. Many of them had no committees at all except a Board of Elders, Session or Vestry to assume the formal governance of the church. Nor did these churches have large interior programs to sustain. Many didn't even have a fund drive to raise money.

This struck a chord in me, because the church I pastored in Detroit had a typical Presbyterian structure when I came to it (Session, Deacons, Trustees, a full spectrum of programming and administrative committees, etc.). It was a congregation of 1100 members, ten committees and countless programs. I observed that the running of all these committees and their programming was absorbing all the energy of the people so that they could not concentrate that energy on mission. I proposed to the Session, therefore, that we reduce the ten committees to four. These four groups were the Session to provide spiritual guidance and both governance and the Trustee function over the congregation, the Deacons to assume all congregational care, and two other committees -- a committee on Outreach/Mission and a committee on Spiritual Formation (worship and education). And the entire church ran quite well on just four programmatic/administrative bodies. Although this was only one of several contributing factors, after we reduced our structure to the minimum we felt we had to have in order to function, the membership of our congregation (which had been in decline for 16 years) stopped declining and began to grow so that the year before I left, my church had the most growth of any church in the Detroit Presbytery. Our income in three years doubled and our mission giving increased five times over. Why? Because the people's energies were going into something other than the maintenance of the institution. I have found this pattern true in every church in which I have worked since that discovery in Detroit years ago.

Why am I critical of church committees? Simply because committees exist to sustain an institution. That is why they are created. If the objective is to preserve the institution of your church, then it needs committees to operate internal programs that exist, not for the sake of the world, but to maintain the congregation. So everyone in the congregation is caught up in busy work, attending committees, planning and operating programs, and eventually feeling spent and asking the question, "Is this worth it? Why am I doing this to myself and to my family?" Committees sustain an institution; they do not build a movement.

It is important to understand that I am not suggesting that a church not have structures. What I am suggesting is that church structures need to evolve out of the mission focus and purpose of that church. The primary task is for the church to get clarity on what that church perceives itself called by God to do in the world beyond itself. The structure of that church must then be one that is created in order to enable that mission to be effectively carried out. Thus, the "form" of the church's structure is following the "function" of that church at a particular place in its journey and mission as a congregation.

This is an approach to organization profoundly different than one that seeks to maintain a structure that does not change, irrespective of the specific conditions of the congregation at that point in time.

Most of the effective urban churches I have studied operate with "temporary" structures. Those structures are created for a purpose, and once that purpose is adequately served, the structure is dissolved. Such an operational perspective is one that takes a utilitarian, pragmatic approach to structure (what do we need *now* to get the job done) rather than one that seeks to maintain continuing structures irrespective of the needs and capabilities of that congregation. I am therefore not suggesting a structureless process, but rather a process where the structure comes out of the mission of the church, is periodically evaluated and is readjusted to enable that congregation to fulfill its present mission in the most effective way.

How, then, does the internal work and the mission outreach of the church get done if not through committees? The work gets done by people who feel called by God to assume that ministry - a dynamic that is profoundly different than being appointed to serve on a committee. And that brings us to the third insight from these pastors.

### **Empower and Equip Your People for Ministry**

The third reality that was confirmed for me in visiting with these pastors is that *the essential task of the church is to empower and equip people to discover and carry out their own ministry*. The primary task of the church is to enable its members to discover and to live into that ministry to which God has called each one of them. The purpose of the church is to enable people to live practically and concretely into both the theology and practice of their vocation.

As I looked at these different churches, they all had different ways of living out a commitment to the world. But their common denominator was that each perceived the task of their church leadership as that of devising and carrying out a process that enabled the church members to minister with other church members in the world. In other words, *the church members do not exist to serve the church. The church exists to equip its members to serve the world!*

Perhaps it was expressed most eloquently by one pastor. "All that Christian laypeople want," he wrote, "is the thing which we preachers tend to take for granted, that is the sure call of God in their lives!"<sup>4</sup>

The churches I studied certainly don't follow a common pattern of enabling people to follow God's calling on their lives. The strategies of these churches are as diverse as are the churches themselves. But all see the leadership task to be that of empowering and equipping their members to discover and carry out ministry in the world. Thus, all of them have created some structure and strategy to enable the congregation to live into that third principle. Let's look at several of those strategies.

## *Mission Groups*

A first approach is *mission groups*. Churches that develop a mission group strategy center their ministry around the doctrine of vocation, seeking to find ways to enable their memberships to listen to their own hearts regarding human need and seeking to hear God's call to service both from out of that human need and out of their personal and corporate spiritual formation.

Two urban churches that have been extremely effective in using this structure for vocation are the Te Atatu Bible Church in Auckland, New Zealand and the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C. No two churches could be wider apart theologically than these two congregations. Yet both carry out city-transforming ministry that have, in turn, transformed these two congregations.

Te Atatu was a congregation of 35 members when Brian Hathaway became its pastor; today this inner-city congregation is the largest church in its denomination and carries on 36 ministries in its city. Gordon Cosby and two other people were the founding members of the Church of the Saviour immediately after the Second World War. Today COS carries on an international ministry of such scope that it is felt by many to be the most influential church in the United States. I found the example of the Church of the Saviour most helpful in developing a strategy of mission groups for the churches I served in Detroit, MI and greater Los Angeles, CA.

The objective of churches like these is to provide the structure of “mission groups” for their congregations. This mission structure assists people in their personal exploration of call, builds a strong support life in community and forms groups of church members and friends who feel called to a particular ministry in the world. As such mission groups form around the sense of call to address a particular human need, they request the congregation to invest them with the responsibility to carry out that ministry on behalf of the church. Once so commissioned by the church, the mission group members develop their objectives for that ministry to which they all feel called. They create and carry out plans of action, engage directly in that ministry, evaluate their effectiveness, build relationships with other non-congregation groups in their area of ministry and otherwise assume full responsibility for that ministry on behalf of the congregation.

But these mission groups also build a strong life together of Bible study, prayer, worship, support of each other, and sharing of personal concerns. They meet regularly with each other, go on spiritual retreats with each other, pray for each other between meetings, commit themselves to building their personal relationships with God through daily reflection and Bible study, etc.

The mission group, therefore, becomes the main organizing form of these churches, for in them, mission group members study, worship, pray, support each other, raise funds, plan and carry out that ministry to which they all feel called. With a mission structure like that, about the most the entire congregation is called to do is corporate worship, educational programs beyond the scope of a mission group, and fellowship of the entire body.

## *House Churches*

A second approach is that of *house churches*. One example of this approach is the Ichthus Christian Fellowship of London, a charismatic community. This church began with only 40 members and is now over 30,000 -- the largest church in all Great Britain and in the heart of the worst slum in London. Ichthus has a profound impact both upon that slum and the city. They focus on small-group evangelism, social action and particularly on issues of justice. Such social commitment has meant that the church has become intensely involved in politics.

A second example of this mission structure is found in Central Presbyterian Church of Manaus, Brazil. Manaus is a city of 1,500,000 that is 600 miles inland of the Amazon River delta, close to the place where the two main tributaries converge to form the Amazon River. Central Presbyterian was a traditional, "tall steeple" church in Manaus until Caio Fabio became its pastor. Under his leadership, the church committed itself to planting churches in Manaus and the Amazon hinterland. Today, this church of 1,200 is divided into 25 congregations - ten in Manaus and fifteen in villages along the Amazon River and its tributaries. "Pastoring" these small congregations of 10 to 100 people are lay members of Central Church who have given up their jobs to be mentored by one of Central's pastoral staff, to receive intensive theological training and then assume responsibility for shepherding these little congregations. Members of Central Church form the base for the new church, reach out to the new community to share the gospel and to build a congregation there. They and other Central members volunteer time and labor to construct with these budding churches a small meeting place. Congregations created in the 15 villages along the Amazon are linked together by the church's hospital boat and five mission boats, manned by doctors, nurses, youth workers and church missionaries who are freely contributing their time.

The approach churches like Ichthus and Central Church have developed is one of many congregations in one congregation. These churches center their church life and mission in congregations of ten to thirty people who assume all the responsibilities of a church in a given neighborhood. They are, quite literally, "house churches" (or churches small enough to meet in houses). The larger church of which the house-churches are members gathers together only for worship (sometimes weekly, sometimes occasionally; Ichthus, for example, gathers as an entire church only four times a year and has to rent a football stadium for those gatherings), administration and coordination of the work of the entire ministry.

The house churches are the center of the life and mission of churches using this mission approach. These house churches assume for their little gathering all the work a conventional congregation would normally assume: spiritual nurturance, biblical education, worship and prayer life, stewardship and finance, addressing of the issues of the community in which the small group lives and the undertaking of the work of evangelism in their geographical area. These little churches have no building to maintain, no system to serve, no program to undertake -- only the task of assuming responsibility for each other's spiritual formation, of being a community of faith, and of carrying out the specific community ministries the group determines for itself.

The essential difference between mission groups and house churches is that a mission group is focused on a specific social issue or concern to which it feels called. A house church concentrates on a given neighborhood, carrying on the full ministry of a little church in that community.

### ***People Groups***

A third approach centers on *people groups*. In missiological thinking, a "people group" is a natural collection of people around a commonality that creates cohesion among those people. Thus, a people group can be a racial or ethnic group, the people who live in geographical proximity to each other and feel a strong sense of community with each other, or even a people who have a highly-significant characteristic in common which binds them together (such as an incurable life-threatening disease, like AIDS).

Eagles is a unique ministry in Singapore inspired by Isaiah 40:31 ("They shall mount up with wings like eagles"). Built around the conversion of its leader, Rev. Peter Chao to Jesus Christ as a young adult, Eagles seeks to reach a people group otherwise untouched by Singapore's traditional Christian or charismatic churches -- the upwardly mobile, secular young adult. Eagles is remarkably effective in reaching these wealthy, highly educated pagans by building its outreach around large, high-tech music-and-drama media events usually held in theaters or stadiums. Reached by the gospel message, thousands of young adults have been channeled into small-group Bible studies, discipleship training programs, prayer meetings around work and into the church life of Singapore. Eagles' concentration upon reaching this specific group in Singapore has led to church ministries among hard-to-reach young adult professionals and technicians in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Another example of this strategy for mission is the Bear Valley Baptist Church of Denver. This church began with just a handful of people, but now is over 2,000 in membership. Unlike Eagles which concentrates on a single people group, the former pastor of Bear Valley Church credits the startling growth of that church exclusively to its strategy of empowering its members to minister to a variety of people groups. Thus, Bear Valley Church has developed extremely effective ministries to young adults, to singles, to victims of AIDS and to a wide spectrum of people. This they have done by urging the members and friends of the church to work with the concerns they feel most deeply about and to join with others in the congregation who feel the same concern. Out of such exploration, the group is urged to identify the people group with which it wishes to minister or which it wishes to reach with the gospel, devise a strategy for undertaking ministry in that context and then go and do it together!

### ***Community Organizing***

A fourth approach is *church-based community organizing*. Two examples of this approach are the St. Peter's Lutheran Church (ELCA) and St. Mary Gate of Heaven Roman Catholic Church in Queens, New York City and the Edgewater Presbyterian Church of Chicago, IL.

St. Peter's and St. Mary's are two churches in Queens (a borough of New York City), close to the JFK International Airport and LaGuardia Airport. St. Peter's is a small African American church;

St. Mary's is a large, working-class church of over 5,000 families. But both are committed to their borough and its people. And they have both chosen to act out that commitment through the Queens Citizens Organization, along with 18 other Catholic, Lutheran and Protestant churches. The membership of these 20 churches confronted the New York Port Authority (the municipal body that controls the two airports) over a number of years, finally getting the Port Authority to admit it had an obligation to that borough which its two airports so radically affects. The result was a commitment by the Port Authority of \$2,000,000 to pay for neighborhood improvements in Queens. A side result was the application of organizing principles to the life and ministry of St. Peter's and St. Mary's which has significantly strengthened them as two congregations in a vulnerable neighborhood.<sup>5</sup>

Edgewater Presbyterian Church was a dying "tall-steeple" congregation in Chicago when, as its pastor, I challenged that church's leadership to join me in learning about our inner-city community. In four months, 54 members of our church made over 2,000 calls on pastors, politicians, local businesspeople, education, health and social service providers, and particularly on "ordinary folks" in the community. Out of this survey, our church leaders realized that the primary problem of that community was neither poverty nor prejudice as much as it was powerlessness. Consequently, the church leadership decided that our congregation needed to concentrate its mission activities on the development of a local community organization.

Out of that decision, the Organization of the North East was born which mobilized the people of that inner-city community and most of its churches to successfully deal with political disenfranchisement, economic exploitation, pornography and prostitution, and a host of other problems. Through community organization, our inner-city neighborhood became a community with a future and a hope. We were not prepared, however, for the profound impact that participation in community organization would have in arresting the decline of our church.

Within two years, Edgewater Church had arrested a fifteen-year decline in membership from over 1500 to 500, added in one year nearly as many members as it had lost over the previous five (47% of whom were adult converts to the Christian faith), increased the church's income by 56%, developed 22 active community ministries and doubled Sunday worship attendance. In other words, involvement of our church members in the formation and leadership of ONE also resulted in the profound reversal of the decline Edgewater Church had been facing for over ten years.

Community organization is that process by which the people of an urban area organize themselves to "take charge" of their situation and thus develop a sense of being a community together. It is a particularly effective tool for the powerless poor and middle class as they determine for themselves the actions they will take to deal with the essential forces that are destroying their community and society. In church-based organizing, the organizing of the community is done around the churches, built upon the ethical framework and spirituality of those churches. Its ultimate objective is to create an authentic sense of community in that neighborhood, rather than simply organizing it to address its issues. Organizing thus becomes a means to the end of creating community, and not an end in itself. Therefore, it places a strong emphasis on the clarification of those values by which that community chooses to live its life, and applies those values to the way the community deals with its enemies as well as its friends.

A church cannot truly be effective in doing community organizing -- nor can that become transformational in the life of that church -- unless the congregation moves into organizing from a sense of call. They must feel that both the church as a community is being called by God into this ministry of seeking the empowerment of its neighborhood, and that each of them as individuals are being called into that ministry as well. Otherwise, there is neither the motivation nor the staying power to undertake a ministry as demanding and risk-taking as is community organizing. And this sense of call will not be sustained unless the church has a small group structure to support, equip and empower its people to continue in this ministry.

These, then, are four strategies by which effective churches have empowered and equipped their members to discover and carry out ministry. The strategies we surveyed are mission groups, house churches, people-groups ministry and church-based community organizing sustained by small groups. The important point I wish to make is that all of these effective churches are operating on the premise that the church exists for the world -- not just in theory or in rhetoric but in the very way the church is organized. Each church has found a specific way to enable congregational members to enter into mission, not just individually, but together as a congregation. They all have different ways of doing it. But all these churches are operating essentially out of the same realized commitment to mission.

Although their specific expressions and perceptions of mission differ, all of the innovative pastors I visited have given up seeking to get the people to serve the church in order to provide means by which the people reach out in ministry to the world. Their objective has become to get their members away from serving the church in order to enable these people to reach out together in ministry to the world. As one pastor put it, "My aim is to get the church dark during the week and the community bright with our people!" The result has been vital, growing, dynamic churches - even in the most unreceptive cities or uncondusive neighborhoods.

### **The Three Elements in Church Life to Sustain Its Mission Focus**

I have found in my own pastorates and I observed in these other pastors of vital churches that there are three elements that need to be integral to the life of the church if a church is to be sustained in mission focusing. First, worship must be the adhesive that holds that congregation together. That community of believers has gone out into the world in their several groups to live out and to practice ministry or to proclaim the gospel. Such ministry will almost invariably result in overextension, deeply felt pain or exhaustion. So the people come back to worship to be sustained and strengthened and spiritually prepared for their corporate and individual ministry in the world. Every one of these pastors saw worship as a primary means of enabling their congregation to carry out their mission in the world.

Second, these pastors indicated (as I had also learned in my congregations) the absolute necessity of theological and biblical grounding. Such an understanding of ministry implies a theologically knowledgeable congregation. Consequently, every one of these effective churches had significant adult education programs, led by members of their congregations who felt called to adult theological and

biblical education. Most of these churches had developed a comprehensive adult education curriculum, designed to prepare and equip people for ministry in the world within the context of the mission design of that congregation. Some of the pastors assumed a major teaching responsibility. As a pastor, for example, I normally taught between four and six courses a year (of course, the churches I served normally had professional ministry staffs of three to six people so that, as senior pastor, I could concentrate on a ministry of preaching and teaching).

Third, each of the churches had to have some sort of structure in order to enable mission to occur. In most situations, the aim was to keep it as simple as possible. But there has to be some means by which people, once perceiving themselves called by God to a particular kind of ministry, could discover other people in the congregation who also are called to that ministry. And then that structure has to enable such people to move from a heart for a ministry to the actual carrying out of that ministry in the name of that church.

### **Creating A Church for Mission**

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned the work of Rev. Brian Hathaway and the Te Atatu Bible Church of Auckland, New Zealand. As I noted earlier, the Te Atatu Bible Church is a part of a small, conservative denomination, the Open Brethren Church. Under Hathaway's leadership, the Te Atatu Bible Church, located in one of the poorest sections of Auckland, grew from 35 members to become the largest church in that denomination anywhere in the world. In the book *Beyond Renewal: The Kingdom of God*, Hathaway tells his story of how he went through a profound conversion in his understanding of ministry.

When he became the pastor of Te Atatu Church, Hathaway operated out of a very traditional understanding of ministry. But he quickly realized that something was radically wrong with such an approach to ministry. So he joined with his church members in worrying their way through to a new way of being church. They tried this and that, failing here and succeeding there, until gradually a new pattern of ministry began to emerge. That pattern eventually became the model that gave to Te Atatu Church such significant new life that it both transformed the church and its ministry, and eventuated in the church becoming the largest congregation in that denomination. The model they developed through failure and experimentation is presented in *Beyond Renewal*.<sup>6</sup>

The essential premise upon which effective ministry should be built, Hathaway postulates, should be commitment to the Kingdom of God. Such commitment should be the focus of a congregation - not the building of that church. The task is not to renew the church, Hathaway states. The task is to enable the church to work for God's kingdom and to be a foretaste of that kingdom in the world.

Hathaway then asks the provocative question, "If a church is going to center itself on God's kingdom, how would such centering shape the work and life of that church?" Any model of the church based upon a commitment to the kingdom of God as its primary focus will seek to equip and enable its church members to become servants of the kingdom through:

- ? praise of God and worship;
- ? fellowship
- ? enabling of the people through (i) theological and biblical grounding; (ii) providing means by which each person can discover and act upon a sense of call or vocation, and (iii) providing vehicles by which these people can live out these newly-perceived vocations in the world.

Hathaway suggests that all the church should be about is the worship of God, providing means by which church members can be in meaningful relationship with one another, undertake theological and biblical education and discover, organize for and carry out that for which God has called them into the world. Everything else the church does is extraneous, and actually diverts the church from its true task - even though it may apparently build up the institution.

Any model of the church that accomplishes the above, Hathaway asserts out of his pastoral experience, will have within it these characteristics:

- ? The church will embrace a theology of the Kingdom of God;
- ? It will be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit - that is, that the faith in that church will tend to be dynamic and experiential in which its members desire a deepening relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit, and open to the continual renewing work of the Spirit in its life;
- ? It will be involved in social concerns - in reaching out beyond itself in ministry to the hurting, powerless and marginalized of its city and the world;
- ? It will be equally involved in and committed to evangelism - that is, actively seeking to lead people both into a personal relationship to and a growing discipleship under Jesus Christ;
- ? It will cooperate with other local churches, with ecumenical groups and with parachurch ministries in addressing human need irrespective of whether the theology of that group is agreeable with or in concurrence with itself;
- ? It will reduce congregational activity to a minimum that does not directly and clearly serve either the purpose of enabling that church to work for the Kingdom of God within its community and the world or equipping people for that task through worship, fellowship and education;
- ? It will identify people's gifts and will release them within the congregation and/or the community/world for their particular work of ministry for which they have been gifted by God;
- ? It will hold to a radical view of money and possessions;
- ? It will assess its success in terms of that church's effectiveness in forwarding the Kingdom of God in their city, not in terms of simply building up that church's institutional strength.

The perspective of effective ministry was put recently by Thomas Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City (the city which has been called for generations "the graveyard of churches"). Redeemer Church, four years earlier, consisted of 15 members; today, it is 1,200. Keller remarked to a reporter from Time magazine, "I said (to the elders four years ago), 'Let's not build a church for us. Let's build a church for your friends who don't go to church!'"<sup>7</sup>

Do you see the profound difference in perspective? The perspective is that the church exists for mission. The Church has been theologically proclaiming this for years. The Presbyterian Church USA (of which I am a part), has been making this its essential rhetoric for at least as long as I have been a

member of or a clergyperson in that church - a period of over 50 years. The church has always *talked* about existing for mission. But our structures have been built primarily to sustain, preserve and *build up institutions* - and only secondarily to engage in mission. And the result is systems that don't work, collapsing structures, declining congregations and a frustrated people.

Today's Protestant church has become locked into a mindset that insists that there are only four viable ministry models for the church - when, in reality, there are sixteen.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, we are no longer open or flexible to other ways to be church. The world around us is profoundly changing, with today's cities and suburbs being primarily dysfunctional social units differing significantly from the stable community structures within which these four models of the local Protestant church were created. Consequently, the values the established church now prizes most (harmony, the maintenance of the status quo, comfort in that which is established, conformity and a small scale and personal approach to dealing with issues) are all values that came to dominance in 19th century rural America. But the city today and the world it influences through the rapidly-developing personal and public electronic communication, a multinational economic system and international politics values conflict-management, change, mobility, diversity and approaching life comprehensively and on a large scale. No wonder the established church has been unable to become flexible, mobile, embracing diversity in their midst, not afraid of conflict, and acting out of a ministry vision as big as the city itself.<sup>9</sup>

What is consequently required is a profound conversion. Protestant denominations operate out of the unspoken perspective that the task of the church is to preserve the church. And yet the reality is that *the act of seeking to preserve the church is exactly what will destroy the church!* Churches that are truly effective in the city are those that have been able to think and act outside the conventional restraints of being "church", and have been free to craft ministries that really speak to the human condition in the city by enabling their members to find purpose and direction in their lives.

The conversion that the church so desperately needs is to an understanding of how to be church in a profoundly different way - a way that recognizes that the task of the church is, not just in theory or in rhetoric or in theology, but in practice to be in mission. And a church is simply not in mission when it is running programs for church people by church people. It is, instead, sustaining the programming of an institution. The church exists to go outside itself. "Let's not build a church for us. Let's build a church for your friends who don't go to church."

Both my study of effective congregations worldwide and my own experience as an urban pastor tell me that the essential ingredient for a church to truly be in mission must be the creation and implementation of a means by which members of that church are both empowered to discover their ministry and equipped to carry out that ministry together with other church members. But in order for people to be "empowered to discover their ministry and equipped to carry (it) out", there are several things that need to happen:

1. The church needs to create one or more vehicles that provide the means by which people can discover and act out their ministry;
2. The church members must be motivated and provided with ways they can discover and act upon that ministry to which they believe God is calling them;

3. As they become involved in their respective explorations of their faith and mission, the people must be sustained in that quest through worship that lifts their spirits and provides direction, theological and biblical reflection that centers on bringing self-understanding, and fellowship that supports and sustains them;
4. The people must not be absorbed by committee assignments or programmatic activities in the church that sap their energy and divert this exploration.

But the most important ingredient to empower church members to discover their ministry and equip them to carry it out is to build the church around the doctrine of call.

## **THE VOCATION OF THE CHRISTIAN**

What is the doctrine of vocation? It is perhaps most beautifully stated by Frederick Buechner: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet!"<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine of vocation can be summarized in one question. Why do you exist? Put theologically, the question is "What is your purpose in life?" The Biblical answer is "Your purpose in living is to serve God by serving humanity." You have been created by God to be used by God in a particular way. And all that you have gone through in life, all the experiences you have had, all the problems with which you have coped, every rejection you have ever faced as a human being, every celebration in which you have shared, every victory you have tasted all has gone into making you into who you are right now. Why? So that God can use you in a special way.

Every human being has been created by God to serve Christ in the world in a particular way. And when we discover the deep gladness of our own lives - our redemption in Jesus Christ - and we allow ourselves to be open to the pain of the world and gravitate toward that issue of the world that hurts us the most, that is where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger come together. And that is where God calls us to serve him.

In today's world and especially in the city, the people of your congregation, the people to whom you relate every day, are constantly told in innumerable ways that they are insignificant, unimportant, that they are cogs in the machine, that they have no purpose in life except to make and spend money. People in the cities are hurting people, many times hopeless people. And that includes people in the church who may find significance for their lives by being in the church. But outside the church and their families, they feel unimportant. The city communicates to them in many ways every day that it will go on with or without them.

The doctrine of vocation declares the opposite! The doctrine of vocation says to people, "You are important. You exist for a purpose. You are not here simply to work or buy, to make money and keep the economy rolling. You are here as a child of God to be used by God in a particular way in order to contribute to God's redemption and transformation of this city and of the world. How are you

called to that work of transformation? Within the whole life of the city to which you are called, what is that human potential, that issue, that pain to which you are called?"

Earlier in this chapter, I shared about the phenomenal growth of the Roman Catholic and several evangelical and charismatic denominations over the past 25 years, a growth ranging between 38% and 350%. I believe that the secret behind the growth in such conservative denominations is that what those churches are doing is saying to people, "You are important. You can make a difference." And they say it in two ways. They say, "You are important to Jesus Christ - he died for you (that's how important you are). So you are called to be in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ within his fellowship, the Church."

But they are also saying, "You are important to Christ because God has created you to be an integral part of the Kingdom of God. You were created by God and are called by God to serve Christ in the world. And others in this congregation are also crucial, for they, too, have been called by God. You need to find each other and you need to work together to become Christ's ambassadors in the world. And our job, as a Church, is to enable that to happen and to get out of the way!"

The secret of the phenomenal growth of conservative churches, I believe, is that they center their message, church life and community outreach on calling people to a personal experience with Christ and the living out of that experience in each person's vocation in the world. And that is a ministry focus any church – irrespective of their theology – can embrace!

## CONCLUSION

The future of the church lies in our capacity to move out of the ways of being "church" that are familiar to us in order to embrace "church" as that community that enables its participants to discover and carry out their ministry together. But in order to do that, it means that we as the church must be willing to plumb the depths of the doctrine of vocation. We need to rediscover that doctrine, both for ourselves in order to more clearly understand our own calling, and in order to provide guidance to our church members as they seek God's call upon their lives.

The crucial question with which each of us needs to face ourselves, therefore, is, "What is my responsibility to enable my church, not so much to be an institution or to unite itself around programs which serve the church and perpetuate its life, but rather enable my church to give its life away and through that giving away, discover authentic life and ministry for itself?"

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<sup>1</sup> "Where Did All the Presbyterians Go?", *Presbyterians Today* magazine (Louisville, KY: The Presbyterian Church USA), July/August 2002, pp. 13-14; also see "The Church Search", *Time* (New York, NY: Time and Life Building, Rockefeller Center), April 5, 1993 for comparable statistics for the period 1965-1990.

The actual statistics in the Presbyterian study are as follows:

<b>Membership Loss:</b>	<b>1965</b>	<b>2000</b>
American Baptists	1,535,971	1,436,909

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Disciples of Christ	1,918-471	820,286
Episcopal Church	3,429,153	2,311,398
Evangelical Lutheran Church	5,684,298	5,125,919
Presbyterian Church USA	4,254,597	2,525,330
United Church of Christ	2,070,413	1,377,320
United Methodist Church	11,067,497	8,340,954

***Membership Gains:***

Assemblies of God	572,123	2,577,560
Roman Catholic Church	46,246,175	63,683,030
Mormon Church	1,789,175	4,679,110
Seventh-Day Adventist Church	364,666	880,921
Southern Baptist Convention	10,770,573	15,960,308

<sup>2</sup> Sahlin, Monte C., "A Study of Factors Relating to Urban Church Growth in the North American Division of Seventh Day Adventists" (Andrews University, the Institute of Church Ministry, 1986)

<sup>3</sup> I visited and studied most of the following churches between 1988 and 1999 while working for the Office of Urban Advance of World Vision International or Partners in Urban Transformation. I gathered information on six of the listed churches without making an on-site visit. I had previous contact with six of the US churches before entering World Vision. From this study of these congregations, I determined that 41 of them were particularly effective in urban ministry and successful in building strong and financially secure congregations. I then isolated the characteristics of those congregations which made them effective and which they held in common with other effective churches. The churches are:

**Africa:**

Buru Buru Church of God, Nairobi, Kenya  
 Mbare Presbyterian Church, Harare, Zimbabwe  
 Ngong Presbyterian Church, Nairobi, Kenya  
 Nkolokoti Church, Blantyre, Malawi

**Asia, Australia/New Zealand:**

Eages Evangelism, Singapore  
 Holy Cross Church (Church of South India), Chennai (Madras), India  
 Newmarket Baptist Church, Melbourne, Australia  
 Parish of the Risen Christ (Roman Catholic), Manila, Philippines  
 Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, St. Kilda, Melbourne, Australia  
 St. Thomas Methodist Church, Chennai (Madras), India  
 Te Atatu Bible Church, Auckland, New Zealand  
 Wesley Methodist Church (Church of North India), Mumbai (Bombay), India  
 Westgate Baptist Church, Melbourne, Australia

**United Kingdom:**

Anfield Road Fellowship, Liverpool, England  
 Icthus Christian Fellowship, London, England  
 Plaistow Christian Fellowship, London, England

**Latin America:**

Barro Preto Baptist Church, Belo Horizonte, Brazil  
 Belem Assemblies of God, Belem, Brazil  
 Central Presbyterian Church, Manaus, Brazil  
 Christian Church of Brasilia, Brasilia, Brazil  
 Concordia 7<sup>th</sup>-Day Adventist Church, Belo Horizonte, Brazil  
 Eighth Presbyterian Church, Belo Horizonte, Brazil  
 Goiana Presbyterian Church, Goiania, Brazil  
 Horeb Baptist Church, Mexico City, Mexico  
 Manaus Four Square Tabernacle, Manaus, Brazil  
 Paroquia de la Resurreccion Church (Roman Catholic), Mexico City, Mexico

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Shekinah Baptist Church, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Torre Methodist Church, Recife, Brazil

**United States of America:**

Bear Valley Baptist Church, Denver, CO.

Church of the Saviour, Washington, D.C.

Edgewater Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL.

Epworth Methodist Church, Chicago, IL.

Faith Lutheran Church (ELCA), Detroit, MI.

Faith United Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, CA.

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA.

Fuente de Vida Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, CA.

Grosse Pointe Woods Presbyterian Church, Detroit, MI.

Haeram Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, CA.

Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, CA.

Keystone Baptist Church and West Side Holistic Family Center, Chicago, IL.

LaSalle Street Church, Chicago, IL.

LaVerne Heights Presbyteian Church, Los Angeles, CA.

New Song Community Church, Baltimore, MD.

Rock Evangelical Free Church, Chicago, IL.

St. Ambrose Roman Catholic Church, Detroit, MI.

St. Paul Community Baptist Church, New York, NY

Wilshire Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, CA.

Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C.

<sup>4</sup> Tillipaugh, Frank R. *Unleashing the Church* (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1982)

<sup>5</sup> Pierce, Gregory F., *Activism That Makes Sense* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 51-54, 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> Hathaway, Brian. *Beyond Renewal: The Kingdom of God* (Milton Keynes, England: Word UK Ltd., 1990), pp. 85-178. Currently out of print.

<sup>7</sup> Time, *op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> The 16 models of church will be explored in chapter 9.

<sup>9</sup> Tillipaugh, *op.cit.*, pp. 26-43.

<sup>10</sup> Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco, CA.: Harper and Row, 1993), p. 119.