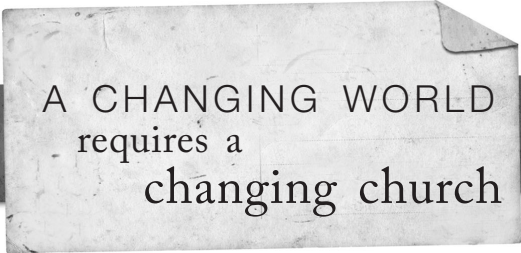


SECTION

one



A CHANGING WORLD
requires a
changing church

We live in a rapidly changing world that requires the church to examine its entire focus on ministry. This first section will look at some of the changes that the church will need to make and how best to address those changes in a not-so-mega church. Some of these changes will be relatively minor, while others will be much more challenging. One of the things to remember is that your church is going to change. As a leader in your church, you have the opportunity to determine whether or not these changes will be positive.

ONE

Missional vs. Maintenance Churches

The Church is by nature missionary to the extent that, if it ceases to be missionary, it has not just failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased being the church.¹

—J. Andrew Kirk

Every church began as the result of someone's vision for a ministry that was needed in its community. In the area where I live, the landscape is dotted with little churches that are 175 to 200 years old. I can leave my house right now and drive to at least three dozen churches within fifteen minutes. But when these churches were established, the people walked or rode horses and buggies to the churches, and it was important to have one in every community that was easily accessible to the people. Each of these churches began as a way to minister to the surrounding community. They were truly missional churches.

Today that mission has often been replaced with a maintenance mind-set. As these churches begin to decline in attendance, their first instinct is to circle the wagons to preserve the limited resources they have. They call pastors to lead them, but they are really seeking chaplains who will tend to their needs. These churches express a desire to reach youth and young families, but conflict will often occur if this actually happens.

A small church that had been in decline for many years was seeking a new pastor. They said they wanted a pastor who could grow their youth group because "the youth are the future of the church." A few months after their new pastor began, I met a young woman who served on the search committee. I asked if their pastor had been successful in reaching young people. She said he had been very successful, but there was now another problem. The older members were upset that the pastor was spending too much time with the youth and felt that he was ignoring them. As a result, they had stopped attending church and stopped their financial support. After serving there for only three years, this pastor was asked to resign.

Another church experienced similar conflict when the pastor began reaching young families. Complaints soon surfaced about the pastor's clique. The complainers said he spent all his time with this group of people while ignoring others. An "us versus them" mentality soon began to infect the church. The denominational leader who worked with this church quickly identified the complainers as the long-term power brokers in the church who needed to preserve the church's status quo in order to retain their power and influence.

Such maintenance mentality may be due to power issues, surviv-

al instincts, or simply because that is all the church has ever known. However, when a church is more focused on maintenance and survival than it is on mission, it has already ceased being the church. If our smaller churches have any hope of surviving, they will have to once again become more missional in their thinking.

MISSIONAL CHURCHES

Maintenance churches see mission as something they support. They give money to denominational and parachurch agencies that are involved in “mission work” around the world. They may invite missionaries to speak to their church about the exciting work they are doing in some remote location. Such churches see mission as done somewhere else by somebody else. In contrast to this way of thinking is that of the missional church.

Although missional churches often support mission efforts in other locations, they also understand that their mission is found in their own communities. They take seriously Jesus’ call to be a witness to their Jerusalem, and they understand that it is the responsibility of every member of the church to be missionaries to that community. Mission isn’t something that is done by someone else but is the responsibility of every believer in Jesus Christ, and missional churches spend time and resources equipping people to be missionaries.

*And you shall be witnesses to me
in Jerusalem, and in all Judea
and Samaria, and to the end of
the earth.*

—Acts 1:8

A NEW PHILOSOPHY

This requires not just a new way of working but a new way of thinking for many churches: “Mission is not something the church does, a part of its total program. No, the church’s existence is missional, for the calling and sending action of God forms its identity. Mission is founded on the mission of God in the world, rather than the church’s effort to extend itself.”²

Although church mission ministries can be expressed locally, na-

tionally, and internationally, mission is not first about geography but philosophy. It is not about *where* the church is but *who* the church is and *what it is here to accomplish*. It is not location-based but relation-based. Wherever believers are, those among whom they live and work constitute the mission field. Being missional is not first about ministering among those we do not know but about living authentically among those we do know.³

At one time it could be claimed that America was a Christian nation. At the very least, one would have to agree that life in America was shaped around the teachings of Scripture, and the church had a great influence on the morals and practices of the people. Neither of these are now true. We now live in a nation that has embraced many different religions and philosophies. Christianity has been relegated to the periphery of most people's lives, if it is even on their radar screens at all. Our age is often referred to as pre-Christian or postmodern, and some Christian leaders even claim that we are now trying to do ministry in a pagan society.⁴ We are fast approaching a time when non-Christians will outnumber Christians in America.

This means that our churches need to see themselves as mission stations working in a non-Christian culture. When a person prepares to become a missionary to a people group, he or she may need to learn new languages, a different culture, different clothing styles, different customs, and even to eat different foods. To be effective the missionary has to fit into the new culture. It is not the job of the missionary to Americanize the culture being served but to introduce Jesus Christ to the people in that culture.

This is the challenge of the church that truly wants to be effective in reaching this generation God has given us. We can no longer sit back in our pews, invite people to come to our services, and ask them to adapt to our culture so we can tell them about Jesus. We have to understand their culture and learn their language and new ways of doing ministry so we can share the good news of Jesus Christ with them in ways they can understand. This is a completely different philosophy of how to "do church" than many of our smaller churches currently have. Smaller churches that seek to become missional will have to change several things about the way they now do things.

MISSIONAL CHURCHES ARE FOCUSED

Although the missionaries I have known are very talented people who are able to do many different things, their primary ministry is rather focused. They tend to work for long periods of time with the same people groups often within a limited geographical area. Early in life they understood God's calling on their lives, and they spend the rest of their lives fulfilling that calling.

Small, maintenance-minded churches prefer to take a broad view of ministry. I have frequently encouraged struggling smaller churches to identify a target group they could try to serve and focus their efforts on that group. In nearly every case, my efforts have been rejected. Leaders of these churches always respond with the same argument: God has called us to reach out to everyone. They take a shotgun approach to ministry, hoping something they do touches the life of somebody rather than focusing on a specific target and concentrating their efforts on reaching that target group. They usually end up touching no one.

Saddleback Church has identified a target they refer to as Saddleback Sam. They have created a very detailed composite of Saddleback Sam, and everyone who goes through their membership classes can clearly describe the characteristics of Saddleback Sam. In fact, they can clearly identify him because he is their next-door neighbor.⁵

Willow Creek Church identified their target audience and named that audience Unchurched Harry and Unchurched Mary. This church has also clearly identified the characteristics of this couple, and they focus their ministry efforts on reaching their target.⁶

Each of these churches has many thousands of people attend their worship services each week. Their financial and human resources far exceed those of smaller churches, and yet they understand that no church has the resources to reach out to every person in its community. They have identified the target group they believe God has asked them to reach, and they focus their efforts to reach that group. This decision then impacts the music they use in their worship services, how the church facilities are laid out and decorated, how the messages are presented, how literature is prepared, and even how people are greeted when they arrive on the property.

Compare this to the smaller church with a hundred people (or less) in the worship service on a typical Sunday morning. Their music is also targeted toward people (their existing members), their sermons are delivered in a way that is appealing to their targeted audience (their existing members), people are welcomed to the church in a way that is appealing to their targeted audience (their existing members), as is everything else they do.

God's mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in our own societies, in the cultures in which we find ourselves.⁷

—Darrell L. Guder

The only targeted group most smaller churches seek to serve

is their existing members, and they wonder why they can't reach new people.

If a church is serious about wanting to be missional, it must identify a target different from its existing members. A missional church will seek God's direction to identify a people group within their community and begin to focus its efforts and ministry toward reaching those people. The more narrow the focus, the more effective the church is apt to be in reaching them. Such a church is truly on mission with God.

MISSIONAL CHURCHES HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR MEMBERS

Maintenance churches are very concerned about their members and will do just about anything to ensure that no one leave the church. Harmony is often preferred over truth or mission.⁸ Church membership guarantees certain perks: free weddings for your children, free funerals, and the right to select the music and the times of the worship services. Stewardship is ignored because the membership doesn't like to hear sermons about money. There is little emphasis on discipleship, and as a result, few adults are found in Sunday School classes or small groups. Maintenance churches do not ask their members to be involved in any meaningful ministry outside the church, and even if they did, the members are kept so busy serving on committees designed to preserve the organization that

they wouldn't have time for ministry. If members drop out of active involvement in the life of the church, their names are simply moved over to the "inactive member" list.

Missional churches don't have "inactive member" lists. These churches have high expectations for their members, and they are not afraid to communicate those expectations to people before they become members.⁹ Many of these churches require persons seeking membership in the church to complete a membership class in which these expectations are clearly explained. Some require a signed membership covenant agreement that states that the new member will fulfill their expectations of membership.

Two other things occur in missional churches that don't happen in maintenance churches. Extensive training is provided the membership so they can better understand their spiritual gifts and how they can use those gifts in ministering to others. Second, the administrative work done by committees is turned over to the pastoral staff, and the church structure is streamlined so people have the time and energy to be involved in ministry.

TRAIN THE SAINTS

Late in my pastorate I became convicted that, like many pastors, I was better at complaining that few of our members were involved in any type of ministry than I was in helping prepare them for ministry. I also became aware that there are many in our congregations who want to be more involved in ministry but are waiting for someone to train them. That someone, according to Eph. 4:11-12, is the pastor: "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

It is not the responsibility of the pastor to do the entire ministry that occurs in the church but to equip the members to do that ministry. Maintenance churches believe otherwise. This might be a slight exaggeration, but there are some church members who want to call the pastor every time their cat stubs its toe, and they expect the pastor to hurry right over to conduct a healing service for the cat! These same members later complain about the lack of growth in the church and usually assign the blame to that same pastor.

Rather than focusing on pastoral care, missional churches understand that congregational care is the more biblical model.¹⁰ If the pastor is expected to provide all the caring ministry in the church, it should not be surprising that the church is unable to grow. There are only so many people one person can care for. However, if the congregation accepts responsibility for caring for one another, there is no limit to the growth potential of the church.

*We expect both too much and the wrong kinds of things from pastors, much of which should be done by other church members.*¹¹
—Klyne Snodgrass

Congregational care cannot occur if the pastor does not provide the training and resources church members need in order to feel comfortable in a ministry

role. Laypeople are often reluctant to visit someone in the hospital, nursing home, or funeral home because they don't know what they will say when they get there. They fear accepting leadership positions because they are afraid they will fail and the church will suffer. They avoid opportunities to share their faith with others because they aren't sure how to do so, and they are afraid someone will ask questions they are not equipped to answer. Fear is the number one reason laypeople are not more involved in ministry, and this fear can only be eliminated when they are properly trained in how to do these things.

Pastors must take the time to identify potential servant leaders in the church and invest themselves in the lives of these individuals. It is crucial for the future of the church that the pastoral leaders help these persons feel comfortable doing ministry. Such comfort will only happen when they have been challenged to do ministry and given the tools to do it well.

SIMPLIFY THE STRUCTURE

If we want our church members involved in ministry, we must also take away much of the administrative work they are now asked to do. Please understand, there is nothing evil about administration. Organizations, including churches, must be properly managed in order to effectively operate. The problem is that most administration is maintenance work, and too often we so overwhelm our church

members with maintenance work that they have no time or energy to do ministry.

I consulted in one small church that complained that the few people who were willing to be involved were often sitting on six or seven committees in addition to serving as teachers, choir members, and other roles in the church. Several admitted that many of these committees never met because people just didn't have the energy and time to attend everything they were asked to attend. The church was not growing; it had financial problems; there was a great deal of conflict; and many people were blaming the pastor for these problems.

Despite very nice facilities in an excellent location, this church had a structure that inhibited growth. Most of the church's energy was focused internally in their committee (maintenance) responsibilities. Few people felt any great desire to minister in the community, and their many responsibilities within the church would have prevented such ministry anyway. I asked why each of these committees existed, and the only reason given for many of them was that they were required by the church's constitution! Part of my recommendation to the church was to eliminate the committees that added little to the life of the church, and that recommendation was promptly rejected.

I'm convinced that the majority of committees in most small churches could stop meeting, and the congregation would see no impact on the life of the church. Many smaller churches are over-structured for their size. They have so many boards and committees that they have to ask their few members to sit on several of them in order to fill all the slots, and many of these boards and committees really don't add much to the life of the church. They add even less to the mission effectiveness of the church. People either have time to serve on committees or be involved in ministry. Only if a committee exists to serve a true ministry need within the church or community is serving on that committee a good use of people's time.

The church of the twenty-first century must shift its focus from an institutional orientation to a community orientation.¹²

—Mike Regele

You may be wondering who would be responsible for seeing that administrative work is done in the church. In the missional church that task is done by the pastor and a few key leaders who are especially gifted and called to this role. Decisions are entrusted to these leaders who are expected to make their decisions based on the core values and vision of the church.¹³

This will be a very difficult paradigm shift for many smaller churches, and, quite frankly, an impossible change for others. In the Baptist tradition of which I am a member we have as one of our chief tenets the belief that the congregation makes the decisions that impact the church. Committees, boards, and individuals make proposals at the regularly scheduled or special-called business meetings, and the people attending the meeting listen to the proposals and vote whether or not to approve them. We seem to believe that the will of God is determined by a 51 percent majority vote. (The decision of the Israelites to not enter the Promised Land the first time should be sufficient to disprove this theory! [Num. 13—14].)

Despite the biblical example, this will still be a difficult change for congregational churches to make and will require a great deal of trust within the church. Many factors impact the level of trust that exists within a church, and a low level of trust will ensure that the congregation will insist on voting on virtually every proposal made within the church. If little trust exists in the church, it would probably be best to work on this issue first before trying to make the shift away to the leaders assuming full responsibility for the administrative functions of the church.

However, there are two good reasons for making the move away from having the congregation vote on every proposal that comes before the church. One, change is happening so fast that congregational decision making is always playing catch-up. By the time a committee or board discusses a proposal for a few months and the church finally has a chance to vote on it, many of the benefits of the proposal may already have been lost. New ministries and opportunities may be presenting themselves, but the church is still discussing the original proposals, causing them to miss these new opportunities as well. Congregational decision making was fine in a slower age, but in the twenty-first century it is vital that decisions

be made quickly so the changes can be implemented in time to have the most effective impact.

A second reason to entrust decision making in the hands of a few is that these are the people who have studied an issue and developed a proposal that addresses it. If a ministry team has spent several weeks, or even months, researching a significant change for the church, how can we expect a few people who attend a business meeting to intelligently vote on the proposal after hearing it discussed for a few minutes? They can't, and many churches have lost the opportunity to provide more effective ministries to their communities because people did not understand a proposed change and voted against it.

Clearly there are dangers involved in handing over decision-making power to a few people within the church. Some might make decisions based on selfish or unbiblical reasons. If that happens, the church must have a mechanism in place to remove such people from the decision-making body. Decisions might be based upon faulty information, but that can also happen in a congregational decision-making process. While there are risks associated with entrusting decision-making power to a few, there are also risks in not doing so. This leads us to our next characteristic of missional churches.

MISSIONAL CHURCHES TAKE RISKS

Maintenance churches are committed to self-preservation and will do little that might threaten their continued existence. Missional churches understand that being on mission automatically assumes there is risk involved, and such risk does not frighten them. In fact, missional leaders are just as concerned about the risk involved in not taking some action as they are in the risk associated with going forward.¹⁵

Risk must be evaluated not by the fear it generates in you or the probability of success, but by the value of the goal.¹⁴

—John Maxwell

Two years ago I was asked to speak to a small church that was in serious decline and present a process to help them identify a fresh vision from God for their church. In my presentation I men-

tioned that there is always the possibility that if the church begins to implement some changes, some people might leave the church. Those changes do not reflect who they are or what they want from a church, and they will feel it is necessary to leave. I emphasized that I was not saying that people would leave the church but that they might. Following the service the church had a question-and-answer session that was going well until one elderly lady reminded the church of my comment that people might leave. She said, “When you said that, I looked around the sanctuary and didn’t see anyone I was willing to lose.” Several heads nodded in agreement, and I never heard from that church again. The risk of losing a friend in the church was too great. In my opinion, that church has a much greater risk of seeing their doors close within the next decade, but that is a risk they are willing to take.

Risk is a normal part of progress and growth. The founding fathers risked everything when they declared independence from England. The risks were huge when early settlers began moving

west in hopes of finding a new life. Your church exists today because at one time people took the risk of starting a new church to provide Christian teaching and ministry to the community. Many older churches have risked

*Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage assumes fear.*¹⁶

—Andy Stanley

moving their meeting sites to new locations in the belief this would allow them to offer better ministry. In each of these situations the people involved understood the risks but believed the benefits of moving forward with their plans were greater than the risks. Our smaller churches will have to adopt the same belief if they want to successfully move from being maintenance-minded to missional.

A question I often ask churches who are struggling with the risks associated with transformation is, “Who are we here for?” If our churches and their ministries exist solely for the benefit of the membership, then we really don’t need to make any changes and risk upsetting people and disrupting our current ministries. However, if our purpose includes reaching new people for the kingdom of God, then we must be willing to take the risks that will enable us to do that.

The purpose of every church is to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Both involve risk. It is risky to share our faith in the pluralistic, post-modern world in which we live today. It is risky to love people unconditionally. But it is riskier to disobey God's will, and the benefits of being obedient to God's purpose for our churches are far greater than the risks. Only when we are willing to accept the risks and share our faith and love people as God does will we see lives transformed by the grace and power of God.

*The church is one of the few organizations in the world that does not exist for the benefit of its members.*¹⁷

—Ed Stetzer and David Putman

WHY ARE MISSIONAL CHURCHES SO IMPORTANT?

One can travel to many churches that are struggling to survive today and find somewhere on their walls a picture taken in the early to mid-twentieth century that shows a congregation that filled the church every Sunday. One church told me that in the mid-1900s not only was their sanctuary full every Sunday, but in the summer they would open the windows and people would sit outside on the grass or in their vehicles to hear the preacher. That church today will normally have three to four dozen people attend their morning worship service. The denominational affiliation of this church has not changed, nor has its location. The facility is much more modern today—with air-conditioning, carpeting, padded pews, a beautiful new fellowship area with a modern kitchen, and a paved parking area. They remain theologically conservative. The difference is not in the church; it is in the society in which they are trying to do ministry.

We live in a time of rapid change such as has never been seen before. While the maintenance church seeks to maintain its traditions and offers ministries in ways that used to be successful, the world around them is changing at a mind-boggling rate. Some of those changes are the subject of the next chapter, but we can say here that we need missional churches because they are the only churches that will not see these changes as a threat but merely as the new context in which they will minister to their communities.