

# Six Critical Issues for Missional Leadership

ALAN WAS LEADING A WORKSHOP AT A YOUTH Specialties/Emergent conference in San Diego. The group comprised some one hundred church leaders from all kinds of churches—experimental, long-standing, mainline, and congregational. But from all the groups the common question was, “How do we lead and form these missional/emergent congregations you keep talking about? How do we form missional congregations without blowing up the churches we’re serving, or losing our job?”

This book is written out of the conviction that *we need a new approach to leadership for missional communities*. We come away from countless encounters with pastoral teams and denominational executives with the pressing sense that the tools and resources they are using will not address the critical issue of forming missional communities of the Kingdom in a time of rapid, discontinuous change. We believe there are six critical issues in developing a missional leadership in our day.

## ISSUE ONE: MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP Is *the* KEY—BUT HOW DO YOU DO IT?

There’s a lot of good theological and biblical conversation going on about creating missional churches and communities, but little sense

of or assistance for how such leadership can actually be developed. Alan was sitting in the office of a denominational executive talking about the church's need for change. This executive had read the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. He turned to Alan and said, "I love this missional theology. I believe in what you folks are saying. The critique of culture, the evaluation of the church and the theology are wonderful. But what do I do with it? Pastors come into my office asking me for help. And I know that just giving them 'how-to' programs isn't going to help them.

"But neither is this book. It's too academic. Most of my pastors will read it and have no idea what to do with it at the end (if they understand it at all). You see, when a pastor walks into my office and asks for help with other kinds of issues or problems, I can reach onto my shelf and pull off any number of programs that will help them know what to do. But this missional conversation is just that: it's a conversation, but there's nothing to help us know how to do it in the real life of our congregation."

At the end of a workshop at a convention for emergent leaders, a similar thing happened. This time it wasn't a denominational executive but a young pastor in an experimental congregation in the Midwest who said, "Al, what you're saying about the church and our culture is absolutely right! It resonates with my heart. I was feeling excited and energized as you spoke. But where does someone like me go to learn how to be this kind of leader?"

Alan didn't have an answer for him. Leaders are eager to engage in the missional/emergent conversation, but their most pressing questions suggest they're struggling to make sense of how to actually lead in this new way after they go back home.

## ISSUE TWO: MOST MODELS REPACKAGE OLD PARADIGMS

In response to demand, numerous books are being published with missional language in the title. What is disappointing about most of these books is that they use missional language to repackage the familiar language of church effectiveness, church growth, and church health. In other words, the writers have not engaged the nature of the change a missional paradigm requires and are simply offering a few

more good tactics for doing the same thing more effectively. Leadership models are borrowed from psychology (counselor, therapist), medicine (health and healer), the business world (strategist, coach, manager), and the educational world (teacher). A lot of congregations and leaders have been socialized to view these models as the only viable ones. A denominational executive told us about one extreme but real example. He met with a congregation of about 150 people. Describing the profile of the new pastor they wanted, they told him they were not interested in anyone wanting to bring about change. They wanted their church to be like a hospital with a pastor who looked after their needs and metaphorically changed their IVs when required. This is a pastor-medical model of leadership, and it is based on palliative care. It may be extreme, but it is a sign of the borrowed cultural images that shape our understanding of church and our expectation of leaders. The executive admitted that although this was a gross example of a church's pastoral search, it was not far from what many actually wanted.

In another case, a congregation called us to ask how it could remove the current pastor because she wasn't an effective change agent. The job description they developed called for an entrepreneurial leader who could make things happen—clearly a business model. Both examples demonstrate that the leadership models currently shaping the church are inadequate to forming a missional church. In their own context and setting—medicine, the business world, counseling—these images of leadership are appropriate, but when the church borrows and applies such models to the community of God's people it misses an opportunity to shape leadership around the biblical sense, in which leadership is about cultivating an environment that innovates and releases the missional imagination present among a community of God's people. What do we mean by the language of "environment"? We use the word in much the same way as we would say we want to create an environment that enables our children to thrive. In other words, what are the skills, capacities, and habits that we as parents would want to cultivate that give our children all the things they need to thrive? When we talk about the water quality of a lake, we seek to describe those elements in the water that contribute to the fish in the lake thriving, or making sure that what we put into the lake as human beings helps to maintain high-quality water for drinking and swimming. In

other words, we cannot *make* our children into what they will become, just as we cannot make water in that sense. But in both cases we can, as parents or responsible citizens, set the context for the child or the lake to thrive as it should. In the same way, missional leadership is about creating an environment within which the people of God in a particular location may thrive.

### ISSUE THREE: DISCONTINUOUS CHANGE Is *the* NEW NORM

At a meeting with a dozen executive staff members of a denomination, we heard one, reflecting on the dynamics of the congregation, say that she felt every time she turned around things changed. The executive responsible for resourcing Christian education spoke up: “The very nature of change has changed, but I can’t quite get my mind around this discontinuous-change idea. How is it different from continuous change?” After a while, another executive looked at his associates around the table and said, “The reality is that discontinuous change has become the new continuous change, and we were never trained to deal with this kind of world!” Everyone nodded in agreement. It’s a new kind of world!

We heard similar sentiments from an executive leader of a major denomination in a series of three-day meetings concerning some critical issues of innovation in the denomination. We had just brought to this group of some thirty people a comprehensive report (based on about one hundred exhaustive interviews from across the system) on the primary issues confronting its congregations and leaders. The executive looked over the report, sighed, and said: “I’m just plain tired of all this change; I don’t have energy left to address it all anymore!” After a pause, he smiled and said, “But I know these are accurate descriptions of what we’re facing, and I know I need to address the new changes!”

Almost every book one picks up these days and most conferences on leadership begin with the same theme: our culture is in the midst of rapid, extensive transformation at every level. We are moving through a period of volatile, discontinuous change. Change is always happening; that’s not the issue. There are two kinds of change we want

to consider in this book: continuous and discontinuous. Let us illustrate the difference between these two types of change.

Continuous change develops out of what has gone before and therefore can be expected, anticipated, and managed. The maturation of our children is an example. Generations have experienced this process of raising children and watching them develop into adults. We can anticipate the stages and learn from those who have gone before us how to navigate the changes. We have a stock of experience and resources to address this development change; it is continuous with the experience of many others. This kind of change involves such things as improvement on what is already taking place and whether the change can be managed with existing skills and expertise.

Discontinuous change is disruptive and unanticipated; it creates situations that challenge our assumptions. The skills we have learned aren't helpful in this kind of change. A friend became the executive vice president for finance in a college at quite a young age. One day, just before Christmas and about a year into the job, he returned from a fundraising trip and was immediately invited into the president's office. He assumed it was for a regular meeting, but he discovered a member of the board in the room as well. The president passed a letter across his desk to the young VP and told him not to go back to his office; there was a career counselor waiting to see him because his job in the institution was over right then and there. This friend found himself suddenly in a world he never anticipated and for which he had no coping skills. In discontinuous change:

- Working harder with one's habitual skills and ways of working does not address the challenges being faced.
- An unpredictable environment means new skills are needed.
- There is no getting back to normal.

Discontinuous change is dominant in periods of history that *transform* a culture forever, tipping it over into something new. The Exodus stories are an example of a time when God tipped history in a new direction and in so doing transformed Israel from a divergent group of slaves into a new kind of people. The advent of the printing press in

the fifteenth century tipped Western society toward modernity and the pluralist, individualized culture we know today. Once it placed the Bible and books into everyone's hands, the European mind was transformed. There are many more examples, from the Reformation to the ascendance of new technologies such as computers and the Internet, that illustrate the effect of rapid discontinuous change transforming a culture.

Discontinuous change and developmental change are not the same. Developmental is about more of what has been; it's change within a familiar paradigm. Examples are everywhere. One buys a new car or introduces drums or drama or video into a worship service; a book written about missional leadership has a familiar chapter on the need for high commitment to church membership rather than asking the deeper questions of membership and belonging. These instances are all about change *within* a world. They don't address the deeper, underlying issues. The skills and competencies for leading this kind of change are learned by habit and training within the system. Thus the church culture of the twentieth century said to aspiring leaders, "If you want to be a pastor in this denomination you must go to Seminary X and learn skills Y and Z; then you will be ready. We know skills Y and Z are the right ones because they have worked well in the past and will continue to serve us into the future."

For more than a century, North American churches were at the center of culture; they were an essential part of most people's belief and value systems. Therefore, leadership skills and capacities were developed around how to most effectively engage people when they came to the church. It was about training men and women who would faithfully run effective branch plants of the denomination so that when people came they would be well served with a set of expected resources, experiences, and programs. Leaders who ran these churches really well grew in prestige, respect, and influence.

Discontinuous change is different. There is a wonderful IBM ad that captures something of what it means. A team of people evidently starting up a business, after working hard to develop an online marketing strategy, gather around a computer as their product goes online. They look hopefully and expectantly for the first Internet sale. When one comes through, they nervously look at each other, relieved that something has happened. Then ten more sales come through.

Muted excitement runs through the anxious room. Then, suddenly, a hundred or so orders show up on the computer screen. The team is cheering and hugging one another in exultation; all their hard work has paid off. Then they stare at the screen, beyond disbelief: instead of hundreds of orders, which they couldn't have imagined in their wildest dreams, there are suddenly thousands. Everyone is overwhelmed. No one knows how to deal with this; it's outside their skills and expertise. They are at a loss to know what to do next. The organization has moved to a level of complexity that is beyond the team's skills and ability to address.

In a period of discontinuous change, leaders suddenly find that the skills and capacities in which they were trained are of little use in addressing a new situation and environment. What do congregational leaders do when the skills that have been effective in drawing people in and building it up no longer get the same results because the growing numbers of emerging generations are no longer interested in being attracted into a church building or joining the church programs?

#### ISSUE FOUR: CONGREGATIONS STILL MATTER

Despite the claim that congregations are so hopelessly compromised they cannot make the adjustments required to missionally engage our new context, a congregation can become a center of missional life.

We are not naïve about the challenges. Many congregations are in significant decline. For a lot of people, the congregation is little more than a haven in a heartless world, a dispenser of religious goods and services to individuals. Nevertheless, it is still populated by the people of God. God chooses to create new futures in the most inauspicious of places. Through the Incarnation, we discover that God's future is at work not where we tend to look but among the people we write off as dead or powerless to make things different. If the Spirit has been poured out in the church—the church as it is, not some ideal type—then we are compelled to believe that the Spirit of God is at work and alive among the congregations of America. Congregations matter. But they need leaders with the skills to cultivate an environment in which the Spirit-given presence of God's future may emerge among the people of God.

ISSUE FIVE: LEADERS NEED  
NEW CAPACITIES *and* FRAMEWORKS

A denominational executive sits listening to a group of pastors share their convictions about the shaping of a missional church for their denomination. His arms are folded across his chest, his legs crossed, as he listens in silence. His body language suggests nervousness and resistance; yet, like a good leader, he has chosen to come to this meeting and listen to these men and women share their hearts with him. A veteran of many years, he has given his heart to his denomination and gotten many a bruise from his efforts. He knows the statistics, just like everyone else. This once-proud mainline denomination is bleeding members every year, budgets are plummeting, reserves are running low, and the remaining staff are being obliged to carry more and more work. Something needs to be done.

After the pastors finish speaking, his initial comments reveal the needling questions he brought with him. He is concerned that he seems to hear a lot of negative things from the missional church movement. From his perspective, missional church seems to be telling him that he what he did in the past was wrong, that he and others just don't know how to lead in this new world. He is concerned about the criticism of his and his peers' leadership.

This executive is both right and wrong. He and his peers are exemplary; they lead with excellence and great skill. The skills and capacities that shaped church leadership for much of the twentieth century were the right ones for that context. We are not critiquing these skills and capacities. Our point is that the world has changed. Discontinuous change means that many rules and assumptions about leadership now need to be reexamined and rewritten. This does not make those who have led us in the past wrong; it means we are functioning in a different context. Just as a missionary who moves from North America to another culture must unlearn a lot of habits and skills to learn how to be present and effective in a way that achieves results in the new context, so we pastors and denominational leaders in North America are now in a place where we must *all* learn new capacities if we are to achieve effective missional results.

The important point to remember is that we are all in this situation together. We are all learners on this journey. This is not a matter



of judging or accusing or dismissing the past efforts of leaders of great skill, passion, and integrity. All of us in leadership, young and old, experienced veterans and raw recruits, must discover together the new shape of leadership.

The classic skills of pastoral leadership in which most pastors were trained were not wrong, but the level of discontinuous change renders many of them insufficient and often unhelpful at this point. It is as if we are prepared to play baseball and suddenly discover that everyone else is playing basketball. The game has changed and the rules are different.

The situation requires cultivation of new leadership capacities. Alongside the standard skills of pastoral ministry, leaders need resources and tools to help them cultivate an environment for missional transformation. In one congregation, a staff of five pastors struggled to deal with complex, multiple expectations they had of themselves and the congregation had for them. They could articulate what was meant by a missional ecclesiology, and they had read several books on missional church, but they struggled with conflicting images of what it means to lead and what the congregation expected. They articulated what was for them a helpful way of describing their situation using a summary chart analyzing what they believed were two different paradigms operating both in them as leaders and in the congregation (see Table 1.1). We're not suggesting this is the correct description of the divergent expectations and roles, only that it's illustrative of what we believe is actually happening among leaders in the church today.

The Pastoral Model in Table 1.1 represents, for them, the role expectations placed on or held by congregational leaders. Here the assumption is that people come to the church to receive religious goods and services, and the pastor is, like a priest, present to engage and meet their spiritual or religious needs in every way. This team believed that the image described under this column continues to be the more dominant and powerful model, both for pastors and those who attend church. When they looked at the Pastoral Model, they readily admitted that most of the skills in which they were trained were developed for functioning in this framework. They clearly understood that for a large percentage of the congregation pastoral care is still a central competency for any leader of a congregation. But this team also recognized that it is no longer a sufficient skill set for leaders. Simply

TABLE 1.1. *Operating Models of Leadership.*

<i>Pastoral</i>	<i>Missional</i>
Expectation that an ordained pastor must be present at every meeting and event or else it is not validated or important.	Ministry staff operate as coaches and mentors within a system that is not dependent on them to validate the importance and function of every group by being present.
Ordained ministry staff functions to give attention to and take care of people in the church by being present for people as they are needed (if care and attention are given by people other than ordained clergy, it may be more appropriate and effective but is deemed “second-class”).	Ordained clergy equip and release the multiple ministries of the people of God throughout the church.
Time, energy, and focus shaped by people’s “need” and “pain” agendas.	
Pastor provides solutions.	Pastor asks questions that cultivate an environment that engages the imagination, creativity, and gifts of God’s people in order to discern solutions.
Preaching and teaching offer answers and tell people what is right and wrong. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telling</li> <li>• Didactic</li> <li>• Reinforcing assumptions</li> <li>• Principles for living</li> </ul>	Preaching and teaching invite the people of God to engage Scripture as a living word that confronts them with questions and draws them into a distinctive world. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Metaphor and stories</li> <li>• Asks new questions</li> </ul>
“Professional” Christians	“Pastoring” must be part of the mix, but not the sum total.
Celebrity (must be a “home run hitter”)	
“Peacemaker”	Make tension OK.
Conflict suppressor or “fixer”	Conflict facilitator
Keep playing the whole game as though we are still <i>the</i> major league team and <i>the</i> major league players. Continue the mythology that “This staff is the New York Yankees of the Church world!”	Indwell the local and contextual; cultivate the capacity for the congregation to ask imaginative questions about its present and its next stages.

TABLE 1.1. *Operating Models of Leadership, Cont'd.*

<i>Pastoral</i>	<i>Missional</i>
“Recovery” expert (“make it like it used to be”)	Cultivator of imagination and creativity
Function as the manager, maintainer, or resource agent of a series of centralized ministries focused in and around the building that everyone must support. Always be seen as the champion and primary support agent for everyone’s specific ministry.	Create an environment that releases and nourishes the missional imagination of all people through diverse ministries and missional teams that affect their various communities, the city, nation, and world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

being skilled at caring for people once they come to the church is not sufficient for engaging the changing context in which a congregation finds itself.

The Missional Model they developed (Table 1.1) represented, for them, the emerging leadership paradigm they wanted to innovate in the congregation. This model recognizes a context in which people have an ever greater variety of religious options. A congregation must become a place where members learn to function like cross-cultural missionaries rather than be a gathering place where people come to receive religious goods and services. As the team articulated this list, they were aware that they needed a whole new set of leadership skills.

You may choose your own description and categories, but the principle is the same: in a situation of rapid discontinuous change, leaders must understand and develop skills and competencies to lead congregations and denominational systems in a context that is missional rather than pastoral.

#### ISSUE SIX: *A* CONGREGATION IS *a* UNIQUE ORGANIZATION

A congregation is not a business enterprise and cannot be treated as such. But this is precisely what most books and programs for innovating missional life in congregations are doing. They tend to borrow their ideas and strategies from the latest processes in the business world and merely use so-called missional language to describe what is being proposed. The denominational systems that came into their own in

the twentieth century were modeled after and came to look like North American corporate organizations. But a congregation is not a business organization, nor is it meant to be run like a minicorporation through strategic planning and alignment of people and resources around some big plan. The congregation comprises the people of God, called to be formed into a unique social community whose life together is the sign, witness, and foretaste of what God is doing in and for all of creation. Just as early Christian communities chose nonreligious language to express this unique new life (using the overtly political word *ecclesia*), so the church today must understand again its calling as the missional people of God. The calling does not require borrowing language and structures from secular organizations but rather formation of a unique imagination as a social community of the Kingdom.

The habits and activities of many congregations and leaders seem disconnected from the purposes to which God calls the church in North America today. We need to imagine the forms and structures of church life in this situation that are not simply uncritically borrowed from other systems. A leader must be able to help a congregation:

- Understand the extent to which strategic planning and other such models misdirect the church from faithful witness in our culture
- Create an environment wherein God's people can discern for themselves new forms of life and witness
- Thrive in the midst of ambiguity and discontinuity

Even though the regular operational or administrative functions of a congregation continue to require attention, they must now support other leadership skills: cultivating the missional imagination of the people of God in the midst of massive change. This book introduces those skills and presents a framework for understanding why they are important and how they can be applied.