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## THE MISSIONAL RENAISSANCE

The missional renaissance is under way. Signs of it are everywhere. Churches are doing some “unchurchy” things. A church in East Texas decides that its next ministry chapter should be about building a better community, not building a better church. “No child will go hungry in this county,” the pastor declares in his “vision” message, a time usually reserved for launching new church initiatives. A church in Ohio passes up the option to purchase a prime piece of real estate that would allow it to build a facility to house its multisite congregation. Instead, it votes not to spend \$50 million on church facilities but to invest the money in community projects. A congregation located in a town housing a major correctional facility has taken on the challenge of placing every released inmate in some kind of mentorship and sponsorship upon leaving prison. These efforts are resulting not just in cooperation from the prison but in a drop in recidivism rates as well. Another group of churches is collaborating on bringing drinkable water to villages in the developing and undeveloped nations of the world.

New expressions of church are emerging. One pastor has left a tall-steepled church to organize a simple neighborhood gathering of spiritual pilgrims. He is working at secular employment

so that he doesn't have to collect monies to support a salary; rather, he and his colleagues are investing in people on their own street. A church planter who left an established church to start one of his own has decided to set up a network of missional communities to serve as the organic church in every sector of his city. Another entrepreneurial spiritual leader has opened up a community center with a church tucked inside of it. He has a dozen other ministries operating in the shared space.

The impact of the missional renaissance extends beyond the church into the social sector. The head of a homeless shelter in the Deep South has shifted his strategy from a food-and-counseling model to a coaching-and-employment model. Rather than relying on the "mouths fed and beds occupied" scorecard, he is insisting on new metrics to measure the life progress of the people he serves. His staff of "life coaches" are throwing themselves into people development, not just delivery of a ministry service.

Individual Jesus followers are also increasingly unwilling to limit their spiritual lives to church involvement. They are arranging their lives around their convictions and taking to the streets. A young husband and wife decide to live in a low-income apartment so they can serve as community developers for the complex. The complex owner does not mind that they are followers of Jesus or that they hold Bible studies and prayer meetings along with their pool parties and life skills workshops. A local businessman retires and calls on all his former business connections to contribute to a construction ministry he starts to help poor people fix up their homes.

The missional renaissance is changing the way the people of God think about God and the world, about what God is up to in the world and what part the people of God play in it. We are learning to see things differently, and once we adjust our way of seeing, we will never be able to look at these things the way we used to.

A similar dynamic has happened before. During the 1400s, the most gifted and passionate artists, writers, architects, and mathematicians of the day converged in Florence,

Italy, and other cities across Europe. With the sponsorship of the Medicis and other wealthy patrons, their cross-pollination of ideas and practices gave rise to the Renaissance. Their fertilized thought was both disruptive and creative. Old ways and beliefs were abandoned, forsaken for something better, something promising, something hopeful.

Once the Renaissance was begun, there was no going back. The trajectories of literature, religion, art, science, and even economics and political theory would all be altered by Renaissance thinking. A Ptolemaic view of the universe yielded to a new Copernican reality. The application of mathematics to drawing resulted in the development of perspective in art. Real-life representations in paintings replaced medieval iconic figures. It would be impossible for people to think about things post-Renaissance the same way they thought pre-Renaissance. Every part of culture was changed, including the church.

Similar forces are driving today's missional renaissance. Elevated educational levels, heightened technology, and increased wealth have combined to create a huge pool of talented activists and sponsors. A growing number of people are willing and able to engage social issues with new solutions and the power to make a difference. The combination of wealth, talent, and creativity is resulting in ideas and practices that are both disruptive and hopeful for the church. New ways of being church are being born every day. There is no putting this Humpty Dumpty back together. That's the good news. Church will never be the same.

The missional church renaissance is not occurring in a vacuum. Just as in the fifteenth century, larger social forces are at work that conspire to create conditions ripe for this kind of development. The confluence of three significant cultural phenomena is fueling the current collaboration and creativity:

- The emergence of the altruism economy
- The search for personal growth
- The hunger for spiritual vitality

These three elements anticipate the three shifts that people and churches must make to engage the missional renaissance. They serve as a starting point in our exploration of the missional church and how you can get in on it.

## **Emergence of the Altruism Economy**

Wealthy patrons bankrolled the initial Renaissance. The altruism economy is sponsoring this one.

The March 9, 2008, edition of the *New York Times Magazine* was titled “Giving It Away.” Various articles chronicled the evolution of altruism, celebrity chefs’ cooking for charity, four stories of individual twenty-somethings’ efforts to change their piece of the world, and an interview with Dr. Larry Brilliant, head of corporate giving at Google. The thread that ran throughout the magazine is that we are witnessing something truly phenomenal in both the magnitude and the creativity of people’s determination not just to share their wealth but to make a difference with it. The *Times* edition came a few months after the release of Bill Clinton’s *Giving*<sup>1</sup> and hit the stands during the *Oprah’s Big Give* television series. Celebrities like Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett, Bono, and Angelina Jolie target disease, Third World debt, illiteracy, and other social ills on a global scale.

But we also discover in every community nameless heroes who volunteer in soup kitchens, tutor struggling kids in English and math, build houses for people who can’t afford them, and perform innumerable acts of kindness and generosity. And they give money—a lot of money. Charitable giving now comes to around \$300 billion a year and is rising.

Altruism shows up in every sector of the economy. Every major corporation, and most minor ones, assign their managers community service obligations. A growing number of businesses dedicate a certain percentage of sales to performing altruistic work, from digging wells to provide safe drinking water

overseas to supporting local school projects. Special Web sites are donated to organizations, allowing people not just to direct their own money but also to release others' resources for projects of their choice. FreeRice.com is an example of this development, with up to half a million people participating daily, freeing 400 metric tons of rice for hunger relief. Family foundations support favorite causes and local giving circles fund the arts in their communities. Hospitals provide millions of dollars in free services each year. Schools and student organizations unleash tens of thousands of volunteer hours into their communities through their campus service projects. The entertainment industry throws money at charity benefits. *American Idol* raised millions in one night, and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* has inspired hundreds of copycat local renditions.

The emergence of the altruism economy signals the positive inclination of people to believe that they can and should make a difference, starting with their neighborhood and extending to the entire globe. They also expect the people they deal with in commerce, the schools they attend, the businesses they support—and the churches they belong to—to be investing in making the world a better place.

This increased spirit of altruism is calling the church out to play. It beckons the church to move from being the recipient of a generous culture (religious causes garner the largest percentage of charitable dollars—about a third) to actually being generous to the culture. It challenges the church to move beyond its own programs and self-preoccupation. And it promises that once the church ventures into the street to engage human need, it will have many partners from all domains of culture to join with it in creating a better world.

This explosion of good actually creates a chance for the church to gain relevance and influence. But only if the church is willing to get out of the church business and get over the delusion that the “success” of the church impresses the world. It does not. It only impresses church people, while making others even

more skeptical of the church's true motives. After chronicling the negative image of Christianity among younger generations in their groundbreaking book *Unchristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons conclude, "No strategy, tactics, or clever marketing campaign could ever clear away the smokescreen that surrounds Christianity in today's culture. The perception of outsiders will change only when Christians strive to represent the heart of God in every relationship and situation."<sup>2</sup>

The way forward for churches that want to redefine their position in the community will be through service and sacrifice. In classic Renaissance dynamics, this approach is rediscovering and reapplying an ancient idea. The early church movement was characterized by this posture of service. Recapturing that character will require the church to make a major shift into a kingdom way of thinking and seeing. This shift will show up in a new scorecard highlighting different factors and behaviors than the ones that are typically tracked (attendance, monies received, activities at church). These new metrics will push beyond the church's own internal measures to monitoring the church's positive community impact beyond its walls.

### **Missional Shift 1: From an Internal to an External Ministry Focus**

The church must shift from an internal to an external focus in its ministry. This reflects what missional churches and missional church leaders are doing and why they are doing it. They don't focus beyond the church to be culturally hip. They make this shift because the new direction defines who they are. The missional church engages the community beyond its walls because it believes that is why the church exists.

This shift redefines the target of ministry. Internally focused churches and ministries (and people, for that matter) consume most of their energy, time, and money on a wide range of concerns, from survival to entertainment. Success in the internally

focused culture is defined in terms of organizational goals. Leaders in these situations focus their efforts on helping the ministry achieve these goals (attendance, budget, new program widgets, improved widget performance). In other words, the scorecard is tied to activity focused on the organization itself.

Externally focused ministry leaders take their cues from the environment around them in terms of needs and opportunities. They look for ways to bless and to serve the communities where they are located. Much of their calendar space, financial resources, and organizational energy is spent on people who are not a part of their organization. These ministry ventures may or may not improve the organization's bottom line in terms of traditional measures (attendance may actually go down if people are released to mission). These leaders increasingly look to network with other leaders and organizations with similar passions in order to synergize their efforts and increase the impact of their ministry efforts.

Shifting from an internal to an external focus usually requires a radical change of mind-set on the part of the leader, away from being ruled by the constraints and scorecards of the internally focused system. Many leaders have spent their entire leadership lives in pursuit of building great organizations that rise to the top of church industry standards. Changing values and motivations is not easy, but nothing less will accomplish this shift. Not to mention the fact that leaders generally know how to "do church" (even if it is a guaranteed losing season), but they don't know if they have the requisite competencies to do anything else. After all, their training, roles, and status are tied to their church culture performances, not to their community awareness and contributions.

### **The Search for Personal Growth**

It is no accident that people pulled millions of copies of Rick Warren's *Purpose-Driven Life* off the shelf. They want to grow, and they want their lives to matter. Just check out the self-improvement

section of your local bookstore. It dwarfs many other areas. Or take a look at what colleges and universities are offering, and filling up, in terms of adult education opportunities—everything from second-career (or third!) preparation to the advanced pursuit of leisure hobbies and interests. Check out the cable TV listings of shows offering advice to help people decorate, cook, dress, garden, manage money, train a dog, or flip a house. Life coaching has become a major industry. Many therapists are moving from traditional pathology-based approaches to more holistic, interventionist, proactive coaching, recognizing that people are searching for life change and development.

This unprecedented pursuit of personal development can be traced to several key changes. In the second half of the twentieth century, wave after wave of technology pushed people to adopt the mentality that they would need to engage in lifelong learning. Thanks to the Web and wireless access, information is now ubiquitous and asynchronous. Need to know something? Google it! You can suck the entire Library of Congress out of thin air! Right now!

Paradoxically, the more knowledge is available to us, the more we feel we need to learn. Far from satisfying our curiosity to know stuff, the onslaught of information fuels it. So a pervasive sense of needing to grow, to learn, to adapt, and to change has taken residence in the psyche of people in our culture.

The availability of information also does something else. It empowers people. Consider just one example—education. In a previous world, now made ancient by the digital revolution, people used to have to go to certain places and to certain people to acquire the knowledge necessary for an education. The educational system was built around an information acquisition and transfer modality, involving a largely didactic process from teacher to student. In this system, the learned instructor, the one with the information, passed knowledge down to the supplicant learner during certain hours of the day on certain days of



the week in certain months of the year. We even built buildings where this knowledge transfer could occur, sending out buses to gather the learners. It was mass standardized education.

Forget that! Today, people learn at their own speed, on their own time, at their own convenience. In this new arrangement, power is ultimately transferred to the information consumer. Learners get to craft their own learning path.

The availability of information has increased empowerment. People are empowered to do for themselves things they once had to rely on others to do—others with the information and connections—like ticket agents who alone had seating charts for airplanes or stock brokers who alone had access to the stock market or any of hundreds of other examples. Some of you have never known a world where you had to wait for the bank to open and then ask someone there to manage your accounts. People like the idea of being able to manage the transactions of their lives. More than that, they expect it! They also want to and expect to be able to maximize their own personal development—whether at work or in their hobbies or recreational pursuits.

Not only do people want to grow themselves, but they also want to make sure other people have the same option. They want to invest in people, to lift the life experience of people less fortunate. To make these investments, people are now capable of and inclined toward researching problems and funding their ideas of solutions. And they are also increasingly determined to make sure their social capital is used efficiently and effectively to produce the results in people's lives they seek to achieve. Nearly gone are the days when charities could ask donors for money based just on how much activity the charitable organizations generate. Donors want impact—in people terms.

When you combine this commitment to personal development with the rise of the altruism economy, you arrive at the missional renaissance.

## **Missional Shift 2: From Program Development to People Development**

The confluence of these two cultural trends calls for the second shift of the missional church: from a focus on programs to a focus on people and their development as the core activity of the community of faith. If we only make the first shift without understanding and implementing this one, we wind up replacing an old program (church stuff) with a new program (community service) or another set of activities layered on top of what is currently being done. People will be worn out, maybe even at an accelerated pace—the very opposite result of what needs to happen.

Program-driven churches and ministry organizations operate on suspect but often unchallenged assumptions. These assumptions are that people will be better off if they just participate in certain activities and processes that the church or organization has sanctioned for its ministry agenda. The problem is that study after study continues to reveal that active church members do not reflect a different value set than the culture at large. In addition, they are beset by the same lifestyle ills of nonparticipants. They wonder, “Where’s the abundant life that was promised if we only participated more?” The answer is that achieving abundant life will require intentional personal development. This is not a given in the program-driven modality of operation; the only *real* guarantee is that the church will keep people busy.

The missional church takes far more seriously the challenge to help people shape their path for personal development. Some of the key ideas we will explore for making this shift will challenge prevailing notions of how people grow that have shaped much of the program-driven church. We must change our ideas of what it means to develop a disciple, shifting the emphasis from studying Jesus and all things spiritual in an environment protected from the world to following Jesus into the world to join him in his redemptive mission. We need to expand the

bandwidth of issues we address in helping people grow, realizing that there is no such thing as spiritual growth apart from relationship health and other life factors.

This shift is the most difficult of the three shifts necessary for going missional. This is true for several reasons. First of all, helping people grow and develop is hard work; it isn't something you start and finish in a twelve-week course. Second, the shift from pursuing institutional goals and objectives to measuring the impact of ministry on people's quality of life calls for a dramatically new scorecard. In the program-driven modality, the assumption was that if the church was doing well at providing and executing programs, people who participated in them automatically experienced personal growth. This assumption is no longer valid, and perhaps it never was.

Another reason this shift will prove difficult is that church leaders are not prepared for a life of people development. Typical clergy training efforts, including Bible colleges, seminaries, and denominational and parachurch ministries, prepare church leaders to teach the Bible, manage the church, and grow the business. The typical clergyperson is groomed to do project management (yes, even the sermon is a project) and perform religious rites, not develop people. And if the truth be known, many leaders do not give themselves to developing other people because they have never had it happen to them. Leaders will have to travel a steep unlearning curve to move away from the activities and behaviors that support the program-driven model.

This shift also means that church membership or some level of involvement in a local congregation will no longer be the primary spiritual expression of missional followers of Jesus. Missional Christians will no longer be content to help their church succeed in getting better at "doing church" or consider their commitment to the church as an expression of their spiritual depth. They are shifting their commitments to people and causes beyond the church. They also no longer look to or rely on the clergy and church leaders to script or dictate their

spiritual and personal development. The church has to recalibrate its ministry efforts to champion this new reality.

The missional church provides an alternative to a failed system. No one can legitimately claim that our current model produces vibrant disciples. North American church attendees lack the caliber and character of disciples that we see in many other parts of the world where the movement started by Jesus is exploding, where the focus is on developing people, not just processing them.

### **The Hunger for Spiritual Vitality**

The quest for spirituality as a central tenet of postmodern life has been amply chronicled by scores of researchers and cultural analysts. This development reverses a centuries-old trend set in motion by the fifteenth-century Renaissance. From the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason that followed, the modern era conducted a systematic assault on God. God was consigned to a smaller and smaller realm, occupying only the niches that could not be understood or explained by scientific inquiry. The freeing of people from ignorance was supposed to create a better world.

However, what modernity promised it failed to deliver. Despite the mantra that progress is better, human ills have diminished for only a portion of the human race. Age-old problems of disease, hunger, war, and injustice persist. The possibilities of nuclear annihilation, terrorist attack, or a pandemic viral outbreak render vulnerable even those ensconced behind citadels of wealth. Current institutions and systems are no longer trusted as adequate to deal with the growing complexities of the planet's dilemmas. The result is that people have turned again to transcendent belief systems to help them make sense of the world and its challenges.

God is back, big time! And he's breaking out of the box—the box that moderns tried to put him in. He's making his

presence known beyond the confines of religion. He is showing up across all domains of culture. This means that people are not confining their search for God to traditional church settings. In addition, the pervasive mistrust of institutions characteristic of postmodern culture extends to institutional religion. Many people are conducting their search for spiritual vitality in the street, outside the church.

The 2008 Religious Landscape Survey conducted and published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life discovered that the fastest-growing segment of religious affiliation in the country is the nonaffiliated (16.1 percent of adults age eighteen and older).<sup>3</sup> People moving into the unaffiliated category outnumber those moving out by greater than a 3-to-1 margin. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this percentage of unaffiliated Americans had held between 5 and 8 percent, meaning that this group has more than doubled in the past decade. One of the more instructive findings in the study, from my point of view, is that 25 percent of all adults under age thirty are now in the unaffiliated category. While only one-fourth of the religiously unaffiliated classify themselves as atheists or agnostic (1.6 and 2.4 percent, respectively), half of the other respondents in this category say that religion is important or very important in their lives. Clearly, the move away from affiliation is not a move away from God. It does signal a disaffection for the institutional church that is changing the spiritual landscape drastically—and quickly.

All this calls for an expression of Christian spirituality that does not reflect or rely on the Constantinian world order for its major self-understanding. After Constantine, Christianity became a clergy-dominated religion centered around designated places of worship. This differed radically from its first three centuries. The movement founded by Jesus was largely a marketplace phenomenon, an organic connection among people who were experiencing a way of life together. The early days of the movement focused on simple teachings of Jesus, with particular attention to living lives of sacrifice and service

to one another and to one's neighbor. Even though the movement spread very rapidly among the slave populations and common people, its appeal transcended all cultural lines. The spiritual expression of Jesus followers was not characterized by a set of religious activities layered on top of other interests. Jesus invaded all areas of life. Church was not an event or a place; it was a way of life. It must become a way of life again. Enter the missional church.

### **Missional Shift 3: From Church-Based to Kingdom-Based Leadership**

Today's spiritual realities call for the third shift of the missional renaissance, from church-based to kingdom-based leadership. The spirituality the world needs must be robust enough to engage people where they live, work, and play. This kingdom movement requires spiritual leaders who understand the culture's search for God and who are willing to engage this discussion. These leaders do not insist or depend on people's leaving their own turf behind to have this conversation. They do not need the props of religious authority or church real estate to pursue their passion of introducing people to the revelation of God's heart for the world through Jesus. Their agenda differs significantly from those leaders who see their major task as serving people who come to church.

Accomplishing the first two shifts demanded by the missional renaissance will take a kind of leadership geared toward stimulating and supporting a movement. Much of the kingdom movement agenda will be focused outside the "organized" church, exercising its influence in the world beyond the church by bringing church into every domain of the culture. This does not mean that missional leaders cannot serve in the institutional church. But it does mean that if they do fill a traditional church role, they conduct it with a missional agenda. The content and

character of their leadership will be very different from others who hold similar positions but view their responsibilities through a church-based mind-set.

Missional leaders are thinking differently about what church could be and even should be. The difference in their thinking is measured not in degree but in kind. For these leaders, church has moved from being internally occupied to externally focused, from primarily concentrating on its institutional maintenance to developing an incarnational influence. These leaders find themselves thinking of kingdom impact more than church growth. These innovators (twenty-first-century apostles and prophets) are imagining the church as a catalyst to mobilize all the community, synergizing the altruistic impetus, to work on the big things that God cares about. Their agenda stands in stark contrast to the program-driven church of the modern era. Their devotion to God is lived out in their determination to bless and to develop people who are made in his image.

This leadership shift will cull many present church leaders whose lips profess that they want to go missional but do not have it in their hearts. In an extended treatment of this shift that comes later in the book, we will explore some of the challenges inherent in making this leadership shift. Spiritual leaders will not only have to see their roles differently; they will also have to demonstrate in their lives what it is they want people to do. This may require that they acquire new competencies for an assignment that is quite different from managing a church role. The training agenda for leaders of movements differs quite dramatically from the current leadership training models in place for readying clergy to lead churches. These leaders will also have to answer the question of the proper role of clergy in a missional church. Many are probably going to have to raise financial support for themselves and for their ministries. And in the process of doing all this, missional church leaders are going to have the time of their lives.

## What's Next?

There are two things, then, I want to accomplish in these pages. First, I want to explore these three distinctive shifts that characterize the missional renaissance in terms of theology and practice, thinking and behavior. I will offer some language to capture and to express these implications for the church and for spiritual leaders. This discussion will not only help you think this through yourself but will also help you communicate with others what must be done to engage the missional renaissance. It is my hope that these pages will become powerful ways of convincing and recruiting others to join your journey. But be careful—once you start down this path, it will ruin you to the old world. You will be faced with choice after choice that will serve to declare your intentions about whether or not you will engage the missional renaissance.

Second, I also want to suggest what a new missional church scorecard might consist of. We need a new scorecard to support the rise of the missional church in North America. A universal maxim of human behavior—in families, at school, at work, wherever—is that what gets rewarded gets done. This means that the old church scorecard of how many, how often, how much—all bottom-line measures that are calculated in terms of church activity—is counterproductive to participating in the missional renaissance. The old scorecard keeps us church-absorbed. As long as we use it, we will continue to be inward-focused, program-driven, and church-based in our thinking and leadership.

Missional church is not about “doing church” better—at least, not the way we’ve “done church” in North America. It is not church growth in a new dress. It is not adding a smoke machine for the worship center or hiring a new band. It is not about church renewal, which generally means trying to find some new way to revitalize the troops to do church better with the hope of poofing up the numbers as the end result. Missional



church is not a fad, the next big thing. Missional thinking and living change the game completely. The missional renaissance is altering both the character and the expression of the church in the world.

Ours is an age that celebrates in fresh ways the potential of people to make a difference, just as the original Renaissance reawakened the human spirit to noble pursuits. This outpouring of good and hope in the face of so many daunting challenges, together with people's desire to grow and to experience genuine spiritual vitality, represents the spiritual awakening of our times.

The missional renaissance reflects the church's response in a time of a remarkable manifestation of the kingdom. Those who miss it will find themselves on the other side of a divide that renders them irrelevant to the movement of God in the world. Those who engage it will find themselves at the intersection of God's redemptive mission and the world he loves so much he was willing to die for it.

