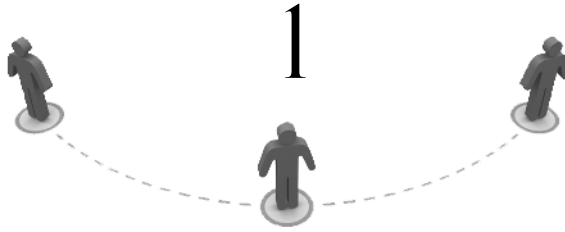




PART ONE

WHOLE CHURCHES
AND FRAGMENTED
CHURCHES

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FOSTERING WHOLE CHURCHES

THE BIG IDEA

The gospel we stand for is a message of wholeness (shalom, salvation, spiritual health) for broken people and a broken world, and that wholeness must be reflected in our churches. Powerful forces are constantly fragmenting us and our churches, but it is still possible to be a Whole Church. Engaging God's supply with human need is a call for the twenty-first-century church.

SICK OF FRAGMENTATION

I have never met a pastor or other church leader who said that he or she wanted to foster a partial or broken church. Churches are meant to be whole. And I have never met a leader who said he or she wanted to promote fragmentation in the church—although any of us can be blind to the forces of fragmentation, and in our worst moments we as church leaders may be the source of or promoters of fragmentation.

None of us wants to see the church we serve be satisfied with being incomplete, skewed, prejudiced, parochial, limited. We know that churches, human as they are, will be all these things, but we also know that our churches have a higher calling to draw from the fullness of Christ and demonstrate the fullness of Christ. This book is meant to be a gift of encouragement to church leaders who feel war-torn by the battles that arise from our own

foolishness in the church, and to church leaders who feel as if they have been on a search for the holy grail of church models, that the search hasn't been very fruitful, and that they can't exactly remember what they were searching for in the first place.

I am sick of fragmentation. How about you?

The one community that should understand wholeness—and explore it, embrace it, luxuriate in it, model it, enhance it, promote it—is the church. The one organization that can hold together despite having a head who is invisible and a mission that embraces all of life—is the church. The one collection of people who should experience the most joy, be committed to the most focused agenda, and have an ongoing sense of expectancy—is the church.

So why is it that our churches can be the most

fragmented,
restrictive,
tense,
controlling,
uptight,
mean-spirited,
small-minded,
self-righteous,
spirit-smothering,

organizations you can find . . . and what's more, believe that churches are really supposed to be battlegrounds, as if God intended things to be this way?

There is a better way.

It is time to rediscover the *Whole Church*. It is there for us, just an arm's length away. A Whole Church is a local congregation believing that it is called to the whole purpose of God in and through the church, rather than to some specialization. A Whole Church means leading people in practical ways into a true engagement with God (in worship and devotion), engagement with God's people (in true *koinonia*), engagement with the community (deployed witness), and engagement with the world (making real

connections across national lines). And when we commit to all levels of engagement, we see a truly integrated picture of ministry and church life: worship leads to mission, community enhances personal devotion, witness leads us back to worship again. We see spiritual life with forward momentum as being the great cohesive dynamic of life. We see the gears of the church coming together, fully engaged, and then the engine of God's power moving the church forward.

Wholeness is our best defense against arbitrary personal ambition and against party spirit in a congregation. A vision of the Whole Church is the big idea that elevates us above our squabbles and our small-mindedness. In those seasons when a sense of Whole Church is the spirit of the majority of a congregation, we see celebration come naturally, and a congregation can come through even the kind of crises that are like earthquakes that shift the ground on which people stand.

Does this sound too idealistic? Are you saying to yourself, "Whoever this author is, he's not offering a very realistic picture of the church—not of my church, anyway." Well, I assure you that in almost three decades of being a pastor, I've seen every kind of disappointing behavior we all see in our churches. I cringe whenever I've been the root of a problem, and I live with the rueful memories of when I've spoken carelessly or led the church down a dead-end street. I cling to the biblical view of the church that is lofty in aspirations and measured in expectations. Wholeness is there for us, at arm's length, but our churches will always be susceptible to division and fragmentation. We hear the gears grind. We surge ahead, but we also get stuck. Leaders pull in different directions, following different agendas. New special interest groups may be born at any time in a congregation, and the old special interest groups hang on out of an instinct for self-preservation. We go to a leader conference and come back home thinking that we have to import somebody else's idea and change the whole course of the church one more time—and we hear our coworkers groan. You introduce change in the church, and you get e-mails right away accusing you of pulling the congregation apart rather than pulling it together. And, amazingly, the accusers believe they know exactly what your motives are. They have some telepathic capacity to read your mind and know that you are creating this trouble

because you are self-centered and indifferent to the feelings of others. They always knew you intended to be unfaithful to God.

Pause. Groan. Catch your breath.

Whole Church is at the same time both an unattainable goal and also the only goal worth striving toward. It is about unity, but not the kind of unity that is grudging and obligatory. Certainly not unity for unity's sake—which never happens. On those days when we see the church we serve in come together, it is because a crisis or a challenge or an opportunity compels us to attach ourselves to God in that mysterious way that pulls us together. Unity isn't a slogan; it's becoming what we are in Christ.

And that is where leaders come in. Effective leaders do not sit back on their heels in status quo mode, and they do not charge ahead, way ahead, of the congregation until they are so isolated that they preach to the air. As someone once said, "If they ain't followin', you ain't leadin'."

Effective church leaders lead congregations into activities that provide a realistic sense of forward momentum, and they look for every cohesive experience available for the staff, for the congregation, and for themselves. (And the best ideas those leaders borrow from other churches are for creating those cohesive experiences.) In our better days as leaders, we believe we are looking at a body, not a herd of people we've corralled into a big room on Sunday morning. And the ministry activities in which we choose to invest our finite amount of energy and time lead others to experience the Whole Church.

In this book you will encounter the stories of dozens of real-life churches and leaders who have gone through our common experience of watching the church alternately fragmenting and pulling together. At the end of each chapter are specific practical things to do to promote cohesion in your church.

Before going any further, let me say something about you, the reader. I wrote this book in honor of and in support of the many pastors and other church leaders who want to clarify their ministry stance in a way that is faithful to God's call to practical fruitfulness in this new millennium. (Or forget the millennium—just to get through this week.) I have worked at different times as a pastoral assistant, a youth pastor, an associate pastor, and a senior pastor in rural churches and metro churches, in a large church and in

one church that had a couple dozen pews and thirty or forty in attendance (on a good Sunday). I've worked in mainline denominational churches and nondenominational churches.

I'm thinking of those of you who are looking for ways of doing ministry that are fresh and new, but not faddish. Ministry whose roots are in the kingdom of God and not the kingdom of Wall Street and Madison Avenue.

If you find the paradigm and practicalities of engagement helpful, you may wish to invite the leaders with whom you work (key lay leaders, church staff, board members) to read this book with you and discuss it.¹ No church is helped by leaders pulling in different directions or fretting that they are directionless or chasing the latest fashion that will be here and gone within a decade or less.

This book includes 325 concrete ideas for creating cohesion in your church (25 at the end of each chapter). To promote the Whole Church, we need inspired imagination and concrete ideas. Fragmentation is happening all the time; healing is happening all the time. But we need to see every day as an opportunity to promote the Whole Church.

Do we have any option but to commit ourselves to fostering Whole Churches? Bringing together God's supply and human need at every level of engagement is the boldest, most strategic move we can make. It is the way God's Spirit works.

THE REAL STUFF

The visitation line snaked through the church lobby; hundreds of people, many sobbing at the placards displaying photos of Clint, inched their way forward before coming up to the grieving parents. The line continued down the church aisle to where the open casket was on display. By the time the funeral had started, two thousand people had gathered, many of them teenagers from different high schools around the city who knew Clint as that outstanding football player and just a really great guy. But this was not the first time that this had happened. Within that same year, two other teenagers from our church had also been killed in auto accidents, and then too, large crowds had gathered. Three times. It was beginning to seem bizarre. And in the three years prior we

had seen a huge outpouring of the community and our church at the funeral of two church members, husband and wife, martyred in Uganda by nighttime raiders, and at the funeral of a nineteen-year-old girl who was shot and killed in the Humvee she was in on patrol in Baghdad. A beautiful young girl whose two sisters, one of them a twin, had been serving in Iraq at the same time. Three beautiful soldier sisters. Now two.

When I look out at crowds like that, at those hushed moments when our mouths are stopped and when the congregation consists of mature believers and complete nonbelievers and everything in between—I always think about how these are moments of engagement. We come face-to-face with that bold line between life and death. It is a moment of reckoning. But in this engagement with God, engagement of church members with each other, and engagement with the wider community—what do we do? What do we say? It is a time when church leaders know: this is why we are here. This is why God gave the church. This is the real stuff.

Occasionally I go to Bob and Win’s house to have them pray for me. I feel greedy doing so, because I know that even without that request, Bob and Win pray for me every day. And I mean pray. They talk to God the Father and Jesus and the Holy Spirit; they pour out their hearts. That has to be one of the main reasons they are the compassionate, generous people they are. They look at other people, and they see, with a precise vision, their real need. And they see the grace of God all around. They are living the verse in Hebrews which says, “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (12:15). Some people just have their eyes open. They’re not full of false spirituality, and it’s not that they are spinning life in a way that things come out kind of God-ish. They really do see the blessings and the protections of God, and that must be what allows them to look realistically at the wounds of everybody around them as well.

(And “see to it that no one misses the grace of God” is an excellent definition of church ministry, too. “Seeing to it” means that leaders are to be sentinels of God’s grace, sounding off and pointing in the direction of God’s grace wherever we see it. Isn’t

that why people show up at a church in the first place—because they are looking for some source of hope?)

I pull into the gravel driveway of Bob and Win’s modest home in Menomonee Falls at the end of a cul-de-sac. The front door—faced with a wood hand carving that Bob did years ago—usually swings open before I have a chance to knock. I usually seem to be running late, but Bob and Win measure their time well and do not fuss when they’ve waited for someone else. I’ve never seen them try to squeeze more into a day or out of a day than what is sensible.

Just a few steps to the right on the hardwood floor brings us into the small living room, with a few select pictures on the wall and a couch, a couple of chairs, and a rocking chair. They insist that I sit in that comfortable chair, and after a few minutes of chatting we get down to business. But this prayer time is not business-like at all. They just ask me how they can pray, I give them the four or five top things uppermost on my mind, they talk between them about which of them will pray about which topics, and they pray. This is the real stuff.

I can’t enter that room without thinking back to thirty-five years earlier when, as a college freshman, I sat on that hardwood floor at Bob and Win’s youth Bible teaching called “Forever Family.” I was then a brand-new believer, listening to Win teach about the festivals in Leviticus. Now, all these years later, I’m the senior pastor of the church they attend.

Seventy or so teenagers used to crowd into that small living room and spill into the dining area, everyone sitting on the hardwood floor because there was no other way to do it. When the first few people came on a given evening, they helped carry all the furniture from the living room out onto the front yard, because more people could get in if there was no furniture in the room. So in January, there sat the furniture on top of the crusty snow of midwinter Wisconsin. People matter more than couches.

A CALL TO ENGAGEMENT

December of 1999 was filled with anticipation. When the world crossed the line from one century to the next and one millennium to the next, people weren’t sure whether to be excited or

frightened or bored. On December 31, 1999, people held their breath to see if many of the world's computers would stop working at the stroke of midnight because their algorithms could not understand 01/01/2000—the famous Y2K scare. Some scenarios splashed in the media had airplanes falling from the sky, power grids going down, people's furnaces failing and people freezing. Stores had runs on generators, dry goods, and ammunition. (Some people thought you had to have your gun loaded in case your neighbors tried to break into your house and steal your food in the weeks following the supposed catastrophe—an odd twist, I thought at the time, on being salt and light in the community.) People called the office of our church asking (in all sincerity) if we were going to stockpile provisions in the basement of the church. Would I give a sermon on the topic of the coming disaster?

And all the while we fussed about Y2K in late 1999, and some people feared a phantom crisis, a handful of young men from the Middle East were plotting how they could fly jets into office towers and landmarks twenty-one months later.

This is one of the things that drives me in ministry: no one knows where evil is lurking beneath the surface of things. Faith-building is preparing people for *anything* that may come.

It struck me during that time that God was calling us to *engage*. You won't find that as a missional word in English translations of Scripture, but the idea is there throughout. What I mean by engagement is *bringing together God's supply and human need*. It means closing what I call the God gap. This definition is important throughout this book. Christian leaders have been using the word "engagement" for a few years, but it is usually limited and undefined. "Engaging the culture" has meant seeing the films and reading the books and listening to the music nonbelievers are shaped by—being conversant with it all. Responding. Challenging. Offering alternatives. It's a good idea. "Engaging with world need" has meant opening our eyes to AIDS and poverty and illiteracy. That's a fantastic idea.

But for all of this to get beyond fine rhetoric where "engagement" is locked up in magazine articles, it has to be the driving dynamic *at every level of spiritual life* in real churches. We have to truly bring together God's supply and human need. I started to speak to our church—just as one church, one group of people

looking for next steps in the new millennium, about four kinds of engagement:

1. *Engaging with God* (the life of worship and personal devotion)
2. *Engaging with God's people* (real *koinonia* through small groups and other means)
3. *Engaging with your community* (imaginative ways to distribute Christian witness through involvement in social needs—witness that is decentralized, grass roots, salt and light)
4. *Engaging with the world* (developing an awareness of and involvement in global mission)

I started to ask the members of our congregation at least once a year whether they can say with honesty, “I am engaging with God; I am engaging with God’s people; I am engaging with my community; I am engaging with the world.” Most people know where they are engaged and where they are not (unless they barely have a relationship with God or have fallen off a spiritual cliff and don’t know which end is up).

Just look up the multiple definitions of *engagement* in the English dictionary, and the applications for church ministry are obvious:

Engage \in-gāj

To become involved in or participate in

To pledge or to promise

To assume an obligation

To become meshed or interlocked

To be attracted to or engrossed with

To draw into

To reserve to use

Engagement is bringing together God's supply and human need. It is the “bringing together” that is the transformational process for individuals and for a local church because it is extraordinarily easy for us to say we believe in divine supply and human need, but then in our ministry to fail to bring together the supply and the need. Too often the church talks about God’s great provisions (grace,

salvation, mercy), but then those provisions are not applied in real and practical ways in people's lives. This has resulted in disengaged Christians and disengaged churches. A lot of talk, little action. Disengaged worship is just going through the motions; there is no God-encounter. Disengaged congregations are gatherings of people that could be engaged with each other in a revolutionary community, but that somehow never get past cake and coffee in fellowship halls. Disengaged "missions" initiatives are merely exercises in writing checks and mailing them overseas. Disengaged evangelism keeps the gospel bound up in catch phrases that are increasingly meaningless to the nonbelieving world. Disengagement keeps us talking a good line as the church with little or no long-lasting effectiveness. We preach to the choir. We feel self-satisfied. We affect no one.

Engagement is a call for the twenty-first-century church. Not because it's our newest invention in making today's churches run well, but because it is the ancient way, so often forgotten, neglected, and layered over with so many distracting ambitions. On the one hand, we see a world more connected than ever before through technological communication advances, but on the other, what we learn is how fractured and fragmented the world, our communities, our families, and we ourselves are.

This is the time to engage.

Church leaders have a most serious responsibility in helping people personally **engage with God**. That's what people need. That's what they want. That's what God has called us to do. A hundred years from now, nobody is going to care who had the biggest church or the most-quoted catchphrase. What will matter is whether we engaged with God. And then we have a responsibility to help fellow believers **engage with each other** in meaningful *koinonia*. A church can be and must be a movement of people coming together, living the shared life, finding grace in the other. But we must not stop with engagement between God's people. By leading people into **engagement with their communities**, we release them into the great mission. In the world, but not of the world. The community of Christ infiltrating the surrounding community. And we must not stop there, but lead people into **engagement with the world**. An ordinary believer living an ordinary life in a small town in the middle of Nebraska can be a "world Christian."

Joining a two-week mission team to do construction work in Costa Rica can open a believer to the horizon of God's great work in the world. But we don't need plane tickets to be world Christians. Our vision of the great mission is only as limited as our spiritual imaginations. When we tell the stories (and tell them well), our people will thank us for transporting them to a higher place where nations are not distinguished by crayon colors as they are on a map. People will thank us for giving them an authentic sense of purpose.

EXPONENTIAL EFFECT

As we look at these four different kinds of engagement in this book, one of the most important dynamics to understand (and the most exciting, I think) is the cumulative effect they have on each other. Who cares if we can take many of the functions of a local church and divide them into four tidy boxes: engagement with God, engagement with God's people, engagement with the community, and engagement with the world? We need something more than another rubric that gives us a list, a sermon series, and a table of contents for a book.

Engagement is a movement. It is divine power reshaping human experience. Bringing God's resources into contact with human need is one way of interpreting what the "work of the Spirit" means. And here is the best part: when we lead the ministry of a church as a whole, and when we bring these different kinds of engagement into contact with each other, they have an exponential effect. The energy of one kind of engagement combines with the energy of other engagements, and things really get out of control!

There are two kinds of growth: numeric and exponential. If you have a fire burning a couple of logs and you add one log every fifteen minutes, the fire will burn steadily (that's numeric growth). But if every fifteen minutes you add one log for every one in the fire, then in one hour you'll have sixteen logs on the fire and a release of energy that is stunning (that's exponential growth).

If a church tries to get one hundred more people involved in small groups each year, that's a good thing. But if the energy of small groups is brought into the worship of the church, and global

engagement is featured through storytelling in the worship time, and personal devotional life (engagement with God) is directed to community engagement, then the energy of each of these dynamics builds on each other. In other words, the Whole Church that mixes and matches and blends engagement with God, with God's people, with the community, and with the world will build a fire that feeds itself. A fire is never sustained when the logs fueling it are spread out and separated from each other. But that is our instinct in church leadership: to put spiritual life into categories and its own special rooms in the church.

LIFE IN THE CLUTCH

Engagement is like getting a car with a stick shift in gear.

A couple of years back, my son got his first car. He followed my suggestion in getting one with a standard transmission. It wasn't hard to convince him. An eighteen-year-old boy wants an engine he can rev and to lay down some rubber (unintentionally, of course). The day came when we picked up the car, and I gave him his first lesson in how to drive a stick shift. I knew what I was in for—the same embarrassing experience everyone has when learning how to put a car in gear manually, pressing the accelerator and easing up on the clutch. We went to a far corner of a large parking lot where there were no objects he could collide with and where no onlookers could watch the spectacle. He took occupancy of the driver's seat for the first time in this car, grinning from ear to ear. But it took at least a half-dozen attempts before he got the thing moving. Either he revved the engine far too much, the sound of it elevating to a high-pitched whirr that would make any neighborhood dog cock his head, or he didn't apply enough accelerator so, that when he let out the clutch, he killed the engine. When, after a few restarts, he did actually get the car moving, it lurched forward in spurts, the engine belching with each lunge. Our heads were alternately thrown forward and back (and I have to admit that I exaggerated these movements, just to keep him humble). At first he laughed. But after the sixth or seventh time, he wasn't laughing anymore. He became very intense, and I knew I had better not say much. And on days two and three, when he was still starting out by either killing the engine or catapulting himself down the street,

he was sufficiently humbled to know that when you have power in your hands, you have to know how to use it. Starting the engine and idling it are easy—engagement is challenging.

When you are using a manual transmission, you are engaging the power of an engine with the dead-weight inertia of the automobile. The clutch is where power contacts need. And when power comes together with need, amazing things can happen. Now, if you'll forgive the limitations of a physical analogy, just consider this. Doesn't the church sometimes rev its engine up to incredible RPMs and remain motionless? Other times, lunge ahead and kill the engine? Still other times, engage the clutch, but with spurts and starts? But in those ministry moments when we get it right, when the gears come together and all the moving parts are engaged, transferring power to mass, we take off down the road and out onto the open highway. That's when we know: this is the way things are supposed to be.

We all learn the hard way that we can't rev the engine, talking about the theory of the power and the love of God, yet remaining disengaged. We just sound and look foolish. We also learn the hard way that to try new ideas or to impose somebody else's ideas on our congregations in ways that are artificial or rushed or full of hubris will only kill the engine.

Engagement is an easy word to say, but a challenge to make real.

Engagement is a way of life—for the believer and for churches. It is more than a program or task or project. It is social action and global involvement, but not merely so. Effective engagement with the needs of the world only begins as people are engaged with God.

 IN PRACTICE—COHESIVE IDEAS
 FOR A WHOLE CHURCH

1. Think of a time when your church was as unified as you have ever seen it. Make a list of the factors of unity and cohesion at work at that time.
2. Think of the last several times someone told you that your church was his or her place of hope and connection. What was happening in that person's life that made that possible?

3. Never reward the behaviors of people whose attitude is divisive.
4. Have a cup of coffee with another leader in the church who tends to pull in a different direction from you. Insofar as possible, make a personal connection.
5. Think of some way in which you can “see to it that no one misses the grace of God,” by telling a story of grace sometime in the next week.
6. Discuss with two or three longtime, very mature members of the church what the long-standing history of the church is. Where are there deep-running fractures? Where is there unity?
7. Give up any desire to please everybody. Recommit to the role of the shepherd (who feeds, protects, and leads).
8. Apologize to someone you hurt in some way that created a fracture.
9. Be thinking of five key leaders in your church with whom you could discuss this book.
10. Develop confidential friendships with leaders from other churches who can be a sounding board for you.
11. Visit three other churches in the next year, not simply to copy ideas but to gain a wider and wider vision of the Whole Church.
12. Read three books this year that show the Whole Church in action (not theoretical books).
13. Step away from your church, take a real vacation, and then reset your vision of what is most important.
14. Find five things your church should stop doing because they are ineffective, drain energy and resources, and probably take away from the church more than they give.
15. Adopt a mind-set of continual incremental change. Always use the word “change” with a positive connotation when addressing the church. Use the word frequently.
16. Find a mature person or couple in your church who would consider it an honor to meet with you and pray for you.
17. Talk with your family members about whether you bring frustration from ministry work into your family, and decide together on what standards you will hold.

18. Ask *yourself* these four questions for right now: How am I (1) engaged with God, (2) engaged with God's people, (3) engaged with my community, and (4) engaged with the world?
19. Get a notebook and, as you go through this book chapter by chapter, allow yourself enough time to write out specific ideas that apply to your ministry.
20. Go further by checking out the additional resources at www.wholechurch.org.
21. Take a prayer and meditation day to give yourself some time to assess your personal ministry right now.
22. Confess to God the ways in which you have been the cause of fragmentation in someone else's life.
23. Read the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 and make notes on what the essential qualities of faithful churches are.
24. Decide that you as a leader will be bold in simplifying and focusing your ministry. Make a list of six ways in which you can do that in the next six months.
25. Go to the place where your church meets at a time when no one else is around. Have an hour of prayer, asking God to give you a vision of a Whole Church.

