1

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH

> *"That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly: "it always makes one a little giddy at first—"*
>
> *"Living backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"*
>
> *"—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."*
>
> *"I'm sure mine only works one way," Alice remarked. "I can't remember things before they happen."*
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> *"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.*
> —LEWIS CARROLL, *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*[1]

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT DESIGN. It is about conceiving, birthing, and conceptualizing. It is also about experience and emotional attachment, utility, and appreciation. The chair that you love is comfortable and good for your back. It is well suited for the particular space you call home, and it is uniquely your own. It serves your mission of relaxing in the evening while you read or watch television. Whether your spouse agrees or not, this chair is your own designer original.

The idea of design in this book takes in all of these kinds of ideas. In some ways, you might call it "interior design" because we start with the inside (you, your beliefs, and your values). This is the exact opposite of how many people use the word *design* because they think design is about outer appearances, like making something pretty or giving it a finishing touch. In the church

world, there is a great tendency to improve or fix things on the outside by adding or subtracting various programs or methodologies. Here, the process is reversed and intentionally more systemic. It introduces the church to a whole new design experiment.

In 1803, after negotiating the Louisiana Purchase, Thomas Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to lead an expedition to explore the newly annexed territory. The president was hoping to discover the existence of a waterway to the west coast. With no roads and no maps, the expedition, known as the Corps of Discovery, had to work from the inside out, creating something where nothing they knew about already existed. They forged a crude route from Saint Louis to the Pacific, returning two years later. When they began, the explorers knew only the path from St. Louis to as far as they could see up the Missouri River, but by the time they finished they had charted a pathway for the United States to span its settlement from ocean to ocean.

Allan often asks his students to consider what it would have been like if Congress had required Lewis and Clark to draw a map of where they were going before they left. What if they had speculated a journey, developed a strategy, and drawn a map based on traveling a waterway nobody knew was actually there? Any plan to adhere to this kind of scheme would have alienated Congress, disheartened the team, and failed hopelessly within days after the expedition began.

As you read this book, we are asking you to abandon your maps and lay aside your preconceived ideas, plans, strategies, and models related to the churches you care about. We want you to think from the inside out, starting with some concepts you may have never considered important. As you move through the chapters, with God's help you will eventually be able to draw a relevant, realistic, and thoughtful kind of map. We believe this will be your experience as a result of having dealt with some new, different, or defining issues.

At the end of the Corps of Discovery, Clark presented Jefferson with a series of amazingly detailed expedition maps that noted rivers, creeks, significant points of interest, and even the shape of shorelines. These maps helped future explorers continue probing the western territory. As you embark on your personal "corps of discovery," we hope you will glean insights on your journey as a church designer, refiner, or re-aligner. Perhaps the maps you draw

will also be helpful to future travelers who are preparing to define new territory for God's people.

Amid some of the most rapid change humanity has ever experienced, we have written this book out of a conscious decision to live well in a gap that connects the present to the future. This gap represents the two great tasks for the church in North America today. The first of these is predictable and in the present: the church must do everything it already knows how to do, as sustainably as it can, so that as many people as possible begin to follow Christ obediently, become involved in authentic Christian communities, and multiply disciples. The second great task of the church is oriented toward the future: the church must also commit to the adventure of figuring out how to reach the growing number of people who are resistant to the gospel as it has been expressed in past generations.

The Task of Sustaining the Present

The church knows a lot about reaching people who adhere to a fuzzy faith in God, who already believe that the Bible is true, and who are open to the idea of church, but who need to hear the call of Christ and to make changes in their hearts, attitudes, and behaviors. There are millions who will hear about the four spiritual laws, and learn how to discover steps to peace with God, and how to have an abundant life. Hearing, we hope they will believe, and by believing become involved in a church, live better, and go to heaven when they die.

In many places in North America today, this is still a primary need. The Association of Religion Data Archives shows that more than two-thirds of people in the United States have no doubt that God exists, believe in heaven, and believe that being a Christian is very important or fairly important. In the same survey, only one-third of respondents say they have ever had a born-again experience. Roughly speaking, this means that approximately one-third of all people living in the United States are not born-again Christians but may be quite open to this kind of an encounter with Christ.[2] Others come to know Christ in different ways, such as Ruth Graham, the late wife of America's favorite evangelist, who cannot ever remember a time when she did not feel close to Christ.

Children who grow up in homes where Christ is real, and where parents pray for their daughters and sons, are more likely to follow him when they are old, but those kinds of homes have become rare. San Francisco is one example of a city where there has been a gap in the type of historical Christianity to which we refer. It experienced what is often called postmodernity forty years before most people ever heard of the term. Not realizing what they were up against, local churches retreated and failed to make their practices relevant to the culture in which they found themselves. Most became increasingly ineffective, and many grew weary from trying to implement new methodologies that seemed effective in other American cities but that failed in San Francisco. Decades passed, and San Francisco became a radically unchurched city whose beautiful old church buildings stood nearly empty.

When the Billy Graham Crusade came to San Francisco in the late 1990s, it served more of a seed-sowing purpose than a harvesting purpose. It was a novelty, and perhaps even an honor, that the world-famous evangelist chose San Francisco. However, the crusade did not have an impact on the city or its churches in any real way. Many Christians dismissed it: "Nothing works in the spiritual battlefield of San Francisco. Let's go instead where God is working." Translated, "go where God is working" sometimes means "go to some large, rapidly growing, homogeneous, suburban, preferably politically conservative population base where a congregation can quickly become numerically successful." This misinterpretation of the church growth movement and its principles has left hundreds of thousands of today's urban dwellers without even a memory of a relevant gospel message.

A few years ago on Easter morning, a church planter named John sat outside a community center in the Haight district of San Francisco, which forty years earlier was the center of the Jesus Movement. John seized the quiet moment, and strummed his guitar as he worshipped God. A neighbor poked his head out of the four-story house next door. "Come on up here and play some Jesus music for us," the man requested. John obliged, and after a few songs the household asked John a serious question: "Can you tell us what the meaning of Easter is? We've been asking people all week, and nobody remembers."

Nobody remembers the meaning of Easter! The present-day task of the church is clear. Christians must continue to do everything they already know how to do to reach the most receptive people, now in places in North America that still hold historically positive images of Church.

The Task of Addressing the Future

Because the number of those who simply need the gospel story clarified and committed to heart before coming to Christ is fewer than we dare realize, the second great task is very important. A growing number of North Americans are not at all responsive to the story the way we have learned to share it. They do not believe that the Bible is true, or even useful. In their worldview, it is important that a spiritual tradition be able to help people know how to live together on the planet in such a way that we do not destroy one another, and do not destroy the prospects of future generations. They see Christianity, in its seeming exclusivity—with its core belief that the only way to God is through Jesus—as more detrimental than helpful in seeking these global outcomes. It seems there is no acceptable place in this new world for people who believe their group alone has a corner on truth, or who try to enlist others to believe and practice as they do (evangelism).

Others simply find the Christian story archaic and irrelevant. They wonder why we persist in taking our old Book so seriously. They could care less whether humans are saved by grace or by good works. In the midst of this upheaval, we find this second great challenge of the church in North America today. The church must learn to be and do what it does not already know. With all of our hearts, we must address the future together.

It is said that Beethoven, who was a wildly successful musician in his own day, began at one point in his career writing pieces that were so unlike his previous works that his friends were astonished and asked, "Ludwig, what's happened to you? We don't understand you anymore!" According to the story, Beethoven, with a studied sweep of the hand, replied, "I have said all I have to say to my contemporaries; now I am speaking to the future." His later works, including his Ninth Symphony and the string quartet

Grosse Fuge, became some of the most important musical pieces ever composed.[3]

Our aim is similar. We wish to speak to the future. We hope to slow down the depletion of the church's present assets so that they do not become tomorrow's liabilities too quickly. We also want to help future perspectives become present practices in authentic, practical ways. We must ask ourselves what is here for the long haul, and what needs an overhaul or a reconstruction. We will be talking about design, as a process and mind-set that can help everyone who cares about these issues of present and future move forward. Our design process turns thinking processes upside down and inside out. Our readers should not be surprised by such an approach, though we imagine that it will irritate some in the same way that Jesus irritated religious leaders with His countercultural, inside-out ideas: to be rich you must be poor; to be first, you must be last; to live you must first die; to gain you must lose; and it is by giving that you receive.

"Inside-out" thinking is what we are after. We hope to help our readers think about church in ways that are good for them and the people they lead. Designers do not start with existing models and paradigms, and neither will we. Instead we begin on the inside, with you and the people who are journeying with you, and we work our way outward toward a paradigm or way of understanding church. Our approach is both reconciliatory and revolutionary and does not necessarily mean starting over; nor does it require disassociation with historic faith. In his book *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants,* Daniel Williams describes the disconnect between the contemporary church and historical faith traditions as "amnesia." He says that the real problem with amnesia is that "not only do you forget your loved ones, but no longer remember who you are."[4] It is possible to love and respect the church even while calling for change.

Here is a picture of what we mean. When the Bergquist family purchased their 1931 Mediterranean home, it came with a classic bright pink and black tiled bathroom. If they had built the house themselves, they would have chosen some other tile and designed the bathroom differently (design). If enough money were available, they would have made several remodeling decisions, including finding old authentic replacement tile in another color (re-align).

With neither available, they opted to accessorize with complementary modern colors (refine). The result is that they were able to find a way to integrate colors and style so that the look is both contemporary and classic, respecting both the home's character and the Bergquists' tastes. Nothing about it seems either mass produced or unintentional.

McChurch or Mac Church?

McDonald's and Apple are household names. Their products, such as Big Macs and Macintosh computers, are iconic representations of America's success. Although some may prefer the two not be mentioned in the same breath, there are actually a number of similarities in the corporate cultures of these industry giants. Both are fast-paced companies that have their own operating systems. They like to control the entire consumer experience, or what Steve Jobs calls "the whole widget."[5] Both are intentionally rooted in consumer accessibility, and both turn out new products with regularity. However, even though both companies have designed many new products, McDonald's is known as the all-American franchise-in-a-box, while Apple is known for its innovative out-of-the box thinking.

These Mc and Mac stereotypes offer symbolic language for our conversation about church. A few popular models dominate the church landscape. Like McDonald's and Apple, these models have many fans and many critics. A few have worked exceedingly well. They weren't always models; they began with a design. Somebody thought or prayed through a beautifully complete, systemic design process and implemented it faithfully. In our culture, whatever works well is usually imitated, perfected, and reproduced over and over again, often with some predictable rate of success. We're calling this phenomena "McChurch."

In the last few decades, as the church learned to reproduce and perfect certain processes, it has become more effective than ever at reaching the declining number of people who are attracted to existing formats of church. But the church cannot continue to depend on cherry picking forever. To overcome this nonsustainable practice, it is necessary to engage prayerfully in a new missiological orientation that takes design thinking seriously.

This new orientation, which Allan and Linda call "Mac Church," would be different in creating churches with fewer assumptions about how church "ought" to look, what it takes to be effective or productive, and what is good for people's spiritual health. Instead of looking for solutions that fit the masses, it would take individuals' needs and preferences more seriously. The church must learn to do something that is paramount to building an airplane while in flight; it cannot stop what it is already doing to experiment with new approaches. Thus, some must refine and re-align on the basis of already existing models while others, the designers, find ways to radically rethink church.

The Age of Design

Bruce Nussbaum, managing editor in charge of innovation and design coverage at *BusinessWeek,* is acknowledged as one of the world's forty most influential designers. A leading advocate of organizational design for more than twenty years, he calls design thinking the "new Management Methodology," justifying its rising popularity when he says, "There are moments in history when the pace of change is so fast and the shape of the future so fuzzy that we live in a constant state of beta." Nussbaum recognizes the unnecessary tension this brings up: "There is a nice little war going on in the US between those design educators that want to stress strategy and those which focus on form. It's a silly argument to me. Design should not give up its special ability to visualize ideas and give form to options. Design should extend its brief to embrace a more abstract and formalized expression of how it translates empathy to creativity and then to form and experience. . . . Do not deny the powerful problem-solving abilities of design to the cultures of business and society."[6]

The church accepts this same challenge when it not only admits its growing despair in addressing the future but also blesses diverse, God-inspired design attempts to do something about it. In these times of transition, it is imperative for the church's change agents to ask tough questions about the underlying assumptions and mental models that have created the dilemmas we must address. Albert Einstein said problems can't be solved within the mind-set that created them.[7] Even Charlie Brown agreed: "How can you do 'new

math' problems with an 'old math' mind?"[8] If they are correct, it is necessary to consider the inside workings of some of our current church systems.

There is a theory that people in systems, including church systems, often have good intentions but end up producing the opposite of what they intend. This phenomenon is being studied in fields as diverse as business, the food industry, education, and medicine, all of which are reexamining their systems in light of a new era of information. In medicine, the term *iatrogenic* is used to refer to conditions or complications that are a result of the treatment, the facilities, or the participants of the healing team. For example, George Washington almost certainly died as a result of a well-intentioned physician draining many pints of his blood rather than supplementing it. Though a customary practice of the day, bloodletting was the tragic opposite of what Washington really needed.

Sarah Mondale and Sarah Patton explored this notion in their PBS film "School: The Story of American Public Education." It seems that early public schools were often built for the children of factory workers. The goal was to create environments that would produce the best possible next generation of factory workers. Public school was the perfect preparation for a structured, bureaucratic society where work was routinized, authority respected, rules obeyed, and where acquisition of basic skills and competencies was more valued than raising up eager learners. The result was a tendency toward broad mediocrity that still infects our public school systems more than one hundred years later.[9]

In a 2005 speech to the National Governor's Association, Microsoft founder Bill Gates said that now "America's high schools are obsolete. By obsolete, I don't just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded—though a case could be made for every one of those points. By obsolete, I mean that our high schools—even when they're working exactly as designed—cannot teach our kids what they need to know today."[10]

Churches founded in this era, during the growth of public education, spread most quickly among people who worked in factories and whose children attended the new public schools. The churches modeled their systems after these same educational organizations. This should not surprise those of us who recognize

that many churches and denominations today learn organizational practices from business organizations. But what if, despite our good intentions, we are actually propagating church systems that in our own day are creating the opposite of what we want?

A few years ago, while attending an educational convention, Linda heard a presenter ask the group a provocative question: What kind of educational system would we dream up if we were trying our best to produce people who were not learners? The answers made her think that people in churches might respond similarly if they were asked what kind of religious system they would dream up if they were trying their best to produce people who did not grow spiritually and if they were trying to create barriers to other people coming to know Christ. She put this question to a class of seminary students. Here are some of the answers describing such a system:

- The chief activity that people would do together would be indoctrination through absorbing information.
- Information gathering would be valued more than practical application.
- More attention would be paid to slots in the organization that needed to be filled than to the strengthening of people's abilities.
- Participants would be rewarded for agreeing with what they were told and punished for exploring new ideas.
- When people met, they would sit silently in straight rows and listen to just one person's ideas.
- Language would be created to help distinguish group "insiders" from those who were outside the group.
- People in the group would spend so much time together doing things that helped the system that they would have no time left to spend with those outside the system.
- Acceptance would be linked to performance.
- People would be valued for what they contributed to the organization and to what they could do to build it up.
- Freethinking would be discouraged, especially asking questions considered disloyal.
- Freedom of the press would be eliminated.
- Families would be divided up into activities so that they couldn't function as practicing communities during the week.

- People would be valued for what they know more than what they do.
- The message would be that the organization is more important than its people.

When we saw these results we cringed. Ouch! These qualities come a little too close to describing the way a lot of church communities operate, even if they do not necessarily add up to a negative result. Still, it is important to investigate the possibility of our own "illness"-producing practices, and to consider whether our particular traditions of churching are effectively producing the kind of Christian, in the kinds of Christian communities, that most honors our Maker. Although the field of education has spent decades researching and redesigning its systems, the church, in our opinion, has been remiss in finding its own Spirit-led ways to research and design anew.

The title of this book says that it is written for designers, refiners, and re-aligners. This does not necessarily mean that these are three kinds of fixed roles, although some people more easily gravitate to one or the other. The choice is based not only on how individuals are usually called to function as part of the body of Christ but also on the needs of the larger community, the situation, timing, and other considerations. Consider again the Bergquists' pink-and-black bathroom. Their choice to respect the integrity of the old house was not a second-best solution; it was the right one for the situation. Some opportunities call for designing, some call for refining, and some call for re-aligning.

Design is a big word. It encompasses everything from Vera Wang original bridal gowns to mass-produced designer jeans. In some ways, the most exquisite aspects of the design role are open to only the privileged. Just a few can design something new all of the time, and just a few have the luxury of doing so. The church world does not pay for research and development, as pharmaceutical companies do when they are looking for new projects, or government does to explore outer space. The most radical designers in the church world have always paid for their own design processes, either by being judged heretical by their contemporaries, or by being unsuccessful for some period of time before their thoughts form something whole, systemic, and useful. An example

is our friend Brad Sargent, a brilliant missiologist designer who has never really found his place. We wish someone could just pay him to think for the rest of his life, and then pay for an army of other people to try a few of his ideas (such as the wonderful quirky learning games he created for students of culture).

The role of the re-aligner is less radical. The re-aligner takes the pieces and makes them fit together in new and better ways. The re-aligner is also a troubleshooter who can spot design flaws. NASA's Genesis space capsule had sensors that were meant to detect deceleration. They were installed correctly but were designed upside down, thus failing to deploy the capsule's parachutes. Because of this design problem, the capsule, which had been carefully collecting solar matter for two years, crashed in the Utah desert in 2004. It would not have crashed if someone had thought to re-align the sensors.

Harold Bullock, founding pastor and inspired designer of Hope Church in Fort Worth, Texas, talks about misalignment in church systems. He starts on the inside with character alignment issues that can eventually make a difference in every aspect of church development. The entire system reflects design integrity because of the emphasis on personal integrity. Harold really believes in good alignment. He says, "you can't put a Volkswagen engine in a Mack truck."[11] In a church design process, there must be a Spirit-led, ongoing alignment that can help forge new directions for the future, keep major efforts from backfiring, and save people from unnecessary pain.

Refining, in the sense of this book, means to improve, perfect, or enrich. Refining is essentially a purification process that is absolutely essential to addressing the future. This is indicated in the story of the man who saw a field and knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the treasure in the field was so breathtakingly valuable that it was worth selling everything he owned just to buy it (Matt. 13:44).[12] Refiners help us recognize what is valuable when we see it, dig deeply for the treasure, and give up everything to serve it. In this context, refiners call the church to repentance and help rekindle ancient meaning. They prophetically remind pilgrim people to value the Story above the process and the Creator above whatever new thing is created. Sometimes refiners are needed to help hurting churches work through emotional trauma.

They help these churches attain healing and forgiveness, a process that sets them free to re-align around a hopeful future instead of a painful past.

The Design Process

The chapters of this book flow together like tributaries that finally converge. The overarching context for everything we have written is that we believe God is working, speaking, guiding, and informing each arena in ways we can hardly imagine. He is the Master Designer, Re-Aligner, and Refiner. Chapter Two is about acknowledging self. We begin here partly because we sense that "self" is a forgotten place. Churches do mission, start churches, and preach sermons for others, often to the neglect of our own souls. We all forget that God loves us, not just others, and He has a vested interest in seeing us function according to how He wired us. When a baby is born, parents naturally expect that the child's genetic code will show up somewhere. When a church is born and develops, there is no such expectation. But in fact, those who parent churches always bring themselves to the table. This chapter demands that readers be transparent and open about their own selves: to consider and acknowledge their own unique experiences, influences, gifts, talents, and personalities as a first step in thinking through an overall design.

Chapter Three is something like an extension of Chapter Two, but instead of being limited to one individual leader it reflects on communities, bound together in Christ, who live life together and work as a missional team. A single cell is the simplest living thing; however, living things cannot exist alone. Cells exist within the framework or network of other living things. When a cell reproduces, it passes on not only its genes but also its whole cellular network; it is not simply the DNA that reproduces. We suggest too that at this level, a "microcommunity" functions as a unit to carry the genetic code of the church into its larger "macrocommunity." This chapter helps teams consider how their spontaneous friendships, intimacy, shared passion, and interdependencies shape the community and inform design decisions.

Chapters Four and Five are about beliefs. When church planning processes begin with models, methods, and strategies, a set

of theological presuppositions and biblical values are often simply assumed, and rarely revisited. Structures, programs, polity, and pragmatics teach theological postures and priorities, whether or not they are ever verbalized. Theology and biblical exegesis may become unintentionally marginalized while pragmatics (whatever works) and social agendas and preferences form the basis for organizational decision making. These chapters ask readers to consider the values and beliefs any church model or structure promotes, and then to make decisions that express their real beliefs and honor God.

In Chapters Six through Eight, we ask readers to consider appropriate ways to engage the larger culture. We challenge you to learn to understand underlying worldviews and to embrace the people to whom you are called. We also want you to ascertain the degree to which you are personally functioning as a cultural insider, or how you are living as missionaries among people whose cultures and worldviews are fundamentally different from your own.

"Without analysis, no synthesis," claimed the German philosopher Eugene Duhring.[13] Our final four chapters are about synthesis. They tie all previous chapters together in away that is supercharged with possibility: What can the church create collectively if it believes that design is more flexible than rigid? First we examine existing models. This section of the book offers a menu of potential existing models, comparing and contrasting them in relationship to the critical factors discussed in earlier chapters such as self, team, culture, beliefs, and values. It dovetails with a chapter about facing tough choices and addressing the consequences of those choices. As a result of reading these chapters, we hope our readers will make fewer design omissions and minimize systemic design flaws.

Finally, the last two chapters consider new ways for churches to think about design. We consider some common metaphors for organizations, and we suggest some practical ways of reorganizing that can help not only designers but re-aligners too. The last chapter of our book is about a whole new way of envisioning organizations. We suggest the possibility of organizing more like living systems than like any classically structured organization.

Einstein said that the world we create is a product of our way of thinking.[14] If so, what kind of world can be created as a result of truly hopeful, inside-out rethinking? How can we think systemically, and open our hearts a little wider? For many years, our journeys have led the two of us in search of the intersection of strategy and Spirit. One place where we have found epiphany is in this concept of systemic, living systems design.

We wrote this book for many reasons. We wrote it because something isn't working, and we don't accept that. We are neither hopeless nor helpless. We wrote it because we yearn for the world to see more clearly the good, just, and sustainable communities of faith that exist all over the planet; but somehow efforts do not translate. We wrote this book because we believe that women and men are created in the image of their Creator to be creative. We long for God's church to experience the freedom that creativity brings from the inside out. We wrote it because we believe in the church and its ordained place in God's plan from the beginning of time.