Chapter 1

Learning to Lead Change

A Transformational Journey

MANY CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS in America today need to experience life-giving transformation. If the need is so compelling, why are these congregations not embracing and initiating change? In fact, many have attempted to make adjustments. But their efforts often run into resistance or produce marginal results. When this happens, they may conclude that "we can't change—we'll just have to make the best of it."

There's good news! God is still eager and able to re-create both people and congregations. Furthermore, the principles of leading transformation can be learned by most church leaders in ordinary congregations.

Over the past decade, a group of churches in Houston, Texas, has passionately engaged the question, "How do we transform declining congregations into Christ-like bodies that display the power of the Gospel in our communities?" Today congregations everywhere are struggling with the rapid-fire changes in our world and the impact these changes are having on their ministries. How do churches respond to these changes and remain true to the core teachings of the Scripture?

These are questions that the churches of Union Baptist Association (UBA) have been addressing for more than a decade. This book presents the model and principles for congregational transformation that emerged from their journey. In sharing the lessons from our experience, we hope to encourage other congregations and to help them navigate their own tumultuous environments.

In this chapter, we relate the story of the model's development in UBA. The story actually unfolds on two levels– the transformation of a local judicatory and of many individual congregations. With the benefit of hindsight, we are able to tell the story in an orderly fashion. As we

lived it, the actual experience was anything but orderly. Fueled by a passion for the local church, pastors and judicatory leaders prayed, studied, dialogued, and experimented. We learned as much from our failures as we did from our successes. We experienced conflict at many different levels. The process was both humbling and rewarding, two emotions that any change leader will ultimately experience.

How successful has the journey been? In the 1980s, Southern Baptist congregations lost ground, when compared to the overall growth of the population, in every county in the country. From 1990 to 1995, the Southern Baptist churches in Houston grew by 19.2 percent while the county grew by an estimated 12.9 percent. Baptisms increased by nearly 50 percent, and giving to the association increased dramatically. A clear and compelling vision is shared among this group of denominational churches in a day that proclaims the death of denominational loyalties. This book is not about denominational revitalization, but we do advocate that congregational leaders learn and draw support from others to navigate the waters of change successfully.

The church in America is at a crossroads. We share our story to offer hope to churches across the country—hope in a practical, proven process that can help create a renewed sense of vitality and impact. Though it is written by three church consultants, this is the story of courageous pastors and congregational leaders who allowed us to learn with them as they embraced the journey of change.

Two Defining Moments: Catalysts for Change

Our story begins in the fall of 1989. The UBA staff team experienced two clarifying moments that set the course for a decade of learning about change leadership. The previous spring, I (Jim Herrington) was called to serve as the director of this association of five hundred Southern Baptist churches in the Houston area. The two colleagues who coauthor this book joined the team almost immediately. James Furr became a member of the staff team, serving as a consultant to local congregations. Mike Bonem served as my personal consultant in the effort to clarify UBA's mission and vision for the future.

A Fresh Look at the Trends

The first defining moment grew out of a statistical analysis. James profiled the membership, attendance, and giving trends for all our church-

es as a group from 1950 through 1989. The graphs reflected generally positive growth in all the categories. My immediate response to this picture was "This looks good. We've done well over the past forty years."

Then James finished the story. On top of the trend lines for the association, he laid a graph of the growth of the city for the same period. The message was startling. It showed a gap between the growth of the churches and the growth of the city that grew wider every year. In business terms, we had been losing market share for forty years. At the annual meeting of our churches each fall, we would congratulate ourselves for an increase in resident membership, while failing to acknowledge that the city had grown significantly faster during the same year. We had actually lost ground. With few exceptions, this pattern had repeated itself for forty years.

Feedback from the Front Lines

Determined to discover the causes of this trend, we convened a series of seventeen listening sessions with pastors around the city. This produced the second defining moment. A total of 176 pastors participated. They represented congregations of all sizes, of the inner city and the suburbs, and of eight different cultures.

On a Tuesday night in September 1989, we convened a listening session at Faith Memorial Baptist Church. Sixteen pastors attended, and several brought their spouses. As the meeting unfolded, a pastor named Dave decided to give us some painfully honest feedback. "I never open any mail that comes from the denomination. You guys don't have a clue what my world is like. You keep sending me standardized programs with promises that my church will successfully reach the community, if I just use the program the way you designed it. When I say that it's not working, you tell me that I'm either doing something wrong or that I'm not working hard enough."

He paused and looked at the floor. When he looked up again, there were tears in his eyes. "I'm working harder than I've ever worked, for less results than I've ever gotten. My health is failing and my family is falling apart. And I feel abandoned by my denomination. I want nothing more than to see my community embrace the Gospel. But one thing is clear to me. Working harder at what we've been doing is simply not the answer."

That night we gathered around Dave and prayed for him. I thanked him for the courage to be honest. Then came the clarifying moment. I

looked at the other pastors and said, "It would help me to know how much Dave's experiences mirror your own."

We did not leave the room until after midnight. These men and women poured out hearts of frustration and confusion. They knew, long before we did a statistical analysis, that we were losing the city. They knew that their best efforts were not producing the results that they desired and that their communities needed. They were brokenhearted over the lack of impact their churches were having. And they were frustrated that their training had not prepared them for this world. It was clear that they were looking for credible guides to share the risks of navigating this new world, and none were to be found.

As I drove home that night, I found myself talking out loud to God. I asked him for wisdom. I made a promise that if he would show the way to help pastors and congregations have an impact on our city, I would follow no matter what the cost. At that time I had no way of knowing the full significance of this covenant. In retrospect, I wonder if I would have been so quick to make that promise had I realized what was ahead. I did not understand the power of a paradigm. I could not foresee the resistance to change that would come. I did not anticipate the personal attacks or the sense of abandonment that I would feel at various points along the way. I now know that these are common experiences for every change leader. As I began the journey, the cliché, "ignorance is bliss" contained more than a grain of truth.

Changing Our Association Before We Could Help Others

These two defining moments produced a sense of urgency that drove us to prayer, to dialogue, and to a commitment to learn. (See Chapter Three about the role of creating urgency in successful change processes.) We readily acknowledged that we were guilty of offering only standardized, denominational programs. And it was clear that the results of these programs were overwhelmed by the scope of the need in our city. The only conclusion was that the association would need to make radical changes.

But not everyone in the organization agreed. Despite compelling evidence, many pastors and UBA staff members still wanted us to hold tightly to the traditional ways. For nearly two years, we ran on two, parallel tracks. On one track we continued offering standard denominational programs and support.

It was from the other track that the new vision ultimately emerged. This was the track of generative learning—of seeking new solutions to

the challenges we faced. It only became a "track" in retrospect. In the midst of the moment, it felt more like fighting our way through a dense, deeply forested jungle. We continued listening to pastors, building relationships with them, and earning their trust.

We also found Henry Blackaby and Claude King's *Experiencing God* to be very helpful. The authors describe that God is always at work around us, and that he invites us to become involved with him in his work (1990, pp. 19–20). (See Chapter Five on the ongoing challenge of alignment.) We began to take small groups of pastors away for one-day prayer retreats. We prayed for God to show us his activity in our world. We made covenants with him and with each other that we would make adjustments to join God as his activity became clear. (See Chapter Two on spiritual vitality and Chapter Three on personal preparation.)

We read extensively from both Christian and business literature about healthy, effective organizations. We were deeply influenced by Bill Hybels and Rick Warren and the successes of their congregations. We also saw many applications in Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) and in John Kotter's *Leading Change* (1996).

As the process continued, a vision for the future began to emerge and gain clarity. The vision had its roots in our very first feeble attempt at drafting a vision statement for the organization. (See Chapter Four on discerning vision.) Over time that vision became clearer and ultimately was expressed this way:

> UBA's vision is healthy congregations changing
> the world from the inside out.

This was a very stressful period. Our staff team was composed of highly competent professionals who set high standards and were accustomed to knowing the answers. Our own image of leadership made it difficult to be in the role of learner. There is a certain vulnerability that comes from acknowledging that we don't know what we need to know to succeed. Yet in today's rapidly changing environment, leaders are increasingly required to be learners.

We also experienced resistance to change from those who were primarily involved in the association's ongoing services. As the vision gained clarity, we began to ask what changes we needed to make. This created an increasing level of anxiety among those who were committed to our traditional track. This anxiety was expressed in hundreds of different conversations and decisions along the way.

Our stress was compounded by the absence of an adequate process for leading change. Our collective experiences were with incremental approaches to change. Only in retrospect did we realize that we were engaged in a *paradigm shift*. (See Chapter Eight on mental models.) We operated more from intuition and from a willingness to risk failure in order to learn. And we were sustained by a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and a conviction that change was absolutely necessary.

Understanding the Dynamics of Change

The pursuit of God's vision for UBA led us first to assess the planning processes that congregations were using. At that time, our denomination used a long-range planning process that was based on a set of standard programs. Churches assessed the strength of their existing programs, without ever asking whether these were the right programs. They followed this assessment by setting goals for increased participation in each area. The message from our pastors, however, was that standardized programming was no longer effective.

Emergence of the First Part of the Model

In the spring of 1991, UBA team member Robert Sowell initiated a pilot project to test the impact of a different planning process. This strategic planning process differed from long-range planning in several critical ways. (The planning process for change that ultimately emerged is described in Chapters Three through Five.) Ideally, it began with a thorough assessment that included internal measures—attendance, giving, membership. But it also required congregations to assess external factors, such as demographic trends and community needs.

Second, the strategic planning process included the development of a mission and vision statement that congregations could use to guide and assess their progress. Rather than measure progress against itself (did our attendance increase compared to last year?), the congregation would begin to measure progress by its impact on the community.

Third, it guided congregations to identify the key priorities that would enable them to make the most progress toward achieving their mission and vision. These priorities became the focus of new activity in the life of the church.

Ten congregations enlisted in the pilot project. The pastors of these congregations participated in a two-day retreat where the strategic

planning process was described. We offered to serve as consultants to the churches as they engaged in this planning process. All ten pastors signed on for the project.

Only one of the congregations in the pilot project had a highly successful experience. Hoi Thanh Tin Lanh Baptist Vietnam, pastored by Khanh Huynh, experienced significant long-term growth. From a congregation of approximately forty members, it is now a healthy, vibrant congregation with an average attendance of three hundred fifty that is making a significant impact in the Vietnamese community of Houston and beyond.

In every other congregation that seriously engaged the process, a common pattern emerged. The strategic planning process began with great enthusiasm. The congregation developed a clearer sense of its situation and its environment and eventually established a vision. Then as the vision-based priorities were implemented, significant conflict emerged.

Learning from Conflict

In retrospect, this conflict should not have been surprising. It paralleled what was happening in our association. As we used the strategic planning process and pursued the vision for the association, the old ways of doing things were challenged. This resulted in an accelerating level of conflict. As new financial resources became available, they were budgeted, almost exclusively, to the new priorities identified in our planning. This threatened those who had a vested interest in the way we had always done things. We experienced passive and direct resistance from some staff members and from pastors in the association. Usually the conflict was behind the scenes, but more than once our deployment of resources to the new priorities was challenged in open meetings.

Over time and through hundreds of conversations we came to recognize that change does not happen without conflict. As we reviewed the biblical patterns, every time—without exception—the people of God began to make adjustments to join God in his activity, conflict emerged. Blackaby and King (1990) call it "the crisis of belief."

I would like to say that the conflict was civil and was conducted at the philosophical level. Often it wasn't. In the midst of change, the best and the worst of human nature emerges. On many occasions, the conflict became very personal. Our motives and character were questioned and challenged many times. Sometimes in the heat of the conflict, our motives were indeed suspect. On more than one occasion, we contributed to the destructive nature of these confrontations.

How did we survive this as an association? Ultimately the answer is "By the grace of God." But many factors contributed. At the core of the change process was a staff team and a group of key pastoral leaders who were deeply committed to joining God's movement. They possessed high levels of interpersonal skills that helped us manage conflict constructively. Our broadly shared sense that we were losing the city resulted in a high level of urgency. This urgency created an unusual willingness to take risks and explore new alternatives.

In our pilot project with the ten congregations, we had assumed that they had the resources needed to manage conflict. In fact, it became clear that one of the prevailing assumptions, or mental models (see Chapter Eight), was that a healthy congregation did not have conflict. As one pastor said, "All my life, I've judged my success by how happy everyone in the church was. You are telling me that if I'm really on mission with God, one sign of my success will be the presence of conflict."

The conflict in the local church was similar in content and scope to our experience at the associational level. Change threatened those individuals within the congregation who had a deep commitment to and vested interest in the existing programs and priorities. Their response to this threat varied from reasoned conversation to personal attack. As this pattern emerged in multiple congregations, it became apparent that conflict management skills would be critical to any successful change process.

Emergence of the Second Part of the Model

Heavily influenced by Blackaby and King, we began to refer to strategic planning as the work a congregation does to (1) identify the activity of God and (2) make the personal and congregational adjustments needed to join him in that activity. As we framed it in that language, the second part of our transformation model began to emerge.

In follow-ups with the ten pilot congregations and in ongoing work with many other congregations, we learned that conflict emerged in each case. The conversations gave birth to the distinction between life-giving conflict and life-threatening conflict.

Life-threatening conflict occurs when people lose sight of the vision to which God has called them. It is found in the Exodus story. After leaving Egypt for the Promised Land, the people lost sight of the mission. They began to murmur against their leadership and they openly disobeyed God. They became more concerned with their own comfort than with achievement of God's plan.

Life-giving conflict is a deeper understanding and commitment that grows out of a significant disagreement. It is found in Acts 6. In this passage, a conflict emerges over distribution of food to the widows. But as the church genuinely seeks God's will in the context of its vision, a better solution is found and the church is able to carry out its mission more effectively.

Khanh Huynh verified that the process created conflict in the Hoi Thanh congregation. "We lost members because we made a commitment to do what we understood God to be calling us to do. Some people did not want to go where God was leading us. Ultimately some people left our church. But even in losing members we became a stronger, more focused congregation."

We began to understand that a congregation must have a certain foundation before making the adjustments that the planning process will require. We refer to this foundation as spiritual and relational vitality (see Chapter Two). The change process, by its very nature, creates conflict. A congregation with a high level of spiritual and relational vitality can accept change and can manage conflict in ways that give life. Conversely, a congregation with a low level of spiritual and relational vitality will tend to manage conflict in ways that preserve the status quo.

The ways in which spiritually mature leaders manage conflict can help stimulate the change process. Though leaders and followers can and must learn skills to manage conflict, this is more an art than a science. As leaders assess the sources of conflict, they will also give attention to managing the conflict in a life-giving manner. This requires patience, wisdom, and a multitude of counselors. It requires a great deal of humility, because sometimes the leader's own broken humanity will be the source of the conflict. How a congregation manages conflict can enhance or diminish the congregation's spiritual and relational vitality. When managed in a life-giving manner, conflict empowers the people to solve the problem and keep the church on mission.

Again, this paralleled our experience in UBA. At times, the conflict was life-threatening. In other instances, conflict produced a renewed commitment to the vision and clarity in our immediate direction. In looking back, our level of spiritual and relational vitality was an important factor that separated the two outcomes. Some of our most significant advances grew out of periods when we intentionally focused on God and when relationships among our core group were strongest.

At the core of the spiritual and relational vitality part of our model is the conviction that leaders bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility for leading change. It follows that the spiritual and relational vitality of the leader or leaders is foundational to the change journey.

One additional learning emerged from our pilot project. It became clear that spiritual and relational vitality had to be linked to a positive vision of the future. In the context of this awareness, the importance of mental models (see Chapter Eight) emerged again.

Most church members have a set of assumptions about how the congregation should function. It was at this point that we learned that spiritual and relational vitality can be misplaced. The assumptions about the congregation may not be appropriate for the congregation's current context. As a congregation gives attention to increasing its vitality, one result can be an attempt to recapture the past. Several of the congregations involved in the pilot project had reached their peak in attendance a decade or more prior to this project. As pastors became intentional about fostering growth in the spiritual and relational vitality of the congregation, many of the longtime members wanted to focus that energy on recapturing the past—returning to the good old days.

As the journey continued to unfold, we began to work with congregational leaders to assess their spiritual vitality. Emphasis was given to leading the congregation to prepare for the journey of change—corporately through worship, reconciliation, and community assessment, and individually through the practice of spiritual disciplines and obedience to the Spirit's leading.

Spiritual and relational vitality emerged as the second part of our model for leading change. But it is the foundational piece. Apart from a strong sense of vitality—in relationship to God and with one another through a shared vision the change process is doomed to failure.

Learning Why the Change Process Stalled: The Third Part of the Model

Five years into this journey, numerous congregations had embraced the change process with spiritual and relational vitality at its core. Working with consultants from the UBA team, congregations began to make progress –incremental at first, but more substantial over time. Then the final piece of learning emerged.

When the consultants exited, the process often stalled. Ultimately, the business community helped us understand the cause. Led by the

work of Bennis and Nanus in the 1980s, business experts began to make a distinction between leadership and management. "Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right things" (1985, p. 21). This resonated with our experience. Most of the pastors with whom we worked had been trained to *manage* the congregation. They approached their work from the question "How do I improve the programs and ministries that we are currently doing?" Few had been trained to ask the question "Are the things we are doing the most faithful and effective means of reaching our community with the Gospel?"

It became increasingly apparent that the consultants had been virtually *leading* the change process, with the pastor endorsing it, empowering it, and continuing to manage the existing programs and ministries of the church. To achieve the vision, pastors and key congregational leaders needed a way to distinguish the leading and managing functions but based on a paradigm of rapid change and continuous learning.

The work of Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* became profoundly influential at this point. He describes leadership as mastering a set of disciplines that leaders must use to guide an organization through turbulent times. The associational team had read his work in the early 1990s and began using these disciplines in their work. Hence, the third portion of the model emerged.

Coming to terms with the learning aspects of transformational leadership had two specific impacts in our work at UBA. At the associational level, we gave birth to the Director Team. This team consists of four individuals who serve as co-directors of the association. The fundamental tenet of this approach is an agreement that no directional decisions are made without the consensus of each team member. This team allowed us to benefit from very different gifts and significantly different styles in the leadership of the association.

Our learning on leadership also led to the birth of a significant ministry named Young Leaders. Recognizing that most pastors had been trained to manage a congregation, Young Leaders became the place where we began training them to exercise transformational leadership. The program includes the content of this book and is based on a commitment to learn leadership in the context of community. Beyond the content, this two-year learning process includes very close and at times deeply challenging peer-group experiences. The participants have consistently reported that this is the most successful leadership development experience that they have ever encountered.

The final aspect of the model focuses on the cluster of learning disciplines that must be mastered by transformational leaders. The disciplines assume an environment of rapid change and significant diversity. They are substantively different from the skills required to manage the ongoing life of a congregation where little change is anticipated.

The Congregational Transformation Model

The Congregational Transformation Model, which emerged from the experiences we've described, is shown in Figure 1.1. This model was designed to describe a complex set of challenges, steps, and leadership requirements that are associated with a deep, systemic change effort in an established congregation. The principles on which the model is based are also applicable to a new church start-up, a ministry within a church, judicatories, and parachurch organizations. The model has three major interdependent and interactive components: spiritual and relational vitality, an eight-stage process for change, and four essential learning disciplines. Each component is introduced in this chapter and explained in detail in the chapters that follow.

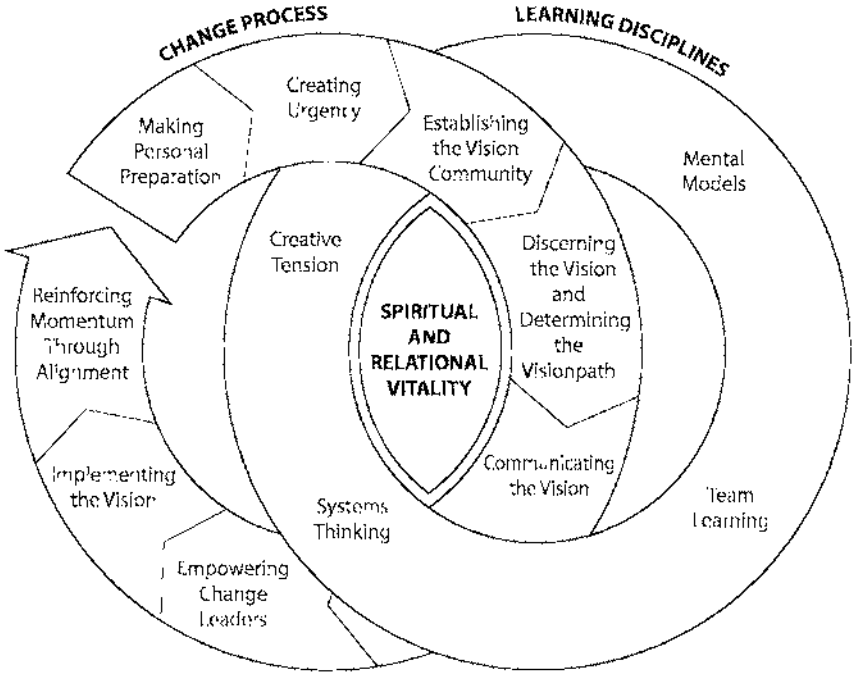
Spiritual and relational vitality forms the heart of the transformation process. Congregations without an adequate level of vitality will not be able to sustain significant change. A congregation that is not committed to following God or that is experiencing serious discord within the body will find it virtually impossible to follow the difficult path of transformation (see Chapter Two).

The eight-stage change process is the sequential component of the model that gives form and direction to the transformation. It is not enough to know that change is needed, or even to have a clear image of the church's future. The challenge is to create a realistic way to get there. The eight stages give structure and sequence to the process of moving from today's reality to a distant tomorrow (see Chapters Three through Five).

The third component represents a set of learning disciplines that are essential for the leaders who will guide the transformation. Without these disciplines, the many hurdles that are encountered in the long journey are probably insurmountable (see Chapters Six through Ten).

When asked how long it takes to transform a congregation, we always reply that there is no simple answer. The transformation of an existing congregation is never a quick or easy process. The actual time required will depend on many factors, including the scale of the change

FIGURE 1.1 Congregational Transformation Model



needed, church size, the congregation's readiness to transform, its spiritual and relational vitality, and past problems that may have been mishandled. Likewise, various stages in the change process will take differing amounts of time.

But a realistic figure for comprehensive transformation might be five to seven years, or sometimes longer. By comprehensive we mean deep changes such as a shift to ministries that target unchurched persons, a major transition in the racial or ethnic composition of the membership, movement to a significantly different size, or the journey from a "chaplaincy" stance to a missional posture. We have also found that the most effective transformational leaders have mastered the *art* of leadership. They know when a congregation is ready to move forward and when it is time to slow down, regardless of any timetables that may have been previously set.

Congregational transformation has many analogies to whitewater rafting. Whitewater rafting is an exhilarating adventure, but it can also

be dangerous if it is not done properly. Simply having experience with other watercraft—sailboats, rowboats, fishing boats—is insufficient. Before beginning, the right equipment must be gathered. The right kind of raft, oars, and life jackets are imperative. A wise rafting guide will include a first-aid kit, an emergency throw line, water and snacks for the journey, and other supplies. In the same way, spiritual and relational vitality must be in place to begin the transformation. Starting without this foundation is like heading down a raging river in a twelve-foot aluminum fishing boat.

For challenging raft trips, a map of the river is invaluable. Being warned of the approaching rapids or the need to portage around a waterfall is more than a "nice to know" luxury. A good river map recommends a particular approach to the tricky currents, highlights boulders hidden in the stream, and suggests places to stop for a rest or for scouting a difficult passage. But even the best map is limited in the amount of information that it can convey. Changes in the river's flow rate, weather conditions, or the abilities of the rafters may necessitate different approaches to the river. Obstacles that can be avoided easily at low flows may become major concerns when the river is running fast. So it is with the eight-stage change process. It provides many suggestions and insights for the change process, but actual conditions will always require real-time adjustments in the approach for a given congregation.

A specific set of skills is also needed for a successful whitewater journey. Anyone who decides to pilot the raft based exclusively on experience with other types of watercraft has made a serious mistake. Handling a raft bears no more resemblance to boating on a lake than riding a bike down the street does to driving an eighteen-wheeler on an interstate highway. Reading the currents, recognizing patterns in the water that point to hidden rocks, steering a clumsy rubber craft, timing the turns and paddle strokes are all essential skills for the whitewater environment. The learning disciplines facilitate transformation, just as rafting skills provide for safe passage on the river. And like the boater who has never been in whitewater, many church leaders underestimate the gap between their level of preparedness and the requirements for change leadership.

One of the great challenges of congregational transformation is that all three components must be done well and simultaneously. A transformational effort based on spiritual vitality without the change process or the learning disciplines is no more sensible than having the raft without

the river map or the whitewater experience. All three are essential to successful transformations.

The interdependent nature of the three components is a challenge to many leaders. We acknowledge, without apology, that mastering and monitoring all three components simultaneously is not easy. We also assert that human beings are designed to master complex tasks. Those who make the commitment and stay the course will find great reward in the journey. It is our hope that this book provides encouragement and practical guidance that has emerged from our collective journey. It is ultimately our hope to contribute in some small way to the renewal of the church as we face some of its most challenging days.