



Thomas Bandy

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There are seismic shifts in organizational and spiritual life since the latter part of the 1990s that have overtaken and curtailed the church-growth movement. Church transformation that was once bold and innovative has become timid and tactical in the first decade of the 21st century. The momentum for church planting and multi-site ministries reveals that many of the most restless and creative leaders have given up on the spiritually undisciplined church establishment and invested their energy in mega-churches and micro-movements. Unfortunately, many still carry hidden corporate addictions to “churchiness,” and renewed signs of frustration are already beginning to emerge. The big shifts that are changing church life and mission for years to come include the following:

The shift from the “top-down” to the “bottom-up” organizational world: There will be less task supervision, denominational policy setting, and confrontation with culture. There will be more boundary articulation, congregational policy governance, and conversation with culture. This trend will bring severe stress to traditionally organized denominations because the mission agenda will no longer be determined by experts, career bureaucrats, or elected officials. It will emerge as the Holy Spirit elicits it from the hearts of spiritually growing people.

The real dilemma for church leadership, therefore, is not how to get everyone to agree about policies or practices, but rather how to motivate and equip spiritual growth among lazy North American church members who fundamentally do not want to grow. If the members refuse to commit to serious, accountable, spiritual disciplines, then the Holy Spirit cannot elicit anything from their hearts, and the church will be without purpose. In other words, it will continue to decline in relevance and credibility. Leaders are already investing more and more energy to build clarity and consensus around core values, beliefs, vision, and mission from the “bottom-up.” Individual transformation leads to congregational transformation, which leads to denominational transformation. Not the reverse.

The shift from “Reasonable Religion” to “Experiential Christology”: There will be fewer doctrinal summaries, orthodox pronouncements, and dogmatic statements (liberal and conservative). There will be more stories of miracles, supernatural connections, and mystical expressions of the real presence of Jesus the Christ. The immediacy of the incarnation will increas-

ingly polarize the academic study of religion and the existential practice of mission. The gap will widen between religion defined by the social sciences and religion defined by faith, and a good many theological facul-

ties will be forced to choose sides or fall into a chasm of irrelevancy.

The real dilemma for church leadership, therefore, is not how to normalize ecumenical relations, but how to provide a collective answer to the question *what is it about your experience with Jesus this community cannot live without?* The church is rapidly dividing between those who are perplexed and even outraged by the question, and those who are clear and passionate about the answer. The “head trip” of Christendom is over, and the pre-modern quest for the experience of divine immediacy is on.

The shift from “Membership Loyalty” to “Spiritual Credibility”: There will be less institutional loyalty. We knew that. There will be more attention given to spiritual credibility. We have chronically ignored that. The stress of the future will be the rude awakening to new standards of spiritual leadership. Churches will no longer be able to measure success by raising money, preserving property, maintaining programs, assimilating members, and swapping pastors occasionally. They will be forced to measure success by unrelenting alignment to mission, unembarrassed lifestyle integrity, unlimited continuous training, and unselfish teamwork.

The real dilemma for church leadership is not to protect the salaries, benefits, and vacation days of clergy, but to restore the respect (and indeed, the self respect) of the laity. This is important not only for the multitude of broken, lost, lonely, anxious, victimized, or thankful seekers who are desperately looking for mentors to guide them to God. It is important for the many church members who are restless and ready to make the church all that it can be, but who are frankly ashamed to be church members. This source of self-esteem has dramatically changed, and church leaders need to catch up to it.

The shift from educating “Church Leadership” to mentoring “Mission Movers”: There will be fewer full-time salaried preachers, paid staff, and tenured theological faculty. There will be more tent-making, part-time priests, volunteer teams, and congregationally trained apostles. The reality is that fewer people (especially under 45) want to be trained to lead an

institution, and more people want to be mentored to lead a spiritual life and follow a productive missionary journey. Christians either want to go *very* deep into Christ and *very* far with the Risen Lord in mission, or they do not want to go at all.

The greatest churches, the boldest spiritual movements, and the most innovative church plants are almost always led by “mission movers” who were never graduated from a degree program or certified by a hierarchy. This may not be quite true in the U.S.—but it is certainly the trend in the rest of the world and there is every sign that America will catch up. The emerging mission field welcomes the sincere spiritual amateur.

The shift from “Conflict Resolution” to “Control Intervention”: There will be fewer church members, but more missionaries in the average growing church. There will be less harmony, but more spirit-filled chaos. The median age of church boards will go down. The expectation for membership tenure to be elected to office will go down, but the expectation for serious spiritual discipline will go up. Just as “conflict resolution” was the key leverage point for change in the 1970s through early 1990s, so “control intervention” will be the key leverage point for change in the era to come.

“Control Intervention” is the skill with which spiritual leaders pry loosed dysfunctional people from controlling the life and mission of the church. They stop controllers from shaping the budget, programs, and staff development around their personal neediness and aesthetic tastes. The key skill of the future will not be how to fire a staff person, but how to fire a volunteer. No doubt this will lead to plenty of personal denigration and hostage-taking, but growing churches will persevere until they

break the stranglehold of a domineering, self-interested, minority on church life. They will liberate the rest of the church to go deeper and further than they ever imagined.

The shift from “Secularization” to “Paganization”: There will be far, far less public acceptance and respect for the church, less segmentation of life and spirituality, and less interest in denominational or theological stereotyping. Even though there will be far more public antagonism toward institutional religion, there will also be far more interest in holistic lifestyles and cross-cultural dialogues. Most of all, there will be far more interest in who Jesus is and why he should matter to any given micro-culture.

The twentieth century division between the sacred and secular world has simply disappeared, and in its place is a vast bubbling cauldron of supernaturalism, gnosticism, and superstition. It is a pagan world for which few clergy have been trained, and for which few veteran church members are prepared. The key fight over multi-track, mission-targeted worship design will heat up as more people realize that the blended, one-size-fits all family worship doesn't work. Churches will be forced to become very, very clear. Who do they want to reach—and exactly what grace do they hope to communicate to that strange Macedonian pleading for help.

These are certainly not all the forces in play in the contemporary church and world. But they are enough to creatively stress your next board meeting.

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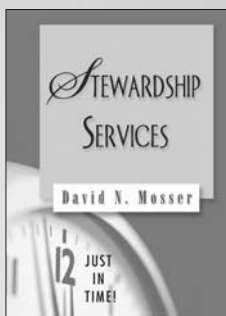


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