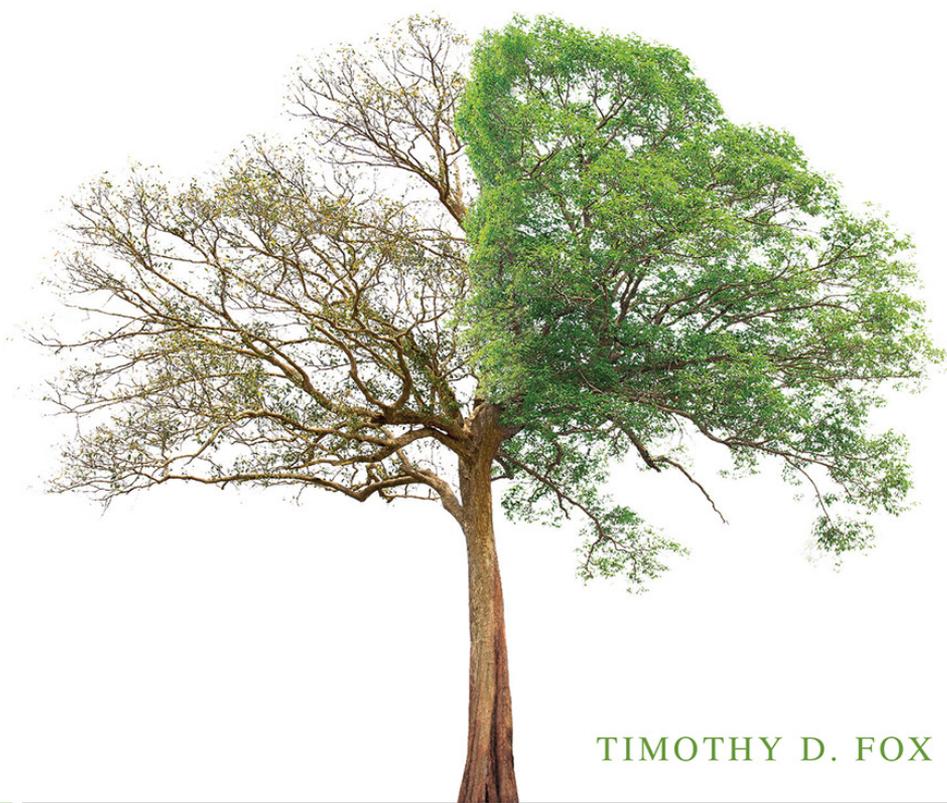


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LEADING THE STRUGGLING CHURCH  
THROUGH DEATH TO NEW LIFE



TIMOTHY D. FOX

Through a balance of narrative and direction, Tim leads readers along a journey from stuck to hope, death to life. By allowing readers to witness his story—as enveloped within Hydrant’s story—the foundation is laid for discourse, initiative, and rethinking of what church can be. This book is an essential read for clergy and congregations that sense the Spirit’s leading to venture beyond the realm of complacency into a new domain of possibility. By its conclusion, you, too, will believe in what is possible, even if possible starts with death.

—Dustin R. Bannister, director of foundations and sponsored programs, and institutional advancement for University of Mount Olive

No matter the size of the congregation, one of the first questions considered often centers on, “Is this Christ’s church or is it ours?” Another chief thought to be considered in this book is whether we’re willing to lovingly confront complacency and risk the status quo every day to reach lost souls of our community for the good of the kingdom of God. The message of Jesus and the gospel should never change, but the methods for “doing” church will change. Be like Pastor Timothy Fox and stay teachable for a lifetime!

—Jim Dunn is a pastor, denominational leader, church consultant, author, teacher, and president of Oklahoma Wesleyan University

A small church carries the lion share of ministry in America yet receives the least amount of emphasis and energy thrust towards its nourishment. In a time when local is celebrated and small relished, the small church deserves a rethink. If you are looking for help, challenge, and encouragement, Pastor Tim and Hydrant Church’s story will dare you to rethink everything.

—Aaron Golden, lead pastor of Union Point Church (NC)

Tim writes this book—not from the ivory tower of speculation and academia—but from the front lines of experience and practicality. His insights and principles instill a confidence that comes from someone who has walked this path before. Tim admonishes, “Forget all the reasons that you can’t do something beautiful for the kingdom and find one reason that you can.” This book will help you discover the reason you can.

—Phil Stevenson, district superintendent of the Pacific Southwest District of The Wesleyan Church

Church revitalization is one of the most difficult challenges in ministry that takes total commitment and a hunger to grow and learn. Tim takes us on his journey leading a struggling church through death to new life. It is powerfully authentic and chock-full of practical wisdom on how to do it. Tim is not only an incredible pastor, husband, and father, but also a dear friend who has walked with me during some dark times of ministry. He is a pastor to pastors and has helped me fall in love all over again with the small church and the big impact it can have on a community and city. You will be reminded that the One who has called you on this adventure is quite able to bring it to completion.

—Jeremy JG White, founder of The North Durham Network (NC)  
and board member of Pastor The Pastor Ministries

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LEADING THE STRUGGLING CHURCH  
THROUGH DEATH TO NEW LIFE

TIMOTHY D. FOX

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To the people of Hydrant Church, who have embarked on this ridiculous journey of faith, hope, and love with me. I am daily grateful for the opportunity to serve with you to see the dream of God come true in our little part of the world.

To Anita, Noah, Sophia, and the rest my family who have supported and walked with me in every up and down of ministry in the church. Your love and faithfulness inspire me.

To The Wesleyan Church, you have given me a home and tribe for which I am grateful.





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## contents

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|                           |                                  |     |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-----|
| Foreword by Wayne Schmidt | 9                                |     |
| Preface                   | 11                               |     |
| One                       | Rethinking the Call              | 13  |
| Two                       | Rethinking First Steps           | 33  |
| Three                     | Rethinking the Way Forward       | 67  |
| Four                      | Rethinking the Death of a Church | 89  |
| Five                      | Rethinking Obscurity             | 107 |
| Six                       | Rethinking the Church's Why      | 125 |
| Seven                     | Rethinking Big Dreams            | 153 |
| Eight                     | Rethinking Leadership            | 179 |
| Nine                      | Rethinking Strategy              | 197 |
| Ten                       | Rethinking Discipleship          | 221 |
| Eleven                    | A Rethinking Leader              | 237 |
| Epilogue                  | 257                              |     |
| Notes                     | 261                              |     |





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## foreword

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**E**arly in 2020, I sat in the packed worship space of Hydrant Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. A room that normally seats about a hundred was filled wall-to-wall with pastors and lay leaders from smaller churches in several states. There was a diversity of generations and ethnicities from a variety of community contexts. Their churches were in different stages of their life cycles. Pastor Tim Fox and Hydrant Church were hosting their first ReThink Small conference.

Tim loves small churches and so do I. That was the size of church I grew up in. In The Wesleyan Church, three-quarters of our churches are under 120 in worship attendance, and most of those are under sixty. That would be true of many denominations.

That opening night, Tim compellingly communicated his own journey and how he fell in love with the small church. He does not bash other expressions of the church—he affirms the bride of Christ in all its shapes and sizes. But he believes the small church has some opportunities unique to its size. While many speak of the 200 *barrier* in attendance, he casts a vision for the 200 *blessing*. Smaller size is not a lid, but a strength to be leveraged.

*Rethinking Church* is Tim's story intertwined with the story of Hydrant Church. He shares it with transparency—the raw realities,

personal and pastoral. Not unlike the psalmist, he expresses his feelings about God, the church, others, and himself. There are mountaintops, yes, but also deep, dark valleys. Multiple times he recounts his own questioning of God, the church, himself, describing it as “whining.”

Some books, like this one, tell a great story, but *Rethinking Church* goes further. It is full of principles and practices to maximize the ministry of the smaller church, painting a picture of what obtainable excellence looks like.

It addresses a broader reality—and a specific opportunity. Many churches are dying. Many of those are missing the possibility of resurrection. Tim led Hydrant Church through a revitalization process, which at first seemed to be working, but then the wheels fell off. Unexpectedly, the journey led to a restart.

The story of Hydrant Church is a resurrection story. Hope prevails over despair, and life over death. Pastors and lay leaders of various giftings and ages will be inspired and equipped to lead their churches into the experience of abundant life.

Tim has a unique genius to leverage what others see as liabilities—a blessing that overflows for us all as this unique genius intersects with a deep desire to be generous in sharing with others. His vision is intensely local—for Hydrant Church and Goldsboro. But his heart is translocal as well. He invests in the equipping of other pastors and churches. It energizes him to see others flourish and experience resurrection power to reach full potential in Christ.

—Dr. Wayne Schmidt  
General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church



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## preface

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I have been rethinking church for as long as I can remember. I was rethinking ministry models, pathways, and accepted norms before I realized I was doing it. The work is not always easy, and the first one to blaze a new path usually comes out bloody. Most of us don't like to let go of what we think we know, or exchange predictability for possibility. Our default is to be satisfied with slightly better than the status quo. I have often wondered what it would take to shake the church loose from some of its accepted realities. What would it take for us to experiment, find new tools, dream, and rethink church?

Apparently, the answer was a pandemic. I began writing this book long before COVID-19 was a part of the everyday conversation—before churches were asked to close their buildings and pastors were forced to learn how to “go live,” produce videos, and make disciples from at least six feet away. As we return to our buildings and our worship gatherings, we are blessed with a gift. We have been gifted the opportunity to rethink our churches. We have a nearly blank slate from which to start. I pray that as we sculpt a new normal for our churches, this book will be a resource to help you rethink church.

We cannot return to the status quo, where we keep scorecards that measure income, buildings, and attendance as the markers of success. We cannot return to ministries that make good citizens and church people, but anemic disciples. We must forge a new future, shaped by the mission of the kingdom of God, that brings to life the dream of Jesus. We cannot go back, though many will try. Many will return to the same overscheduled rhythms and codependent leadership that leads to unhealthy churches.

My prayer is that you will be one of the brave ones. I dare you to rethink church with me so that together we may discover all the possibilities and potential that God has placed within his great church. Your church is neither too small nor too large to change. We must rethink church for the sake of the mission. We must dream as Jesus dreamed, serve as Jesus served, make disciples as Jesus made disciples.

In these pages, many ideas that you have learned and depended on in ministry will be challenged and questioned. I will ask you to set aside many of the presumptions and beliefs that once served you well in your work. Today is a new day. The time is now. The opportunity is ours. Let's seize it together.

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MOVE BEYOND COMPLAINING  
TO LEADING.



I wish I could say that when things are not going my way in ministry I immediately see an opportunity to try something new and creative. In reality, my first reaction is often to whine. I am epically good at whining.

Whining is a function of my active imagination. I see with clarity all the things going wrong. Then I imagine all the ways they will continue to get worse. I imagine reasons to worry and stress, and start to believe this whole thing can't possibly work. I express all of this with a childlike tone of complaint.

When I give in to my insecurities, I feel small, insignificant, and incapable of doing what God is asking me to do. Instead of remembering my calling, I imagine ten new reasons why I can't possibly lead the church entrusted to my charge. When that insecurity is raging, it can manifest as arrogance, and I blame them. You know *them*. They are the unnamed masses who constantly criticize and won't commit, give, or even show up. They are part of the reason that leading the church sometimes feels like trying to get a bunch of toddlers to eat their vegetables. You know you are offering what's best for them, but inside, you wonder if it's worth the fight.

## PREPARED BY GOD

Ministry is difficult, but God is faithful.

I first said yes to Jesus' call at thirteen years old on a Thursday night of camp. Cliché, right? The nervous energy and emotion of youth camp filled the air, and I was moved to respond. I have never really doubted the authenticity of that moment, but nothing could have prepared me for the road I would walk in the years to come.

In the twenty-seven years since that day, I've received so many gifts from the church. Among other things, I've received great opportunities, family around the world, a sense of identity, and my beautiful wife. But while the church has given with one hand, it has often seemed to be taking with the other. Ministry and church leadership have been the source of many of the deepest wounds and greatest losses in my life. Maybe you've had a similar experience.

In a moment when I was tempted to give up and walk away from ministry, God revealed himself to me in a new way. In an effort to prove critics wrong, I had run too hard for too long and unintentionally isolated myself from those who could help me. Inevitably, I became focused on what was going wrong. In that dark place, wasting away along the edge of a prayer labyrinth, I begged God to let me leave the ministry. Then, God began to whisper in my ear. A breeze gently pressed on my back, and God said to me, "Your life and ministry will be like a sailboat without a rudder. My Spirit will be the wind that takes you wherever I want you to go. I will tell you when to put up the sails and when to take them down. Trust me."

God has used everything I have been through in the past to prepare me for what I do now. God is using everything I am doing now to prepare me for whatever he might have for me next. God doesn't waste anything. It is all Jesus' way of shaping us as his disciples and leaders. Written in these pages is my story. I share the obstacles, failures, and pathways forward, along with some lessons I have learned. I share them with the hope that others will find inspiration and their own path forward.

## CALLED BY GOD

My first calling as a pastor was in a medium-sized suburban church. I was charged, as their first full-time associate, to start the children's ministry. Previously, I had explained to God how I would love to do anything in church ministry *except* work with children. I had interviewed and was hired for the position of youth pastor, but before I actually started the job, the church asked me to consider children's ministry instead. In the ten weeks since my graduation I had already declined every other opportunity in order to take this job, so I had no choice. God has a sense of humor.

In that first job, I learned two things. First, I learned the joy of creating new ministries as an expression of my creativity and strategic imagination. Second, I learned *not* to tell God what I don't want to do. His ways often take us to the very places we would rather avoid.

Since that first assignment to create a new ministry, God has placed me in churches that have required me to start, revitalize, or restart ministries that have deteriorated. For nearly two decades, I have started or restarted in kids' ministry, middle school and youth ministries, sports ministry, discipleship ministries, worship venues, and churches.

Before coming to Goldsboro, I had been serving as the associate pastor in a large church. Just three months into that assignment, some issues brewing beneath the surface erupted like a volcano when a staff member was removed for what turned out to be years of misconduct. Then came the cover-ups and blaming that too often characterize the church's behavior in these situations. It was a terrible season, especially for those of us who wanted more transparency. By the end of my first year the environment had

become so toxic with fear and control that I knew my time there would be brief. After a year, I was asked to resign. I was unsure of our next step.

Almost immediately after resigning, we heard about a small Wesleyan church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, that needed a pastor. It was undergoing an implosion precipitated by the moral failure of its leader. My wife, Anita, and I had one thought at the time—“No more cleaning up anyone else’s mess.” I had done that too many times and paid a high price for my efforts. We were open to moving just about anywhere in the country, but we wanted to go somewhere healthy and secure, or at least stable. So we waited.

Several months later, we were still waiting. I had interviewed at a few places and had a few phone conversations, but nothing was coming together. I felt caught in between. Small churches that saw my resume seemed to presume I was overqualified and would be unhappy in a small church. Medium-sized and larger churches passed over my resume because I had not been a lead pastor in those larger settings. The largest churches saw me as a potential campus pastor, but I knew I was called to preach. During those months, our family bounced back and forth between my parents’ house and my in-laws’ basement for months. Exhaustion and anger were knocking at the door of my soul. I was emotionally over it all.

Early one morning, I was cooking cheesy eggs for my daughter Sophia, her favorite breakfast. It occurred to me that I was standing in my in-laws’ kitchen and using my in-laws’ pan to cook eggs my in-laws had bought. That’s when I prayed, “God, Joshua prayed that you would make the sun stand still so you could save his family that day. I need you to save my family today.” Then I wiped my eyes and served my daughter her eggs.

Forty-five minutes later, my phone rang. It was a leader from that small Wesleyan church in Goldsboro that had recently imploded. The voice on the other end of the line asked if we would come to North Carolina for an interview. I first said no, but after a short pause I reconsidered: “We would prefer to start with a phone interview.”

During the phone interview, we were surprised at the openness expressed by this small group of people. They seemed genuine in their desire to grow as a church and talked about wanting to serve their community. They believed that they were ready to change in ways that would lead the church to make a real difference in the community. Anita and I spent the evening praying and talking, then we agreed to come for a visit.

We intentionally tried to portray an unfiltered picture of who we are, as well as my leadership style, preaching, and expectations. We told them we didn’t dress up on Sunday. We talked with them about how different it is for a church to have a young pastor versus a pastor nearing retirement. We were open about our family boundaries, including what they could expect from Anita’s involvement. We had two very young children, and she wasn’t able to be a free staff person. Honestly, I tried to scare them off. In addition, the denominational leader warned the church board that if they called me to Goldsboro they would have to be prepared for significant and potentially painful changes. The vote was unanimous anyway.

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## PLACED BY GOD

Our family arrived in Goldsboro the same weekend as Beryl, the strongest off-season tropical storm to ever make landfall in the United States. I should have recognized it as a sign; instead, we were blissfully ignorant of the real storm approaching. Within eighteen months, the storm in the church grew to a full-blown, category five hurricane. It was a perfect storm of fear, bitterness, power struggles, and gossip, mixed with an attitude of “Let’s go back to the good ol’ days of church.” I was convinced that someone had made a mistake. I wasn’t sure if it was God, the people who voted, or me, but someone had messed up. I was confident that I should not be in Goldsboro. In reality, God had me just where I needed to be.

In the first year, it seemed the revitalization was going in the right direction. Then, we hit a roadblock. It seemed we had reached the limit of what the people were willing to tolerate. The changes—exciting at first—were becoming too much to handle. Nitpicking was on the rise. Complaining, doubt, second-guessing, and accusations characterized nearly every meeting. There was growing disunity. By summer, we had sixty people meeting in two different services. Both groups were hoping the other service would fail, so we would go back to one service. I nearly quit. Someone had messed up. I was not supposed to be here.

It wasn’t the first time I had felt this way. I tend to question God when things aren’t going the way I think they should go. I wonder why, every time I take a step forward, I get pushed back two steps. I doubt God’s wisdom when I find myself in a place where my gifts or strengths are underused or unappreciated. When things get complicated, I am tempted to believe that God has abandoned me. My first reaction is often to whine

and complain. In those times, I am sure that I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

I wonder if the disciples felt that way when they were trying to wake Jesus from his snooze in the storm. Exhausted from teaching, Jesus had fallen asleep in the bottom of the boat. As Jesus and his disciples crossed the sea, a fierce storm arose that frightened those seasoned sailors to death. They flipped out, whined, complained, and begged Jesus to fix it. After they woke him up, Jesus first spoke to the waves, and then addressed his disciples and questioned their faith. It is hard to whine and trust at the same time.

In 2008, I attended a one-day Catalyst event in Lynchburg, Virginia, where Andy Stanley and Craig Groeschel spoke about momentum. The lessons learned during those sessions have proven incredibly practical and helpful over the years. Groeschel shared about a time when his church was experiencing a significant issue and he was complaining to God about everything that was going wrong. Groeschel said that during one particular tirade, God interrupted the pity party with an imperative: "Stop whining. You're smart. Fix it."

As long as we are whining, we aren't working. What if, as leaders, we simply decided to stop whining? When we start the pity party, we lose sight of what is real and what is possible. When we whine, we stop communicating with God and start talking *at* him, as if God doesn't know what he's doing. When we grumble, we separate ourselves from the people we serve with blame, bitterness, and disappointment. Whining gets us nowhere; we fall further and further behind. So, let's agree to stop whining and start listening to what God might be saying to us.

God has created you for a purpose; God has called you with hope; and God is equipping you to do everything you are called to

do. What is God trying to say to you? What do you hear? Here are some possible messages God may want you to hear today.

- ☼ *I made you from dust and I have specifically formed your personality, strengths, mind, and gifts for the work that I have created you to do. (If this message speaks to you, read Ephesians 2:8–10.)*
- ☼ *I have led your steps from the first time you stood on wobbly legs. Everything you have learned and done has led you to this moment. Keep walking. Don't stop. (If this message speaks to you, read Proverbs 3:5–6.)*
- ☼ *I have been with you. I will always be with you. Every loss, sacrifice, challenge, pain, betrayal, and failure are significant to your story. It has all made you who you are. It has brought the best out of you. Nothing is wasted. I will use it all. (Read 1 Corinthians 15:58.)*
- ☼ *Don't give up. Don't shut down. I've got you. I am your strength. With me, you can persevere. You will make a difference. Persevere without exception. (Read Galatians 6:9.)*
- ☼ *I have all the resources you need to succeed. I will give you everything you need to do everything I am asking you to do. (Read Romans 8:32.)*

Within God's Spirit resides in you everything needed to do all that God is asking you to do. He has given you his Spirit, the very Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. You are fully capable

of doing what you have been asked to do. Your experiences have perfectly equipped you for this moment in time. God called and placed you, and you are ready. Answer the call that God has placed within you so profoundly that it may as well be a part of your DNA. God chose you. You are the right person, the right fit.

I am convinced that not only has God saved us by grace, but by that grace, he has also equipped us for good works prepared ahead of time (see Eph. 2:1–10). Let's get to it. Let's fix it. What is *it* for you? Have you named it? Do you have any idea what you need to fix? If you are like I was, you may be saying, "Everything! It all needs gutting. It's all just a mess." It is probably not as bad as it seems, but I know it feels like the steeple is falling. The situations that we face in ministry feel so overwhelming and impossible.

This book is our story. It is my story and Hydrant Church's story. A lot of it was a mess. There are still a lot of messes. However, we chose to believe that God had created us with purpose. We decided to believe that he had placed our church in this place as a strategic outpost for the kingdom of God. We chose to believe that we were entrusted with the mission to love, serve, and teach the people he gave us. We wanted to find out what was possible. We chose hope instead of fear. We decided one day that we were going to stop whining and start fixing it. We were going to rethink church. We are still doing it today.

## THE TIME IS NOW

As leaders, one of the ways we move beyond whining to stay in the battle is to create a moment in time that reminds us of God's faithfulness, our identity, and our calling. As Chip Heath and

Dan Heath said, “If you’re struggling to make a transition, create a defining moment that draws a dividing line between Old You and New You.”<sup>1</sup>

This new you will have to wander out into the unknown. There will be times when it feels like no one is out there with you. There will be setbacks and failures. There will be people who come and go. There will be wounds and losses, and it may feel like God is slow in keeping his promises. You will need your defining moment, your stake in the ground, to inspire your perseverance no matter what happens and no matter the results. You only fail when you quit.

Paul reminds us that we have become servants of the gospel by the gift of God’s grace and that we should not grow weary in doing good, because in God’s economy our efforts are not wasted.<sup>2</sup> Remember the joy of your calling and the excitement of the first time you served. Remember that moment when you realized that this is truly what you were created to do.

## LEAD FORWARD

You have to keep going so others can follow. As leaders, we follow Jesus first and help others to do the same. You cannot lead where you are unwilling to go. We must be willing to go wherever Jesus calls us. We must be willing to do whatever he asks us to do. We must be prepared to face every challenge and overcome every obstacle. We must face our fears and act.

### **Follow Your God-Given Dream**

For most of us, the closest any of us will get to a real flesh-and-blood sword-slinging battle is in our dreams. In our sleep,

we embark on outrageous adventures and exciting journeys. At some point, we have all felt the desire to stop sleeping through our dreams and live them in the real world instead. Perhaps you haven't felt that tug in a while. If we ignore it for too long, it will dull into silence. Don't be discouraged; every once in a while, like a Siren, your dream will begin to sing and woo you back.

The Bible is full of women like Deborah, Esther, and Priscilla who heard and answered the invitation to wake up and live their dreams instead of sleeping through them. There are men like Joshua, Ezekiel, and Paul, who answered God's call to live their dreams. I am convinced that in the heart of every man and woman is that yearning to live the quest. It will mean risk and sacrifice. It is not a call that we answer calmly, casually, or in our spare time.

Jesus says that you only really discover what life is all about when you are willing to lose everything you think is important: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24).

Additionally, he says that he is the portal, the doorway, into that new life and true freedom: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:9-10).

### **Seize the Moment**

We walk into new life one day at a time, even one moment at a time. Each individual moment is pregnant with divine potential. We can rarely tell if the moment we are living will be a moment of eternal significance. You can tell when you let a moment of potential slip through your fingers. Many are tempted to spend

their time focusing on the moments they let slip away in the past. They live burdened by longing. Others fall into the temptation to focus on moments yet to come in their daydreams. The only constructive approach is to focus on this very moment. It is the single moment that we have, and it is the only one with which we can do anything.

No matter how mundane this moment seems, the miraculous may be waiting to unfold from within it. In his book *Seizing Your Divine Moment*, Erwin McManus challenges readers to learn to live and embrace every moment as though it were a moment charged with divine power and significance. Each moment is waiting for you to seize it and live it to the fullest.

You may be thinking to yourself. “No, this moment has no potential. This moment is so miserable that nothing good could possibly come from it. I just want to move on as fast as possible.” Thinking this way can keep us from seeing the power of this one moment. It fails to see that God is always with us and always at work. By choosing life and action in every moment, we are prepared to live into our divine and defining moments. As Chip and Dan said, “Defining moments rewire our understanding of ourselves or the world.”<sup>3</sup>

The Greek word from which we derive our English word “moment” is *atomos*.<sup>4</sup> You might recognize the words *atom* and *atomic*, which also come from *atomos*. It is the perfect picture of what hides in a moment. An atom is the smallest and most fundamental unit of an element. You cannot get much smaller than that—a lot like a single moment.

Within the atom, there is a nuclear capacity derived from the rapid release of energy in the fission of heavy atomic nuclei. In these atoms, there is a hidden power disproportionate to their

size. That power is released in a nuclear reaction produced by the process called fission. Fission is the process of rapid multiplication by splitting. When you seize a moment, you initiate the reaction. As Erwin McManus said, “The divine potential of a moment is unlocked by the choices we make. . . . If a moment is a gate through which your divine journey begins, then choice is the key that unlocks the adventure.”<sup>5</sup> Atomic reactions have a catalyst, a trigger. With the choices you make in each moment, you can become that catalyst for a potential earth-shaping explosion of divine power.

### Get Unstuck

Many of us simply fail to take time to enjoy the great and ordinary moments, to embrace them, to live in them genuinely. But there is another reason that many of us live years on end without experiencing the explosive power of a divine moment. It’s because many of us are *trapped* in a single moment from our past that haunts every subsequent moment of our lives. It is so easy to get stuck, but when we do, we fail to enter into what God has for us today.

We can get stuck in all sorts of moments, trying to relive that moment or wishing it had never happened. If we get stuck in past success or failures, we surrender our ability to experience the present or imagine the future. You can’t look forward when you are looking back. We have to let go of the past to step into the future. Many types of moments can trap us. It can be a moment of:

- ☼ pain
- ☼ anger
- ☼ triumph

- ☼ providence or luck (depending on how you look at life)
- ☼ success
- ☼ failure

We can even get stuck in holy moments in the past when God did something great.

## LOUNGING SAUL AND LUNGING JONATHAN

First Samuel 14 tells the story of an epic moment when two men made a choice. One man, King Saul, was stuck in a moment of failure choosing to do nothing, and the other, his son Jonathan, wanted to believe God enough to act. Jonathan seized a moment full of uncertainty and doubt and found God ready to act in that moment.

The army of Israel was camped in a valley. Saul had just heard that his crown was going to be given to another. His enemies, the Philistines, surrounded him, having both the high ground and the numbers. They had previously destroyed the workshops of every blacksmith in Israel, so Saul's army had no weapons. Fighters were deserting his movement in every direction. He was down to 600 men. The entire army only had two swords, his and the one his son Jonathan carried (see 1 Sam. 13:16–22).

Then Jonathan hatched a crazy idea. He told his armor-bearer that they were going to climb the cliffs up to the camp of their enemies. They would poke their heads over the edge of the cliff so that the enemy could see them. If the Philistines responded by daring them to attack, then they would attack. But if the enemy came their way, they would run fast.

Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, “Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6).

Jonathan and his armor-bearer snuck out of camp. When they climbed the cliffs and revealed themselves, the enemy dared them to attack. So they did. Two men, with one sword, killed twenty of their enemies and sent the Philistine camp into chaos. The Philistines turned on each other and started to flee. When Saul received word of what was going on, he dragged himself from his comfy chair under the pomegranate trees. God joined in the fight, and Israel routed their enemy.

Why do some of us shrink back at the moment and some of us step up? There are many reasons.

Saul and Jonathan both believed the promise of God to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Both men were aware of the odds. They both knew that they were the only two with swords among the 600 fighting men. They both knew that God was powerful enough to miraculously defeat their enemies. But Saul lounged under a pomegranate tree while Jonathan risked everything to climb a cliff and taunt his enemies, motivated by his conviction that with God’s presence in his life, he could overcome any odds.

What was the most significant difference between these two men? I believe the main difference between lounging Saul and lunging Jonathan was that Saul was stuck. He was frozen by his fears. He was lost in the moment of his past failure. He could only see all the things they were lacking. From Saul’s perspective, they didn’t have enough men to attack. They didn’t have nearly enough weapons. There was no way they could win.

What was the failure that caused Saul to hesitate? In 1 Samuel 13, it’s told how Saul once rushed into battle without following

God's instruction to take time for worship first. Saul's impatient action led to failure, loss, and a punishment from God. After the army's defeat, Saul hid with those who had not yet abandoned him. That is why he was taking shelter under the pomegranate tree instead of acting on the promises of God.

## EVERY MOMENT A CHOICE

Where are you right now in your service to God? Are you lounging under the pomegranates or acting on God's promises? If you are hesitating, what is holding you back? Are you afraid to step into the future with all of its uncertainty? Are you stuck in a moment of the past, maybe a failure or wound? Do you feel small or ill-equipped? Have you been lazy, lying around under the pomegranate when you should be acting? Hurts to think about, doesn't it?

Every moment we face carries with it a choice. You are making a choice right now to pay attention to my message, ignore it, critique it, or to think about something else entirely, like what you are going to eat for lunch. If every moment is the gate through which we follow God into our divine adventure, then our choices are the keys that unlock that gate. Our choices either move us toward God or steer us away from him into a life marked with worry, doubt, and fears.

C. S Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*:

Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the

capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.

The beauty of the story of the Bible is that God is all about giving us second, third, fifth, and seventy-fifth chances. He is the voice whispering an invitation, again and again, to join in his divine adventure.

Sometimes we hear his voice and we quickly know the right choice. Other times it seems like we have to search for an elusive correct answer in a jungle of all the wrong ones. When you feel overwhelmed by the moment, challenge, or dilemma, consider how Jesus gave Peter another chance.

Peter and Judas had both failed Jesus. They had been unable to live up to their calling and let opportunities slip by them. Judas became so stuck in his moment of failure that he never escaped it. Peter, on the other hand, got up. He owned his failures and seized the second chance that Jesus gave him to be the rock that Jesus had called him to be.

In your moment of truth, what will you choose? Will you decide to seize a second chance and step into your adventure? Have you confused the blessings of God with comfort, security, preferences, or predictability? Are you lounging under the pomegranate tree or lunging to lead your people forward? Have you considered that God's greatest blessing comes when God calls us to be pioneers, explorers, and even conquerors? Will you dare to answer that call? When you do, you will live in the realm of God's activity.

Is your church small? Most are.

Does your church struggle financially? Most do.

Do you need more volunteers and leaders? Of course you do.

Is the church inwardly focused? Plenty of churches are.

Is your church stuck? Most are.

Is your church dying? Many are.

Are the odds stacked against you? Join the club.

The world around us has been radically changing for the last seventy years, but the church in America has consistently failed to keep up. We need to rethink ministry, discipleship, values, and outreach. Rethinking church is not about style. It has to go so much deeper than that, and it will require much more than some newer music or a good coffee bar. Now is our time. You can seize this moment. You can lead your church into a new day. The time is now. Let's get to it. Stop whining. You're smart. Fix it.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What has God been asking you to do? Do you have the courage to take a chance?

2. Like Saul, we all sometimes find ourselves stuck under the pomegranate tree when we should be acting. What has been preventing you from seizing your moment for the kingdom? Name the past successes and failures, complaints, excuses, fear, and lies that have held you captive.

3. You are facing a limited number of problems but an unlimited number of solutions. Therefore, what you really need is not more money, energy, or people. You need an idea, a solution. One idea is all you really need. Pray for wisdom, then make a list of every solution that you can imagine to your most pressing problem.

4. What truth from Scripture reminds you of your calling and God's provision for that calling?

5. If you could try any one thing in your church, without the fear of failure, what would it be? How would you go about executing it? What would it take to start working on it this week?

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CHANGE THE CULTURE  
TO CHANGE THE CHURCH.



There is a tension for any pastor beginning ministry in a new context. The tension is between the desire to maximize the momentum of being the new leader and the need to be patient and listen before making too many changes. My tendency is to make changes quickly, but when we arrived in Goldsboro, I chose to be as patient as I could be. We spent the first couple of months simply trying to assess the culture, environment, systems, and baggage that were present in the church. A church's culture is the soil in which a pastor's ministry is planted. In order to lead the church in the right direction and bring needed change, my first steps involved trying to fully understand the church's culture.

A few months after we arrived, I was sitting in a denominational meeting when, seemingly out of nowhere, an image of a fire hydrant popped into my head. I began to imagine the local church as a fire hydrant spraying living water. It was bringing joy to the community, as people danced, played, and laughed under its overflow. Not having any paper handy, I pulled out my nametag, wrote the word *hydrant* on the back, and returned it to its plastic holder.

After the meeting, I continued thinking about this idea of a hydrant church. I read again in Acts about the early church's regular rhythms and patterns, looking for the activities that defined them as a people. While studying in Acts, I noticed that the disciples waited and prayed in the upper room for ten days after Jesus' ascension. Before they stepped outward in ministry, they spent a significant amount of time in prayer.

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## CHANGE: THE GOOD AND THE BAD

I decided Goldsboro Wesleyan Church should do the same thing. It was impractical for us to gather for ten days straight, so we set aside ten consecutive Sunday evenings to pray and prepare for the time when we, like the first disciples, would step into outwardly focused ministry. For ten Sundays, we prayed for three things—purity, unity, and vision. In hindsight, we probably should have also prayed for the *finances* to pay for the vision.

When the ten weeks were over, we had a plan for moving forward as a church. It wasn't anything earth shattering, but it helped us focus on preparing for guests. It had been years since the church had regularly seen guests, and it's easy to forget how to welcome, engage, and serve guests when the same few people show up to church every time the doors are open. We needed to ready our property, ministries, and people to engage and receive new people.

We started with the low-hanging fruit, which in our case were facilities. Supplies for making improvements to the physical plant are relatively cheap, and in a small church, people are often willing to volunteer their labor. The results may not be professional, but they're affordable. When a church comes together to work on its facilities, it feels like you are taking care of your home. It's like you are getting ready to welcome guests into your living room. The lowest of the low-hanging fruit is almost always a coat of paint. It doesn't cost much, makes everything feel new, and a small group of people can feel like they have accomplished something when they paint together.

We came up with a list of the facilities changes that were needed to get ready for guests. We prioritized these changes, added price

tags, and then presented it to the congregation in the form of a catalog. People could give toward specific projects or more generally to the whole first-stage project. Over the next few months, the hospital-white walls were covered with warm and welcoming tones. We replaced the stained carpet. Playground equipment was repaired and painted. We installed new flooring in every part of the building. Screens were installed. Video equipment was updated and so much more. That little group of fifty people gave \$20,000 above and beyond their regular giving to upgrade the facilities.

Everyone was thrilled with the new digs. After that, the real work was to begin. Riding the wave of momentum created in the positive changes, we started to address problems with various ministries. First, and most off-putting to guests, was the worship service experience. Ours was like riding in an old car with broken seats and engine problems. Everything was a little uncomfortable and outdated, and it gave you whiplash as you held on for the ride.

The typical order of service, which I've experienced in many small churches, was

- ☼ Welcome
- ☼ Hymn
- ☼ Prayer for servicemen and women
- ☼ Song
- ☼ Public prayer requests
- ☼ Prayer
- ☼ Song
- ☼ Public announcements

- ☼ Offering (At this point the children would disappear out of the service to some undefined location to do their own thing.)
- ☼ Special music by a choir of eight to ten singers or a soloist singing with recorded music
- ☼ Preaching
- ☼ Prayer

And then you run away wondering what just happened.

The issues were not for lack of planning. There was a great deal of thought put into each service. Someone prepared a sermon, and someone else chose the songs and selected the special music. An administrative assistant made and printed the bulletins. Someone stood to deliver the announcements at the right time. We invested energy in doing the things our long-time church folks enjoy. But few people thought about how a first-time guest would experience that service. Worse, we never even considered the person who didn't like church.

When I started rethinking the worship service, instead of asking what current church members needed or wanted, I began asking how to engage those who most needed help connecting with God. When I shifted the questions, the design of the entire service started to change. We aimed to provide a place and time for people who knew the ways of the church to welcome and engage with those who did not.

We took things slowly at first and included the board and leaders in the process. We eventually began shifting the style of music and the order of worship. We recruited musicians and scheduled weekly rehearsals. We took steps toward intentionally designing the service to be understandable for outsiders. We

reasoned that we who know Christ must give up something we love so that all those Christ loves can discover his love. After all, Christ gave us a singular new commandment as he sealed his new covenant with the disciples: Jesus commanded us to love others as he loved us. He made room for us in his family. He offered us grace, hope, and all the time in the world to become who he made us to be. The church must be an environment where disciples can offer to others the love we have received.

## THE PAIN OF CHANGE

You probably won't believe what I am about to tell you next. It may be a complete surprise to you, but . . . it didn't work. We had very few guests and immediate pushback.

Some people missed the choir and special music.

Some people missed the bulletins and sharing prayer requests.

Some people missed the old hymns.

Some people missed their pastor wearing a suit and tie.

Some people missed the big wooden pulpit and engraved Communion table.

It took about six months from the time we made the first changes before the conflict rose to a crescendo. It all erupted in a board meeting. Our meetings had become marathon struggles as we poured over and questioned every detail of every action for the last month. During this particular meeting, it became clear that one board member did not appreciate the manner in which some changes had been made. He flat-out called me a liar, scolding me for everything I had done in my first year as the pastor. He said that none of it was working.

The rest of the meeting was a blur. My wife and I were stopped in our tracks that night. I think that if my family hadn't just bought a house, I would have resigned the next morning and moved on without regret.

If you have ever led an effort to revitalize or turn around a declining or dying church, then you are likely familiar with the pain and difficulty I am describing. We could probably write a few books on our war stories. Most of our stories would focus on something crazy those people did or how those people reacted to the changes we made. But, if we're honest, we rarely consider our own mistakes. There are all sorts of reasons why revitalizing is tricky, but we must remember that it is never just *their* fault.

Unquestionably, churches tend to turn inward with time, with key members trying to protect what they have from people who might mess it up. Many people take comfort in a church that remains the same, even as the world is rapidly changing around them. The irony is that every board at every struggling church tells every interviewing pastor that they are ready for something new. They say they are prepared for change. Can I let you in on a secret? They are not ready for change or anything new. I know what they told you. I also believe they were completely sincere in their convictions. They imagine change means doing the same things better. Even when people truly want change, they rarely know ahead of time the cost of that change. Then, when people see the price tag, the sticker shock sends them into an outrage. How could anyone expect a church to pay that price?

## ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

Many church leaders blame their people for the church's struggles. Have you ever started a sentence with, "My people would never . . ."? Maybe you are tempted to say to yourself, "My church will never embrace new music," or "My people won't go to small groups." The easy way to excuse our lack of leadership is to blame the people we lead. Anytime we catch ourselves wanting to say, "They won't . . .," we need to stop ourselves. Part of leadership is the art and skill of persuading people to do what they don't want to do right now but what will lead them to what they want most. Great leaders will push others to do something they don't want to do so that they can become the best version of themselves. So instead of saying, "The people in my church won't . . .," we need to recognize what we have led our people to do. Your church is made up of what leaders have created and what leaders have allowed, nothing more and nothing less.

As leaders, we need to accept the bulk of the responsibility for the predicament of our struggling or stuck churches. The church is in its current situation, good or bad, because of how its leaders have led. There will always be resistance to change. The enemy will always find a weakness to exploit to attack the work of the kingdom. There are still difficult people in every group or church. That does not excuse the things we do as leaders that allow the status quo to continue or that bring unnecessary pain. We need to count the cost. Every change comes with a price.

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## GAINING AND LEVERAGING CREDIBILITY

For the leader, part of the price we pay is a piece of our accumulated credibility. We store up credibility like change in our pocket. A lack of sufficient credibility often undercuts the decisions or changes we make as leaders in the church. Without credibility, nothing we try will get off the ground. No one will follow an untrusted leader.

We have to have credibility before we can spend it. When we first step into a new role as a leader, the congregation may entrust us with a small stack of credibility coins to use. Many leaders blow through that asset pretty quickly; other leaders use it wisely over their first year. Still others never use that credibility. It sits in their pocket so long it loses its value.

In any ministry setting, there are usually some things that need to change quickly. If left unchanged, they will become more significant challenges in the future. Those are the areas where you'll want to invest the credibility coins you've been gifted. Other changes can wait until you've earned more trust. A discerning leader reads the situation and measures which changes and risks are urgent and which ones can wait. The more desperate the situation, the further your initial change will go. Leaders need to keep a close watch on their credibility account. They need to know where they stand with the church, other leaders, the board, and critical individuals. If leaders overestimate their credibility and attempt to make changes they cannot afford, they are setting up themselves and the church for pain.

Everything you do and everything that happens in your church is adding or subtracting from your credibility. Every decision or change

has at least two points of impact on credibility. First, you pay the price at the beginning, which is directly related to the amount of risk involved. Then you gain or lose based on the outcome of that decision or change. New leaders should choose wisely and expect the return to take longer than you might wish.

There are several ways for leaders to earn or lose credibility. The first way we gain credibility is through our character. Your character will be the most significant contributor to your credibility or the biggest hole in your pocket. Every time you are truthful, apologize, or make a sacrifice, you earn credibility. Every time you dodge responsibility, avoid conflict, or stretch the truth, that hole in your pocket widens. So, are you trustworthy? Do you share credit and take the blame? Do you do what you say you will do? Do you take advantage of your position for gain, even small benefits? Do you put others and the church before your agenda? Do you submit to the will of God? Your character has a tremendous impact on your credibility.

The second way we earn credibility is through relationships. You have to be willing to step toward people. You have to listen with a compassionate heart. You believe in what is possible for people. You **exaggerate** their successes and minimize their failures. When you value people, your credibility grows in leaps and bounds. You must walk beside people instead of preaching at them. We trust a guide by our side, while a sage on the stage is always suspect. Do you step toward people or keep your distance? Do you listen for understanding or to prepare a response? Do you care about things that others care about? Are you there for people when it matters most? Quality relationships build and enhance credibility.

The third way we earn credibility is with competence. You have to do your job well, or at least demonstrate a willingness to grow

and improve. When you deliver results, results deliver trust. Can you be trusted to do what you say you can and will do? When you prove yourself, such as when a change you create works, you gain tremendous credibility. When it fails, you lose more than your initial investment.

Credibility is such a tricky and vital part of leadership. If you lose or spend too much of it, it can be hard to earn back. Once you have it, though, credibility will fuel powerful momentum and ongoing trust.

Here are a few tips for building credibility.

1. Remember people's names and their kids' names.
2. Apologize quickly and honestly, and take a little more blame than you think you deserve.
3. Do the jobs that no one else wants to do, and never ask someone to do something you aren't willing to do yourself.
4. Operate as often as possible in your strengths while managing your weaknesses.
5. Look for small risks with disproportionate payoffs at first.
6. Commit to getting better at one aspect of your job each year.

## PERSPECTIVE, PATIENCE, AND PERSEVERANCE

To create new life in a church where it has been diminished, we need perspective, patience, and perseverance. The three Ps are essential to seeing revitalization in our churches. These three give us the staying power when things get tough. They allow us to see things others miss. They give us calm in the in-between times when

things don't work yet. They free us from the tyranny of going fast when we need to go far.

### Perspective

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines *perspective* as "the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance. The interrelation in which a subject or its parts are mentally viewed."<sup>1</sup> If we are going to lead any group through the transformation process of becoming all that God created them to be, we need perspective. We need to see things in reality, in relative importance, and from the mental view of others. We need the ability to see the church as it is in reality, today. We need to be able to see what is producing results, what is hurting our ministry, and what is not working but not hurting us yet either.

Leaders must find ways to acquire the perspectives of long-time insiders and that of outsiders. We need the ability to see how changes will affect each of the groups involved. We need the perspective to see our community, how we fit into the world around us, and the opportunities to have the best impact.

Leaders are more than optimists; they believe in the impossible and have deep hope. They hope for the best, act on wild dreams, and see what they want to be real. Leaders can, therefore, lose sight of how others see things. It can become frustrating when we aren't sharing our perspectives with others. Communication—mainly, asking good questions and listening—is key to gaining great perspective. A driven leader will get bogged down in times of failure or disappointment. These color the leader's perspective and drain their optimism until he or she can no longer see any way forward. The leaders with the right point of view will save themselves a lot of pain.

## Patience

Patience is a virtue, so they say. In Scripture, we are instructed to pray for daily bread, a way out of temptation, and forgiveness. We are not told to pray for patience. It is part of the fruit of the Spirit naturally growing in us. As we are inhabited by the Spirit of God, he gradually wrestles control of our desires away from our sinful nature. Patience is developed, like any virtue, in the opportunities and situations that require it. I hate those situations and opportunities. I fuss at drivers on the road going the speed limit or doing something stupid. I choose the shortest line at the store or avoid going into the store at all when possible. I want to eat a salad, step on the scale, and instantly see results. I want to plant a garden today and harvest vegetables tomorrow.

Life doesn't work that way. Ministry doesn't either. Waiting for the right time to act is excruciating. It can feel like the harvest of seeds planted in ministry will never come. Patience is the virtue of a leader. When everyone else is rushing around, fretting about the changes not working yet, the leader can breathe a sigh of faith. The leader knows not to overestimate what will be accomplished in this month or year. The leader also knows not to underestimate what will be achieved in a decade or two. By contrast, impatient leaders can ruin themselves, carry burdens not theirs to shoulder, and cause unnecessary strain on churches. A little patience goes a long way.

## Perseverance

Perseverance is a priceless commodity to the leader. Galatians 6:9 reminds us to persevere with the confidence that, at the right time, we will reap a harvest of the things we have sown. It doesn't mean perseverance for a little while. We are talking about

persevering without exception. This kind of commitment makes a real difference. Leaders advance without exception, regardless of whether they win, lose, or draw at the moment. Andy Andrews wrote in *The Seven Decisions*:

I will persist without exception. I am a person of great faith. In Jeremiah, my Creator declares, “For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (29:11 NIV). From this day forward, I will claim a faith in the certainty of my future. Too much of my life has been spent doubting my beliefs and believing my doubts. No more! I have faith in my future. I do not look left or right. I look forward. I can only persist.<sup>2</sup>

Perseverance is the only real pathway to the success that we desire in the work of ministry. With perspective and patience, we persevere because we know the payoff will be worth it. Too many give up on great vision when the predictable difficulties arise. Perseverance anticipates the pain and recognizes that the reward is always on the other side of pain.

Many leaders get in their own way by trying to do too much. We wear people out and push them beyond their limits by trying to get everything done all at once. We change too much too quickly. We do more than is sustainable or wise. Focus on quantity leads to split focus and poor quality in any of our efforts. Mediocrity is frustrating and disappointing for everyone.

Most churches that I work with or leaders I meet from struggling churches are trying to do too much. Without a clear sense of vision and focused strategy, we grab anything we think might

help. We end up with a schizophrenic collection of old and new ministries all running on half the money and a tenth of the volunteers they need to be successful. We must choose what is most important for us to do and focus on what we can do with excellence. It is okay to let other people do everything else.

## CULTURE WINS

Many pastors have the image of a dream church in their mind. They spend years and multiple assignments trying to figure out how to turn the church they have into the church they want. In order to lead lasting change, we need to consider the culture of our churches.

Every church has its own culture already. It includes the church's values, beliefs, and practices, along with its sense of calling and vision. Together, these five components form—and then cyclically reinforce—the culture that exists within an organization. A wise leader or pastor will take the time necessary to evaluate and understand the culture of a potential assignment even before accepting the position. Once the culture of a church is understood, the pastor can discern whether or not his or her values, beliefs, and ministry priorities are a good fit for that culture. Admittedly, pastors may be called by God to a culture in which they do not fit, because God is calling them to transform that culture.

While finding your perfect fit is an ideal situation, it is not always possible. Many pastors accept the call they are given. It is not uncommon for a pastor to sense God directing them to a place and people only to find out later how dysfunctional and

toxic the culture is. In such instances, it can take a solid year or more of immersion to get a full picture of a church's culture. Until you really understand the culture, though, it is impossible to truly discern priorities and direction.

Often, pastors who run into roadblocks in their revitalization efforts do so because they failed to take into consideration the existing culture within their church. Part of what happened in our revitalization failure was the failure to consider the current cultural values in our church. Dysfunctional patterns existed in decision making and leadership choices, and we did not see them at first. There was a sort of codependency between the people and the staff. The previous pastor needed to be needed, and the church loved that he was always running around after them. It made them feel important and it validated his needs. There was a belief that things did not need to change. There was little value placed on ministry to the next generation. The church was relying on what once worked, instead of what could work today or might work in the future. Care for the facilities was an afterthought and a delayed expense.

If I had understood more about how things were, I could have taken a different path to reshape the culture. Instead, I focused on vision and strategy but left the rest of the church's culture unchanged. I paid the price of a failed revitalization. We must understand the culture of the church we serve. If we do not understand the culture, our vision is doomed to failure. Sam Chand wrote, "Culture—not vision or strategy—is the most powerful factor in any organization. It determines the receptivity of staff and volunteers to new ideas, unleashes or dampens creativity, builds or erodes enthusiasm, and creates a sense of pride or deep discouragement about working or being involved there."<sup>3</sup>

If pastors want to bring real and lasting change to their church, it begins underneath the surface. It starts with something more significant than vision, more impacting than strategy, and more important than the programs or outreach. It takes more than a heart for God and your people. You have to address the culture of your church. There are many questions and tools out there that can help us understand the culture in the church we serve. But if we fail to ask the right questions before we jump into change, we are dooming ourselves to pain and likely failure.

In *Dirt Matters*, Jim Powell explains that we can apply the principles in Jesus' parable of the soil found in Mark 4:3–20 to the church. He writes, "The key variable in this parable is—the soil. It's not about the sower. It's all about the dirt. Jesus tells us point-blank that it is important to be sure that our soil is 'good.' Why? Dirt matters. It really does matter."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus explained that if the soil is rocky, the sun will scorch anything that tries to grow, and the shallow roots will not be able to provide the needed nutrients. If the ground is hard and packed like the path, the birds will come to steal the seed. Nothing will grow because nothing takes root. If the soil is full of weeds and thorns, they will choke out anything that tries to grow. It won't be able to get enough water, nutrients, or sunlight to sustain it through the tough days. But if the soil is good, if it is tilled up and turned over, and if it is full of the right nutrients, then anything planted in this soil will grow.

In the right soil, anything can grow. In the wrong soil, nothing will grow for long. It is the same with the culture of the church. If the soil of the church's culture is terrible, it doesn't matter what vision you plant, what strategy you develop, or what programs you try. Your harvest is determined by the quality of the

soil, or culture, in your church. If it is toxic, nothing will work. If it is somewhat dysfunctional, your harvest is limited. If it is healthy and developed, then you will see a crop ten-, twenty-, or a hundredfold.

Our churches are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting right now, and that design is made up of what we as leaders create or allow over time. It is what makes up the content of our soil. Maybe you are new to your church. Perhaps you feel like the culture was so entrenched you haven't had any impact on it. I am convinced that once a leader has been somewhere five to seven years, much of the church culture adapts to the beliefs and values of the leader. It is on us as leaders. It is our responsibility. Even if you are unwilling to accept any responsibility for the current situation, you can and must take responsibility for the future of your church's culture. You can recognize that God has called you to this church, in this place, at this time to lead it into his preferred future. His promised land for your church awaits. It starts in shaping your culture.

## FIVE COMPONENTS OF CULTURE

Five components have the potential to shape the culture of any organization. In a healthy culture, these five elements work together to create the fertile soil in which ministry can grow. Sometimes we are tempted to think that the first thing we need to do is get people into the doors of our church. That is important at the right time. At the wrong time, you only increase your rejection rate. You only get one chance at a first impression, and most people form a lasting impression about your church within

the first few minutes. The more time people spend with you, the greater the chance that they will experience God and receive the grace of Jesus. Therefore, we must get the house in order before we push to get new people in the doors. Adding more people to a sinking ship only makes it plunge faster. We begin to deal with the real health and potential of a church when we start to address the culture.

We will look at the contributing components of culture as five concentric circles, each pointing to the deeper layers. We will move from outward behaviors to vision, calling, values, and beliefs. While the transformation of culture involves the work of graceful leadership in every circle, we make our job more effective and fruitful by connecting everything back to the deepest layer of beliefs.

## Behaviors

Your standardized behaviors are the things you do that are visible from the outside. It includes everything your guests see, hear, sense, feel, and experience when they attend your church. It includes anything of which you might say, “That is the way we do things around here.” While behaviors do not reveal everything about the church, they are the outward expression of everything that is under the surface. You can tell a lot about the quality of a watermelon by examining the rind, and you can tell a lot about the quality of the church by examining what the church does repeatedly.

As guests approach your church, what they see makes a difference. It may begin with what they see on your website and social media or when they first set foot on your property. They instinctively ask themselves questions about your church. Are your facilities attractive, well maintained, and designed to meet the needs of every part of the family? Is the parking sufficient and easy to navigate?

Do people walk into a formal foyer or to café-type area? How is your building decorated? Is the worship center or sanctuary dark or bright? Do you use stage lighting and visual elements in worship? Do you sit in chairs, or pews, or couches, or around tables? How are people dressed? Are there symbols in the building?

Behaviors also include the things we hear. Are guests spoken to and shown where to go? Are there sounds of lively conversation, or is it silent? Is the music live or canned? Is the sound clear, crisp, and of high quality? Is there a lot of noise during the service? Is there laughter of children running and playing in and around your building? Is the sermon designed to connect with them where they are? Is the language academic, churchy, or does the church use common, everyday vernacular to communicate?

Behaviors include the things that people feel. What emotions does your worship experience generate? Do people feel accepted and cared for personally? Are they included and welcomed? Is it a friendly environment for outsiders or just insiders? Do people express emotion in prayer and worship? Are there security measures that make parents and kids feel safe? Does it feel like the church is ready for guests? Can your guests envision themselves participating? Does it feel like family or community, or a sea of faces?

Behaviors envelop all the other things we do as a ministry or regular activity. Some of them we do intentionally, some we do without thinking, and some we may have little or no control over—and people notice them all. It includes our outreach, our discipleship, and the style of our worship. It consists of the types of cars in the parking lot, the signage, missions, celebrations, teams or committees, leadership development, volunteer involvement and recruitment, and assimilation. It includes financial

management and communication. The list can go on and on. We need to take time to identify all the things that we do. In further steps, we focus on how we do them and why we do them.

Unfortunately, behavior management has often been the preferred method of both disciple making and church transformation. We can certainly address the behaviors of a person or an organization, but unless we go deeper into the beliefs, values, callings, and vision that create those behaviors, we will not see real and lasting change in the life of the church. Behaviors answer the question, *What do we do?* The deeper circles of cultural components are the answers to *How?* and *Why?* Before we can manage and shape the behaviors of our church, we have to define and communicate the vision clearly.

## Vision

George Barna defines vision in ministry as “a clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and . . . based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances.”<sup>5</sup> Vision is grounded in the identity and culture of the church. It points to the best possible future for the church as it serves in the kingdom of God.

Vision flows from our *why* questions and informs what we do as a church. Vision is a unique picture of what we should and must do. It reveals how a particular organization or church will answer the call of God based on its values and beliefs. Discerning vision will take time and effort. It will take knowing your people and organization at its very core. It requires that we do the work of understanding why our church exists, why it is in this particular place, and why it has been doing the things it has been doing.

Some leaders are creative, gifted, and called as visionary leaders. These leaders seem to be able to reach out into the future and see things that could be possible. In many situations, God speaks to these visionary leaders with a picture of the future he has for the church.

However, not all leaders, even point leaders, are visionary leaders. These leaders are gifted in other ways and should not feel pressure to go off on the mountain somewhere and stay there until God gives them a vision. There are times when a group of leaders is best equipped to discern vision together. Together they read the situation, the church, the community. Together, they name the church's shared beliefs and values. Together, they receive from God the picture of where he wants to take the church. This method can be particularly fruitful in small churches or when the leader is new.

Whether the lead pastor receives the vision alone or shares the process with others, it has to start with God and spread among his people. The lead pastor becomes the champion and chief communicator of the vision. In all of this, it is critical is to recognize that God is the source of our imagination. He is the architect and sustainer of our churches. It starts with God and is shared through the entire organization for its impact to have its full effect.

Inexperienced leaders often attempt to smash a new vision into an old culture. This approach rarely works; it is new wine in old wineskins. Both the vision and culture are left ruined, and there is a lot of wasted time, effort, and resources.

At Hydrant, before we shut down and relaunched, we had a vision of becoming a church that was like a hydrant. I envisioned a church that was a valve of living water to which people could connect, be filled with the Spirit of God, and overflow into the community as missionaries for the kingdom of God. I first shared

the vision a year before things came to the point of implosion. We spoke the vision and talked about being a hydrant church. We described the picture with clarity and inspiration. People loved the vision. However, it blew up in our faces when the vision and the culture clashed. The new vision named behavior changes but didn't flow from existing values and beliefs. We ran into a significant amount of conflict. To our people, it felt like the vision was violating nonnegotiable values and beliefs. By failing to address the beliefs, values, and calling first, with patience and persistence, we did not prepare the church for the vision to stick.

Vision is compelling when it flows out of adequately aligned beliefs, values, and calling. It becomes the rallying cry of our people. It brings us together in unity and purpose. It defines with clarity what we will do and what we will not do. It informs decision making. It focuses the finances. Vision helps us to stop treading water and gets the church swimming forward in an intentional direction.

## Calling

Most people are comfortable talking about men and women called into ministry or some other vocation. We can describe a sense of calling on our lives based on many factors. God calls our churches in much the same way.

No individual church is required to reach everyone in a community. No church can meet every need in the community, no matter how large the church becomes. We need churches that understand their unique calling in their community. God reveals his kingdom in the diversity of calling and efforts.

In discovering the calling upon the church, we transition to answering the question of *why*. Why can't we stay here, and why

are we going to this new place? Why are we doing it this way? Fredrick Buechner provided a useful working description of calling that is as valuable for individuals as it is for churches.

There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.

By and large, a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (*a*) that you need most to do and (*b*) that the world most needs to have done. . . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”<sup>6</sup>

Buechner identifies a massive challenge for churches when he writes that there are “all different kinds of voices calling you.” In the church, we have too quickly fallen into the temptation of a new vision every year. A pastor or leader goes to a conference and hears a unique voice calling them to a new method or ministry. A leader visits a church on vacation and hears a new voice calling their church to do some great thing. A small group of demanding people asks for some group or ministry, and another voice is introduced to the mix. The pastor reads a book about some great new discipleship ministry and hears another voice. The culture calls for moral compromise, and the pastor hears a voice calling for relevance. When filling out denominational reports on attendance, giving, and ministry, the pastor hears another voice calling out for productivity. The cries are deafening, especially for pastors and leaders. The voices call us in a hundred directions and fill every second of silence. They make it almost impossible to hear

and discern the voice of God among the voices calling us to both good things and compromises.

We need leaders with an ability to hear the voice of God for the churches they lead and the courage to lead the church to answer that call with laser-focused attention.

Sometimes, God calls us like he called Moses. He puts a burning bush in our path and calls us to lead a people out of bondage. Sometimes, Jesus calls us like Paul. He sees us going about our spiritual business and knocks us off our feet. He shows us how misguided and arrogant we have been and points us in a new direction. He sends us to spread the kingdom to the corners of the world where it has yet to reach. Sometimes, he calls us like he did the disciples on the road after the resurrection. He walks with us. He unfolds Scripture to us, revealing something we have missed. He warms our hearts and reveals himself.

Many times, it is much more mundane than that. We feel a burden weighing on us that we cannot escape. Everywhere we look, we see a need that breaks our hearts. Anger boils within us every time we contemplate the problem. God often calls in much more ordinary and everyday experiences. There is something sacred happening in the ordinary moments that inspire us.

Upon calling Moses, God asked him, “What is in your hand?” All he had was a stick—*a stick!* Next time you think that you have nothing to offer God to use, remember Moses offered him a stick. When you feel like your small church is under-resourced, remember the stick. God used a stick in Moses’ hand to defeat every power and god of Egypt. He used that stick to lead Israel to freedom, and that stick split the Red Sea. Moses used that stick to bring water from the stone. Just as he asked Moses, God often asks us, “What’s in your hand?”

God has placed resources at your disposal. His Spirit has gifted each of us. He has made us with strengths that have been growing from the time we were born. He has been writing a story in each of us that integrates every twist, turn, success, and failure. He has burdened our hearts with the needs around us. He has given us insights and opportunities. These are some of the ways he reveals his calling to us. He gives us everything we need to do everything he asks us to do. Sometimes, he asks and then he gives. Usually, he asks and then reveals that he has already given us what we need. God has put what we need in our churches too. There are gifts, resources, strengths, opportunities, stories, burdens, and sticks that God has given to each church to reveal his calling. A friend of mine likes to say that you can only cook with what's in the pantry. So, what's in your pantry?

Who is your church called to reach? The answer is not *everyone*. It is more likely limited to your neighborhood. It can be a segment of your area. Maybe he has designed you to reach the marginalized and forgotten seniors of your community. Perhaps God is calling you to focus on the young families, boomers, or refugees, or to connect with the LGBTQ+ community. Most of the churches in your city are designed to reach the same group of people. Most churches are designed to reach *out* to no one. They are designed to assimilate people of the same race and socioeconomic background who are already interested in church. What about those who have been hurt by the church? What about those who wrote off the church a long time ago? What about those who are antagonistic toward the church or those to whom the church has been hostile? If you want to connect with the people with whom no one around you is connecting, you will have to do things no one around you is doing. You won't be able to figure out what those things are until you figure out whom God is calling your church to reach.

I am using the term *calling*, but others have used the term *mission* for what I have just described. I have chosen to use the word *calling* to bring a little more specificity to the concept. I believe that every church has been given a shared mission from Jesus in the Great Commandment's instructions and the Great Commission's directions. However, *calling* takes it one step further in specifying to whom and for what we are called to live out that mission.

## Values

Our calling is often revealed in our values. Values are the bottom line of what we care about as an organization. Aubrey Malphurs writes, "The most important element of any corporate, congregational, or denominational culture . . . is the value system. . . . A ministry based on clearly articulated core values drives a fixed stake in the ground that says to all, 'This is what we stand for; this is what we are all about; this is who are; this is what we can do for you.'"<sup>7</sup>

Values are the guiding principles behind why we do what we do. Values provide direction, influence conduct, define appropriate behavior, focus activity, and guide mission and vision. Values take root when we embrace emotional ownership over something that we believe, and that belief takes emotional ownership over us. When it comes to a church's culture, it may be that not every current value is biblical or helpful. There are times when distorted beliefs take root and infect the church. The lies lead to valuing wrong ideals, like valuing a method over the message until a church sacrifices its witness to the next generation.

Paul spent a lot of ink trying to argue against a distorted belief leading to dangerous values and disruptive behaviors. Paul was sure that, in his last moments with the apostles, Jesus inaugurated

a new covenant that made the old covenant, well, . . . old. However, there were those in the church attempting to saddle new Gentile Christians with the burdens of the law. It was not unlike much of the church today. Paul was writing and teaching that Christ fulfilled and thus ended the old covenant with all of its laws and commands. Christ initiated a new covenant that is open to every person and obligates believers with the single command to love like Jesus in ways that Jesus loved. Paul connected every instruction back to the love and example of Christ. Paul recognized the destructive power of a distorted value and sought to realign the church's values with the truth.<sup>8</sup> Leaders who hope to revitalize or restart in the church today will have to do the same thing.

Leaders must understand the existing values of the church they serve. Leaders must assess the theological and missional merit of those values and discern the values that need to be realigned or replaced, because the church's system of values exists and is determining every action the church takes, whether anyone realizes it or not. You cannot ignore this process. Do not take for granted that the church values what you as the pastor value. Also, do not assume that the church values what they say they value. You have to look deep within the actions, vision, and calling to discern these values. We always do what is important to us, regardless of what we say is important to us. Values will be worked out in actions. If a leader neglects the work of assessing and developing appropriate core values, it leads only to division and the leader's likely demise in that church.

There are some key questions that we can ask to help us acquire a sense of what the church values: What has been important to us over time? What gets our people excited every time? What do our people love to do together? Looking at current behaviors

and ministries reveals values. Explore recent activities, not what you or someone else hopes the church will do. You are looking for existing values at this point. Are there any sacred cows in the church? Is there anything that would be nearly impossible to change? What do we spend money on every year? What triggers a fight in the church? What do we talk about a lot?

As you develop a list of existing values for your church, you will need to take some time to review this list one more time. You need to discern if each named value is an actual value or an aspirational value. For example, we can say we value children's ministry. But if we give our kids leftover money, no leadership, and the most neglected rooms in the building, then we don't truly value kids' ministry. If we say we value relevance, but haven't taught anything on finances, parenting, or relationships this year, then we don't really value relevance.

Lastly, it can be helpful to develop a hierarchy of our values to help in decision making in times when our values collide. For example, you have a singer in the band who is under-committed and not performing well. Your values include participation as a way of valuing people and the use of their individual gifts. You also value excellence. Which value wins out in the decision about how to handle this situation? The hierarchy of values can help guide this decision.

Having discerned and observed the church's existing values, you can begin the process of identifying aspirational values. You can start to transition to new values that better reflect what you really believe. This process requires much vision casting, teaching, coaching, and time. You do not merely transform the values of an organization by hanging them on the wall and printing them on a handout. Just because you have them printed on a plaque doesn't

mean that anyone values those things. You have to teach new values and gain the buy-in of others patiently. You have to discuss and implement them one decision, one behavior, at a time. You have to teach every new participant the values. Over time they take root in the church.

When the church has a clear system of strong, unified values, it begins to unlock potential and create all kinds of benefits:

1. Unifies the church around a single purpose
2. Defines what is unique about the church
3. Clarifies how those joining can get involved
4. Identifies what matters most in any situation
5. Speeds up decision making
6. Inspires loyalty and gives credibility to leaders
7. Sustains the focus and fuels the momentum of the church
8. Defines what success looks like for the church

Personally, or organizationally, we will typically have somewhere between three and seven core values.

## **Beliefs**

Individuals and churches have many beliefs about God, the church, people, culture, community, outreach, discipleship, ministry, pastors, elders, deacons, volunteers, giving, and Bigfoot! Malphurs defines a belief as “a conviction or opinion that a person holds to be true about the church and its world as based on limited proof.”<sup>9</sup> Our beliefs may nor may not be consistent. The ideas that we act on become our values, but there are all sorts of things that we believe that we may not act on all the time. Some beliefs are more important to us than others. Some are at

the core of how we form our worldview. When the events of our lives shake the different levels of our beliefs, it produces various reactions in us. For example, when we find out the Easter Bunny is a fraud, most of us aren't shaken much. When we find out a pastor we respected and trusted is a fraud, many of us question the church and our faith.

Every organization has a set of shared beliefs that influences what the church values, discerns as a calling, and does. For example, if a church believes that the world has abandoned God and that the church exists to call the world back to right action and behavior, it may sense a prophetic calling and proclaim condemnation to the world. If a church believes God is at work calling the world forward with love to embrace the marginalized, it will value people and sense a call to approach the world with grace and acceptance and patience. Denominational interpretations of Scripture, personal convictions, and shared experiences all work together to shape the church's shared beliefs.

If we are going to see a healthy new life develop in our churches, we need to address the beliefs of the church. We need to see the church fall in love with Jesus and the sin-sick souls he loves. We need to help the church believe again in the mission of making and multiplying disciples. We need to see the church love well and love first, as a servant to all. Only this will lead the alienated back to the Savior of the world. We need to help the church reassert the place of Scripture in our churches.

We have to determine and teach what the church really believes and does not believe about the Bible, the church, worship, discipleship, women, men, roles, appropriate decor, sin, acceptance, love, truth, mission, outreach, evangelism, kids, teens, families, seniors, etc. The one who defines beliefs directs the church.

Aubrey Malphurs gives us “Ten Reasons Beliefs are Important”:<sup>10</sup>

1. They reveal what a church does and doesn't believe.
2. They are key to effective or ineffective ministry.
3. They are vital to accomplishing change in the church.
4. They explain the presence or absence of core beliefs.
5. They are the basis for people's expectations of the church.
6. They guide the church in problem solving.
7. They help people make sense of the church world.
8. They provide people with mental and emotional stability.
9. They may determine a leader's “fit” in the church.
10. They are often the product of past success.

To change the church is not to change the vision, the mission, or the programs. Changing the name, music, or decor will not change the church. It takes a committed and determined leader with patience, perseverance, and perspective who is willing to devote themselves to the transformation of the culture of the church. It will take an effective leader around five years to transform a culture. It takes a great leader at least three, and most leaders need seven to ten years to change the culture. So, go slow, be wise, stay consistent. You will be able to go far with God, and that will be much better than going fast on your own. Take it from someone who has done both.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you currently lack the perspective, patience, or persistence that you need to lead your church through transformation? What can you do to develop in that area?

2. What are some of the distinguishing characteristics of your current church culture? Being as specific as possible, list the distinguishing behaviors, vision, calling, values, and beliefs that shape the everyday life of your church.

3. Does your list of characteristics reflect a biblically informed, healthy, outwardly focused community with missional faith?

4. Are there currently any behaviors, components of vision, calling, values, or beliefs that are inhibiting or even preventing fruitful ministry in your church?



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LEAD THE CHURCH INTO THE  
PREFERRED FUTURE.



I couldn't leave. I was stuck . . . I mean, committed. I had to find a solution.

I had a great idea, an experiment of sorts. With just sixty people attending our church, we would go to two worship services, with one continuing the old way and one using the new approach. This way, everyone could hate church. We decided to conduct this experiment for the summer and see how things went. By the end of the summer, something would break and we would know what we needed to do to move forward.

I didn't know that I would be what broke.

Some people ask, "Why didn't you do a blended service and find a compromise?" I believe that some things don't mix well. In most situations, we brew up something like bad coffee, neither hot nor cold. You end up in this mushy middle land where you have no sure footing, real identity, clear strategy, or intentional direction. No one is happy, and no one likes it much.

As I look back on that summer, I think I may have blocked out parts of that time. I am sure some good things were happening. I am sure there are things worth celebrating from those months. I cannot remember any of them, though. It can be a powerful experience for a church to grow and add services to reach more people. It is an entirely other experience to start a service to separate or create additional styles in a disunified church. We pushed ahead with this plan because we had a purpose and goal in mind. We were going to figure out the direction our church needed to take in worship, one way or another. We accomplished our mission, just not the way I thought it would happen.

In July of 2013, I was more defeated, desperate, and confused than I had ever been. I couldn't handle preaching to an almost empty room—twice each Sunday—much longer. I was just *over* the whole

experiment. If the people of this church didn't want to change for the sake of their community, I wasn't going to make them. We could put on the sign, "Go to hell, we don't care," because, in my mind, that was how we were acting. I don't recommend this to anyone, but that is an actual direct quote from a sermon. I was ready to knock the dust from my Converse and go on to the next city.

That summer, I took a few people who wanted to get away to a leadership conference hosted by **newhope** church in Durham, North Carolina. The times of music inspired me. I was encouraged by the speakers and the breakouts. The conference began to release hope and imagination in me that had been stifled for months, maybe years. It created a new possibility in the minds of the other leaders as well.

Then came the session that set things in motion. It would change the church I was leading forever, not to mention change me. Kyle Ray preached from 1 Kings 19. He camped on that moment when the prophet Elijah called the people of God to a decision: *Choose. Who are you going to serve? Choose. Who are you going to be?* There will be moments in life when we are confronted with reality and forced into a decision. I knew it was time to stop playing both sides of the fence. We needed to decide who we were going to be as a church.

I preached a similar message that Sunday, inviting our people to decide for themselves who they were going to be. I knew that nothing could change until our hearts broke. We could not turn toward our neighbors unless we re-turned toward Jesus. We spontaneously baptized eleven people that morning—some for the first time and some who remembered their previous baptism. The board and I invited anyone to join us at a meeting the next night.

I shared my heart with the board that night. I shared the idea of a fresh start. Several years before this time, I had heard about large churches that would absorb smaller churches by shutting them down and restarting them. I figured we could do the same thing ourselves. I suggested that we consider shutting down the church and restarting as a new church. I suggested the name Hydrant Church. That name was a way that I had described who we wanted to be for the last year.

I can remember sharing my heart from a place of hope, but I was uncertain what the outcome would be. I called us to decide on who we were going to be as a church. The church had waffled and played around for too many years. I explained that the church was free to go back to the same old things it had done for years, or we could imagine and try something new. I assured these leaders that I didn't have all the answers and certainly didn't have any guarantees. If they were willing to give it a shot, I would help us rethink our path forward. What happened next caught me off guard.

I fully expected the decision to get delayed, debated, and discussed, perhaps even until Jesus returned. Instead, Al Johnson spoke. Al Johnson was a man who did not talk a lot, but when he did speak, everyone listened. Al Johnson had built the church's building and quietly kept it afloat for years. He had more influence and credibility than anyone else in that room. Al had also seen what was happening over the last several years in some of the church plants in our area. That day, he used his influence on my behalf.

Al said, "I think it is time." He continued, "It is time. I move that we say goodbye to Goldsboro Wesleyan Church and become Hydrant Church." Time stood still; it got so quiet you could hear

people breathing. Someone followed, “I second.” A bewildered board member asked, “How would this work?”

I responded, “I am not completely sure. What I suggest is to meet again to finalize a plan should we pass this motion. I believe it starts with us taking a Sunday to celebrate the people who have made this church wonderful. We celebrate all the successes and victories. Then we say our goodbyes to the church as we have known it and go dark for a little bit of time. No services or ministries. In the meantime, I can meet with each family to explain what’s happening. We will work to solidify the outward-focused vision and strategy for launching Hydrant Church. We will need to make necessary changes to ministries and facilities to accommodate the new strategy. At the right time, we launch.”

I heard someone say, “Let’s vote.”

It was unanimous. We voted to close Goldsboro Wesleyan Church and set a date for August 2013. I don’t know if I was more excited, exhausted, or terrified. I knew God had been in that meeting room. I knew I was getting a chance to do something ridiculous. I just knew God was going to do something big.

## OUR CONVICTIONS

I stayed up most of the night dreaming, praying, and scribbling notes.

As I dreamed and prayed, I frantically wrote every thought that came to my mind. Some beliefs started to take shape. It was not a comprehensive ecclesiology or soteriology. It was more a list of the convictions that shaped the ways I had done ministry and ways that I wanted to rethink ministry in the future.

My notes took shape in paragraphs like these:

We believe that God is calling us to this restart as a sign and symbol of his loving sacrifice for the sake of the hurting, broken, and disconnected. We believe that Jesus' name is more important than any of our names or the name of our church. We believe that if we want to reach people that the church is not reaching then we have to do something that the church is not doing. We believe that God's kingdom should bring people together, and the church should be a haven for the hurting, the skeptics, the doubters, the marginalized, and the ignored. We believe God is asking us to sacrifice some things we have loved for what we would love even more. We believe God placed potential in us as a gift, and our gift back to him is the work we do with that potential. We believe creativity and innovation are signs of his image in us.

We believe the church is designed to be the body of Christ, a family, and a community of mission-minded followers of Jesus. We must balance its ministry to disciples of Jesus and those who don't know him yet. The church should be a place and people that fill our lives with grace. We believe that grace looks like love, acceptance, patience, and truth. We believe that giving each other grace also means staying out of the Holy Spirit's way, by refusing to be the "fixers." Grace means giving people time and space to be healed by the Spirit. We believe that the church has to meet people where they are. That means physically going to new places. That means meeting people at the location of their emotional needs without judgment or pretense. That

means connecting with people at the point of problems and possibility. That means pointing people to Jesus for the sake of their soul, body, mind, and strength. We believe that if the church reaches men, we can reach the whole family. We believe it is better to do a few things well than to do many things with mediocrity.

We believe that we are the church. We think that we have a window in time, an opportunity that we are either going to seize or let pass us. We believe that we will have all the resources that we need to do all that God is asking us to do. We believe this restart will work, and that we will be able to reach into the next generation in a way that is impossible otherwise. We know that we are called to serve our neighbors, the community, our workplaces, and our world. We believe that when the church is being the church Jesus calls it to be, that community is better. We believe that no one is beyond hope and that no church is beyond hope. We believe that our mission is to make disciples. We believe discipleship should look more like teaching someone to use a fork than teaching them the history of the fork. Disciple-making should look more like a garden than a factory. Together, the church could operate more like a sailboat than a speedboat—in particular, a sailboat without a rudder.

We believe that God loves each person; therefore, we look to love each person that we can. We believe that this community of believers is a hospital where the sin-sick, the heartbroken, and the one whose life is falling apart can be made whole. We believe that Christ wants to bring healing to every aspect of our lives, not just to a compartmentalized spiritual soul.

## OUR VALUES

Over time, those beliefs became codified into the DNA of Hydrant Church. They informed our values, our calling, our vision, and our activity as a church. Over the first couple of years, we wrote down our values. We revisited and evaluated those values. We eventually settled on a few that seemed to shape us most.

**We value Jesus' leadership.** The church belongs to Jesus. He is the center of the church, and he is in charge. The church never belonged to me, or you, or anyone else. We desire to give Jesus his bride back. We always want to make sure that the church lifts Jesus up and not the leadership or the mission or the name. We value Jesus at the heart of the church and as the head of the church. He is in charge. Jesus goes first; he decides; he shows us where to go. We discern his leadership and follow him.

**We value people.** People matter most. People are not numbers to count or resources to exploit. The souls, lives, minds, bodies, and relationships of every person matter. Together, we value and take care of one another and those within our sphere of influence. We choose to create programs that fit people and remain adaptable. We do not make people fit into our plans. We value people over facilities. We value people over our church's "cool factor." We choose to value people and do everything that we can to empower each one to live the life that God created them to live in the fullest way possible.

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**We value authenticity** because it opens the door to real change. Nothing changes until we accept the reality of our own lives, hearts, relationships, and situations. As long as we put on a smiling face and fake it, we are not open to anything changing in our lives. It is like trying to travel from North Carolina to California with directions from Maine to California. God deals in reality and truth, so we too must deal in reality and truth. When we are truthful and real, life change becomes a possibility.

**We value the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.** In other words, the Holy Spirit does the fixing. I have no ability or right to attempt to fix someone else's life. I cannot even fix my mess. The gospel is the proclamation that Jesus does a transforming work in us by inhabiting us with his Spirit as our guide, counselor, strength, and friend. With his work in our lives, anything is possible. Apart from him, little of eternal value is possible. Our most excellent disciple-making tools are three questions: What is God asking you to do? Do you have the courage to do it? How can I help? The church owns the responsibility to teach how to discern the voice of God in prayer, Scripture, wisdom, etc. We get in the way of what the Spirit is doing when we try to do the fixing. The church should connect people to the One who has that job.

**We value hope.** Hope is more powerful than fear, so we act on hope. We did not shut down and relaunch because we were afraid of the church drifting into oblivion. We moved on the hope that God is willing and able to do a mighty

work in our midst if we follow his example. We do not ever begin decision-making conversations with, “I’m just afraid that if . . .” We have hope, not fear as our guide. We believe people need the hope of God more than the fear of hell. We believe those who are scared into acting need an ever-increasing fright to stay on the path. Those who find hope, can’t get enough.

**We value excellence.** What we mean is that we recognize that love is in the details. It is more cliché to say that the devil is in the details, but I believe that it is love. We can express love in attention to the details of preparing a night out with a spouse by filling the evening with their favorites. We show respect when we spend time with our kids doing what they love instead of what we love. We show love when we provide a safe and fun environment for children, while communicating well with their parents. We show love in the care of our facilities. We express love when we remember your name. We express love in the temperature of the worship center and the temperature of the coffee. We express love as we think of the things you might need to experience God in worship before you ask. Love opens the door to the gospel. So, we show love. We show love in the details.

**We value connecting people with Jesus.** Everything we do is for the glory of Jesus and the sake of those disconnected from him. We focus our energy and resources on the ministries that nudge people toward the kingdom and reveal the glory of Jesus. We focus on designing the worship, events, and

disciple-making ministries of the church to be accessible and understandable to those who may never have stepped foot in a church. Our language, our style, our music, our explanations, and our environment are intentionally designed to be a place that someone with no experience of church and little awareness of Jesus can begin that experience.

**We value replication.** We value the replication of disciples and healthy churches. We are called to be fruitful and reproduce. We are called to make disciples. We are called to take the gospel to every person that we can. We will replicate healthy, dynamic churches in eastern North Carolina and beyond.

## OUR VISION

We had to rethink vision. We didn't need catchy words or a theological treatise. We didn't need a new focus every year. We needed a simple, clear picture of what God was challenging us to become. As we envisioned the future of our church, we saw a fire hydrant. I can still remember the first time I did a web search for "hydrant church." There was nothing. There was not a single church listed with a website that was named Hydrant Church. I thought to myself, "God, you have given me an original idea. It may be my first." It could be that I should have spent more time reflecting on why there were no other churches named after a fire hydrant.

I envisioned a place that was like a hydrant, a simple valve of living water. A hydrant doesn't save anyone's life. A hydrant doesn't protect anyone's home or family. The water does that saving work.

The hydrant is simply a point of access to that life-saving flow of water. We could be that valve, that point of access for people whose lives, homes, and families were being consumed by the fires of hell. I envisioned a church, a point of access, where people could connect with God and others. I envisioned a place where that connection would lead to being filled with grace and hope. I envisioned a people so filled that they overflowed in loving service in every area they lived. God's love would overflow in our homes and neighborhoods and around the world. I ultimately envisioned a church that would overflow in the replication of itself again and again in healthy small churches.

I saw the picture so plainly and clearly, it was as if someone painted it on the inside of my eyelids. A common challenge for leaders is communicating their vision and being patient enough for it to take root in the minds and hearts of others. As leaders, we think and dream and believe and pray for weeks or years before we finally get the moment to share it. We are sold on the idea, but we forget others are hearing it for the first time. Vision takes time. The status quo, especially in churches, has deep roots in our psyche and our practices. We let go of our old ways slowly and reluctantly because our attachment to them is rarely reasoned, but emotional.

## THE CHURCH'S VISION PROBLEM

The fact is that many churches today have no real idea why they are doing what they do or not doing what they don't. They are treading water—working hard to stay afloat in one spot. These churches are wearing themselves out while staying stationary,

doing the same things repeatedly for years. Many have no vision and, therefore, no point of alignment for the activities, resources, and ministries of the church.

Churches don't know what their group of people is called to be and do, so we do what we have always done, only occasionally trying some new idea. Instead of following a calling and vision, we act on what feels right. We operate on old emotional ties to buildings, songs, experiences, events, and programs. We have psychological links to furniture, fake flowers, doilies, and giant paintings of a girly European Jesus in a blue bathrobe. Don't lie—one is hanging in your church somewhere (unless you have already taken it to Goodwill)!

Proverbs 29:18 reminds us that “where there is no vision, the people perish” (KJV). Our churches are perishing at an astonishing rate. Projections show that somewhere between four and eight thousand churches in America will close this year. If we are going to inspire the people of our churches to let some things die so that they can walk with freedom into a new life, we have to do more than give them statistics and functional reasons. We should do our homework. We should understand our community demographics and appreciate the identity of our people. We have to follow the trends in our churches. We must be able to paint a convincing and reasonable picture of why we have to chase the vision God has given us. If it is going to stick, the vision must also touch people's hearts. We need to remind them of their love for Jesus and all he has done for them. We need to show them the desperate need for hope in our communities. We must touch their emotions and get to the *why*, not just the *what*.

For vision to be most effective, you will need to find a way to help people become dissatisfied with the status quo and inspired

with a compelling vision for the future. You will also need to find a way to help people see how this picture or vision for the future connects with how they see themselves. Great visioneering (to use a word from Andy Stanley) involves connecting with the image that people have for themselves. Great vision will always offer more for people than it demands from them. Discerning the vision is only one part of the challenge; the real challenge comes with creating unity around the vision. It is all in how you communicate it.

## COMMUNICATING VISION

We need to rethink how we communicate vision in our churches. We need to see that it is more than a statement. It requires more than a plaque on the wall or catchy words. We will not easily uproot ourselves from where we are to go to this new place, regardless of what we believe and value. Organizational inertia is a significant, opposing force, even when we feel called to this new place as a promised new land of resources, joy, and freedom with God. We may still resist going, as much as the Israelites resisted leaving Egypt. So, the vision has to be a clear, compelling picture of where we need to go.

### **Connect Vision to People's Identity and Purpose**

There is one primary factor in clearly communicating vision that is often overlooked and under-practiced. Many leaders and pastors stand in front of their people and attempt to cast vision by describing the future of the church and the tasks that they are going to accomplish. They use biblical and compelling language

to describe this new promised land of ministry effectiveness. They cast vision by describing activities that need to be done. That is an important part of casting vision and developing strategy, but too many of us stop there—or rather, start there.

Vision sticks when it connects to the heart and identity of a people. For vision to stick in your church, you have to start with who people are and why they do what they do. If we continually remind people of who they are, we will rarely need to instruct them in what to do. As you prepare to share the vision that God has placed in your imagination, ask yourself some questions about the people involved.

1. How do our people see themselves?
2. What do our people care about?
3. Why do our people love Jesus?
4. Why are our people a part of this church?
5. Why do they care about this church and its future?

When you have a clear answer for these questions, you have a place to start with communicating the vision for the future of the ministry or the church. If your vision does not connect to how your people see themselves, what they care about, and why they serve God, then you have little chance of getting them to buy into something new. When you connect the vision from God to their core Christian identity and purpose as Christians and as the church, everything gets easier. It also creates room for growth and change within the vision. In that situation, the identity and purpose don't change, but activities may be shifted to better accomplish the vision.

## Create Urgency to Move Forward

In addition to connecting vision to your people's identity and purpose, effectively communicating vision also means painting a picture of staying here—sticking with the status quo—as untenable. We have to help people feel disgust, frustration, and at times, even hatred for where they are right now. This second push can be especially challenging when *here* used to be *there*. If you led your people to this new visionary land, but now have to lead them to somewhere new, then communicating how this place is no longer enough can be painful. It is necessary, though, or you will all go back at the first sign of trouble.

## Develop Buy-In Gradually

When communicating vision, Dennis McCallum suggests a “shock-wave” approach.<sup>1</sup> Start with those closest to you first and work in concentric circles outward. No leader wants to be hearing vision from the pastor for the first time on Sunday morning. We must communicate with other leaders first, keeping the vision close to the vest for a while, no matter how excited you get. Start with the elders or board and staff. If they have lots of questions and concerns, let it linger a bit. Once they have completely bought into the vision, you can begin to communicate with other leaders and stakeholders. Eventually, you go public when you have the support of the leadership. If you do not have the buy-in of the leadership first, you set yourself up for failure.

Years ago, I was leading a middle school ministry. I wanted to take the group of middle school students on our annual mission trip to an area just hit by a historic hurricane. I had researched the city and communicated with a mission organization that would run our trip. I planned out the budget and crafted my presentation

to parents. All of this without first casting the vision to my team of leaders. The parent meeting was a disaster. I was not yet a parent at the time, and I underestimated the concerns parents would have about sending their middle schoolers into the kind of environment I was suggesting. Parents had concerns, and team leaders who had been left in the dark had their own questions. The nail in the coffin of the vision was when our mission team leader spoke up against this trip idea. I was devastated, but looking back, it was my fault. The team of leaders, who were parents, would have helped me see what I wasn't seeing in the picture I was painting. I could have saved a lot of work and frustration if had I just cast vision to the team first. We ended up going back to the drawing board and developing a new trip. I worked with the team more carefully this time, and we ended up with a much better trip than I could have envisioned alone.

### **Continual Communication**

They say vision leaks. It leaks less in a leader, but vision leaks like there are a thousand holes in the bucket for everyone else. You have to communicate the vision, or at least some component of the vision, every time you get together. It should be a part of every meeting, every worship gathering, every message, every recruiting conversation, and every training session. When you are tired of talking about it, someone else is just getting it, and someone else is hearing it for the first time. Neglect the vision, and you swim in smaller and smaller circles until eventually you are treading water trying to survive.

The vision is a part of every single worship gathering at Hydrant. At some point in every worship service, someone will get up and share the vision, saying something like, "We are so glad

you are worshiping with us here at Hydrant today. This church is a place where you can connect with God and others. We believe that those connections create the pathways for our lives to be filled with grace and truth in transforming ways. The love we experience overflows from full lives in service to our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and community. If you are new here today, we would love to meet you.”

Additionally, before we take the offering, I share a story, Scripture, or statistic that connects our giving to our vision. Finally, we use our keywords in response to each Sunday’s message. You will find the words *connect*, *fill*, and *overflow* on the outside of our building. You see those words in the café, in our children’s wing, on our sign, and in our publications. It is how we organize our annual report and budget.

Our vision encapsulated in those three words—*connect*, *fill*, and *overflow*—also gets pushed through the organizational structure and strategy. We provide environments and opportunities for people to connect with God and others in worship. We fill their lives and the lives of others with grace and truth in life groups and learning environments. We overflow by serving in the ministry in the church and mission outside the church. As someone connects, our goal is to help them fill. As someone is filling, our goal is to help them overflow in ministry and mission.

When vision sticks, everything flows more smoothly and becomes more fun. A vision that has been driven all the way down through the organization does so much for the church.

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## VISION SERVES THE CHURCH

Vision turns values into actionable behaviors. Vision is the translation of big ideas and beliefs into a cohesive picture. That picture then reveals the practices needed. It tells you how to design, decorate, and care for your facilities. It defines your style and means of worship. It determines which ministries matter most for you. It separates the good ideas from the right ideas for your church.

Vision points out the bad ideas and gives you a don't-do list. We all know what it feels like to have this massive to-do list that threatens to eat every waking moment of our lives without conscience. Vision defines the actionable behaviors, and therefore also defines the boundaries of what is essential for your organization. Hence, it also gives you a list of the practices, actions, and programs that do not fit your church.

Vision directs your finances. I have sat down with churches that are working on the budget for the next year. Most churches make a list of last year's expenditures and how much they think they will be able to spend on those same things in the next year. When the church has a clear vision, however, it provides a starting point and a way of intentionally directing our money in ways that lead to the results we are trying to create. When you have a clear, actionable vision, you can name your priorities and evaluate every expenditure's helpfulness. You can start the budget with priorities and fill in around those things that bring the vision to life in the best way.

Vision inspires generosity in people. No one wants to invest in a dying church; it feels like a waste of our money. Much more, investing tithes and donations into a church with no interest in kingdom work may well be a waste of God's money and kingdom

resources. Many people will give to the church out of habit, obedience, obligation, or responsibility. People invest generously in a vision that is making a difference in their lives and the lives of others. The more the effectiveness of the vision is proven, the more generosity it inspires.

Vision inspires sacrifice. Generosity is terrific; sacrifice takes it a step further. When there is a clear vision in our church, people sacrifice. They sacrifice time, energy, and resources to be a part of this group of people making a real difference by doing what they are called to do.

Vision narrows our focus. Without a clear vision, we tend to drift and our churches tend to drift. We want everything good. Vision makes us disciplined. It keeps us from sacrificing the best God has for us for just being good or even great. Vision keeps us focused on our values and calling. Churches struggle with excellence when they cannot focus on just doing what is most important. They do too many things, and the result is doing them poorly. Knowing our vision narrows our focus and releases excellence.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Is the vision of your church or ministry a clear picture of a preferred future that inspires people to action?

2. When you sit on your porch in the evening picturing what could be possible in your church, what do you see?

3. How well have you communicated that picture to your leaders, volunteers, members, and community? Can they explain it to someone clearly and succinctly?

4. Is your budget designed to accomplish that vision? What changes need to be made to the budget for your church to budget around the vision?

5. If you are unsure of God's vision for your church, ask yourself some key questions:

- a. What are we good at?
- b. What needs exist in our community?
- c. What values, gifts, and skills has God placed in us to meet those needs?
- d. Is there something missing in our community that we could do to reach people?
- e. What people groups has God laid a burden for in our community?
- f. What is God asking us to do?



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DEATH IS OFTEN THE  
PREREQUISITE FOR NEW LIFE.



When we . . . name our fears and sins and failures and own up to them, describing them as clearly as we are able—we pass through them into the new life on the other side. We have faced the worst about ourselves and we have survived, making us strong in the only sense that actually matters. This is why resurrection is so central to the Jesus story: he faces the worst that can happen to a person, and comes out the other side alive in a new way.<sup>1</sup>

About a month before he passed away, when he knew his time was coming near, my grandfather said, “It is harder to die than you think.” My grandfather served God as a minister in the Church of the Nazarene from the time he was a teenager. He loved God and was ready to meet him, as well as see his bride again. But, it is just harder to die than you think. This sentiment stuck with me.

Churches may illustrate my grandfather’s statement more accurately than just about any other organism in creation. A church can run through the various stages of its life cycle and then, as it approaches death, something happens. It continues to linger on the edge of existence for years. Sometimes, it even lasts for decades in this strange alive, not alive, stage. The building starts to fall around it. The ministries dissipate one by one. There comes a day when five or ten people finally decide to close the doors.

Our leadership board voted to close before coming to this point of desperation. We decided to lay down our church, resources, and legacy for the sake of those Jesus loves. We chose the path; it wasn’t thrust upon us. Even still, it was nearly impossible for the church to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

We shared the board's decision with the church the following Sunday and made a promise to meet with each family in the church individually to explain the vision and the strategy. We promised to answer any questions people wanted to ask. I wrote out the vision as narrowly focused as possible. We worked to develop the picture of a church that was oriented toward others, focused on community, driven by the call to make disciples, and empowering people to serve the community. It was clear and compelling. At first, people loved the idea of life flowing through their church again.

The strategy for the shutdown and relaunch was simple and straightforward. We would have a celebration service in which we all would have a chance to say goodbye to Goldsboro Wesleyan Church, and then we would officially disorganize the church. We would remain closed for a month, only gathering on Sunday mornings for vision casting. During this time, we would develop new teams and leaders, advertise a launch Sunday, and renovate the worship center. Then, when the time was right, we would launch as Hydrant Church.

The plan was that, during the month we were dark, we would focus on developing our volunteer leaders and teams in areas of worship, first contact, children's ministry, and small groups. We would also renovate the worship center with basic audio, visual, and lighting for a more culturally relevant expression of worship.

Yes, that's right, one month. A month was not nearly long enough, but it was all we had. We should have been closed a minimum of four months. As the lead pastor, though, I was financially dependent on the church, and this created severe restraints on the timeline.

As we prepared for closing Sunday, we kept nearly everyone on board with the new strategy and vision for the church. Something in every believer feels the call to reach the disconnected, be family for the lonely, grow in truth and grace, and serve the community. The Spirit held us together with the continual whisper of that call and the hope that we could answer it. There was a mixture of dread and excitement as we drew closer to the transition.

The day finally came for the closing service. That Sunday, as we gathered for the service, there was nervous tension. We sang, prayed, and gave. The message carried the tone of a celebration of what had been and concluded with an invitation to more.

I preached from 1 Samuel 14 and told the story shared earlier in this book of when the army of the people of God had dwindled to nothing and were pinned down in the valley beneath their enemies. Remember that there were only two swords for the entire army and that their king, Saul, was lying in the shade of a pomegranate tree, frozen by his recent failures and fears. That's when Jonathan, the king's son, hatched his risky and ridiculous plan.

During our transition, I had a secret that I kept mostly to myself: I thought our plan to restart as Hydrant Church was more dangerous and ridiculous than anyone had said out loud. I was reminded, though, of how Jonathan had a conviction deep within that God would be faithful to his promise to deliver their enemies into their hands. Jonathan rejected passively waiting for an inevitable end. Instead, he shared his plan with his armor-bearer. As we restarted as Hydrant Church, we camped out on Jonathan's words to his armor-bearer: "Perhaps the LORD will help us, for nothing can hinder the LORD. He can win a battle whether he has many warriors or only a few!" (1 Sam. 14:6 NLT).

Jonathan and his armor-bearer seized a moment in faith. They took a risky chance. It was a chance that would have undoubtedly failed if God hadn't shown up. That day, God joined the battle in a decisive way to give Israel the victory. God gave his people a victory because a couple of men believed in God's promise, acted by faith, took a chance, and seized their divine moment. God gave a decisive victory to Israel against insurmountable odds, so we thought perhaps he would give our little group of people a victory in the face of our own crazy odds.

Each person in that little sanctuary was invited to believe that Jesus had promised to build his church. Each one was asked to climb that cliff by faith and take a chance. Together we could seize our divine moment as we prepared to relaunch as Hydrant Church. There were no promises of success. We offered no guarantees of survival. We acknowledged that it might not work, but if the Lord helped us, nothing could stop us. He could win with only a few willing to act.

## A TIME TO DIE

Our district superintendent led us through a time of reflection on the history and highlights of Goldsboro Wesleyan Church. After a liturgy of thanksgiving and lament, he dismissed us with the following words:

This congregation was God's gift to us for a season. We are thankful for the many ways it has served the mission given to it by Jesus Christ. It is now declared to be officially disbanded. But Christ's holy church is of God and will be

preserved to the end of time. We remain part of Christ's ongoing church, and as we become part of the new work or scatter into other congregations, we shall still be one with Christ, one in Christ, and one with each other until Christ shall come and we shall feast together in final victory at his banquet table. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

With those words, Goldsboro Wesleyan quietly died. This story is as biblical a narrative as I can imagine. A group of people believed in the gospel of resurrection enough to lay down what they loved, their very church, their lives. To me, it was a beautiful moment of obedience and hope. As with any death, there was great sadness. There was great sadness when Jesus laid down his life. There is great sadness at the passing of any saint. This sadness overtook some of our own (people). Their grieving over what was lost prevented them from being able to see the resurrection to come. Others embraced it with the conviction that those who die in Christ never really die.

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13).

“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35).

“Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him” (2 Tim. 2:11).

Sometimes the way that the Western church celebrates Easter and resurrection might lead us to believe that we can experience new life or resurrection without death. We tend, in the church of the West, to sugarcoat the gospel and turn free grace into cheap grace that requires nothing of us. This cheap grace is not grace, nor is it faith. It certainly is not the gospel of Jesus.

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The gospel of Jesus is, without question, life, hope, freedom, and possibility—the experience of which requires that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The good news is that we fear no evil in death. We fear nothing. His perfect love has cast out fear and equips us to lay down our lives for those he loves and for the gospel. We can die, even willingly, because we know that in Christ death does not have the last word.

The story of Goldsboro Wesleyan Church and any other church that decides to restart is a story of the gospel of Jesus. It is death with an unwavering hope of resurrection and new life. It is laying down your life for your friends, family, neighbors, and community. It is painful, scary, and unsettling, but at times entirely necessary. Every church that hopes and dreams of new life will go through some form of death.

Death is a natural part of the life cycle of every church, yet it still seems to catch us off guard and surprise us when it happens. A church can slowly decline for decades until there is only a handful of people gathering with a part-time pastor in a building they cannot afford to maintain and little or no ministry to the community or its congregation. The day comes that the church cannot attract another pastor, afford to replace the HVAC unit, or pay to cut the grass. The leader or denomination comes in and finally delivers the death notice, and everyone seems shocked. How could this happen?

Before a church hits this point, almost every one of the boards of those churches would enthusiastically and collectively express a willingness to do whatever it takes to prevent this fate. Strangely enough, most churches still choose death. More precisely, most churches choose a slow, agonizing death rather than changing. It was our story, too. For thirty years, there was very little change in

the appearance of the church building. The music had been the same for longer than that. We communicated in the same way to a now biblically illiterate culture as we did in the 1950s. We expected what worked in the past to magically work again. Our worship order was the same. We wanted the world to adapt to our methods if they wanted to respond to the timely and timeless message of Jesus. In that way, we had become a lot like the Judaizers of Paul's day.<sup>2</sup> It didn't work then and doesn't work now, but we were still doing it anyway. Changing would require meetings and a vote. Someone's feelings would get hurt. For many years, Goldsboro Wesleyan Church wanted so much for things to stay the same that we were willing to die a slow death to keep it that way.

## REASONS CHURCHES CHOOSE TO DIE

Thom Rainer has listed a number of common reasons that churches choose to die. He suggests that many churches choose to die because they refuse to face reality. They are more concerned with comfort than the Great Commission. These churches do not accept responsibility for the state of the church. Some are too busy fighting with each other. Finally, they are confusing nonnegotiables with negotiables.<sup>3</sup> Let's unpack each of these.

### **The Church That Refuses to Face Reality**

Self-awareness in leadership takes a lot of intentional effort on the part of the leader. We have to be willing to step back from the day-to-day work of leadership to spend time reflecting. There are all sorts of assessments, personality tests, and tools that can help

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with that process. We should spend time, as leaders, understanding our strengths and weaknesses, gifts, talents, passions, and personality. This awareness allows us to lean into how God made us to make our most significant contribution to those we serve. After obedience to God, the key to unlocking the door to your calling, best self, and most significant contribution in ministry is self-awareness. Most leaders just don't put in the work. We are too busy doing ministry to become the best minister and leader that we can become. We end up operating from places of denial and delusion. We are so focused on the trees that we can't see the proverbial forest.

Churches can lack self-awareness too. The community around us changes. The culture we operate in changes. The church's stats are trending down, slowly at first, and then they pick up downward momentum. No one says anything. It is easier if no one mentions the problems. "Things will pick up. They will turn around," we tell ourselves. Unfortunately, they will not turn around unless someone turns them around. The church has to be willing to pull back and take an honest look at itself. It has to own the reality of what it sees so that it can chart a path away from the cliff.

We have a value at Hydrant Church that reads, "We value authenticity as the beginning of a real transformation." Authenticity is a bit of a buzzword today, but we don't just value authenticity for the sake of being authentic. We recognize that without a truthful recognition of how things are at this moment, we can never chart a path toward who we are called to become. God deals in reality. We won't meet God hiding behind a false reality. There is no possibility of new life and transformation until we are willing to tell ourselves the truth.

## **The Church That Values Greater Comfort over the Great Commission**

Every organization, even the church, drifts toward self-preservation and self-interest. Every church in the world today was once a church plant. A few churches were started as angry splinter groups who wanted their way, but most were mission-driven works of the kingdom. They started as an impossible dream, fueled by the passion, dedication, and sacrifice of a few kingdom entrepreneurs. With nothing to lose, they were willing to do whatever it took to reach people with the gospel of Jesus.

Somewhere along the way, though, perspectives shift. We buy property, build buildings, start ministries, create savings, and make a name in the community. When we have something to lose, we start to get scared. We lose track of who we are and why we are here in the first place. The Great Commission becomes a great omission in our work. We are busy at the stuff of church, but we are no longer on a mission. We make decisions out of fear. We choose based on what our people like or want. The church becomes about us and our comfort and stops being the church.

We must rediscover the roots of our mission. We must go back to the beginning of the mission Jesus gave to the church. We can start by rediscovering the stories of our local church and its origins that illuminate who we are and why we are here.

## **The Church That Avoids Responsibility**

“Our church can’t get ahead, and it’s their fault. The culture has just gone to the devil. They took prayer out of schools and the Ten Commandments out of courtrooms. How do we stand a chance?”

“It’s all these new church plants. They come in here with their hip young pastors and rock ‘n’ roll music. We can’t compete with them.”

“You know, people just don’t come to church like they used to. Sports and school projects and community events are the reasons people can’t be at church.”

“We are just so close to the beach, lake, or mountains. People travel every weekend.”

“You know those megachurches are drawing everyone. They water down the message and have those coffee shops and kids’ departments that look like a Disney park.”

“We preach the Bible and holiness, so we are going to be small. People know where we are, and they can come whenever they want.”

There is not a community in the country that is anywhere near fully church-ed. There are so many people to reach in your town. It is likely that if everyone in your neighborhood decided to go to church this Sunday, there wouldn’t be enough seats. There is plenty of work to do. Craig Groeschel often reminds listeners, “You can make excuses, or you can make a difference, but you cannot do both.” It is time to stop making excuses and find a way to make a difference.

### **The Church Consumed with Infighting and Criticizing**

The church has always had detractors and critics, but you can’t stop the train to kick at barking dogs.

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other. (Gal. 5:13–15)

We are destroying our churches with arguments, fighting, and criticism. We break our unity and destroy our focus until, ultimately, we squelch our passion. It runs people off. It is ugly, terrible, and has no place in the church. Fighting with one another and engaging in criticism are sideways energy. They do not move us toward the goal of his kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Some churches are so busy fighting over the style of music, the colors of paint, and who gets on the board that they don't notice how they have run everyone off.

At Hydrant, every person who joins the church as a partner makes several commitments. Two of those commitments are about this issue. We commit to "fight for the unity of Hydrant Church," and we promise that we "will not try to make Hydrant Church conform to [our own] preferences."

When you start gaining momentum in the right direction, there will be plenty of criticism, questions, and assumptions about you from the outside. Within the church, we should defend and support one another. We should stand together in the Spirit for the gospel and the sake of all the people Jesus loves.

### **The Church That Confuses Nonnegotiables with Negotiables**

In every church where I consult, there are great people with a devotion to essential practices and beliefs of the Christian faith. They are committed to worshiping together in praise to God. They are committed to the preaching and teaching of the Bible as the central act of God's communication with humanity. They care about reaching the lost and are committed to passing on the faith to the next generation. They want to be good stewards of their facilities.

I also find that our chosen practices get intertwined with God's message over time. Sometimes, they are so tightly woven together that we cannot see how to untangle them. Here are some examples of what that looks like:

- ☼ It looks like a church that won't remove the pulpit from the stage because it has become a symbol of our devotion to Scripture.
- ☼ It looks like a church that won't change its style of worship because it feels like worship will be devalued.
- ☼ It looks like a church who values teaching kids, yet their children's ministry resembles a 1950s school room.

## NEW LIFE ALWAYS REQUIRES DEATH

If we are going to see new life in our churches, something will have to die. Sometimes, sin creeps into the church and needs to die. The sin of pride is destructive and separates us from those we are called to reach. It renders our leadership and our message mute. Pride also keeps leaders from sharing ministry and embracing the full potential of the church. The sin of selfishness causes us to demand our way in the church. It makes us uncaring of those in our community who do not know Jesus. It robs us of our love for others. The sin of envy makes us jealous of the success of other churches or ministries. The comparisons keep us from reaching our potential or being grateful for the ways God has blessed and equipped us for ministry. The isolation eliminates the possibility of partnering to make a real difference in the community.

Some attitudes like fear and insecurity, bitterness, anger, disappointment, criticism, hopelessness, laziness, and control do not belong in the church any more than the sins from which they stem. These attitudes may not be sin in and of themselves, but they derail the church and keep it stuck in the mire of ineffective ministry. While I am in this hot water, let me say this one thing: being right is negotiable; being loving is nonnegotiable. It is about time the church stopped trying to win arguments and started winning relationships. As long as these attitudes are infecting our decision-making processes, our ministries, or teaching, we are not going to bear the fruit that God created the church to produce.

In the church, we tend to hold on to what once worked. We hold this insane belief that we can keep doing the same things that used to work in a world that is changing as rapidly as ours. If what used to work isn't working, we try harder to do it better. Doing the same thing over and over again will not get us new results. Doing the same thing that used to work in our churches will not even yield the same results it used to produce. The world is changing too fast. Repeating the same methods and activities and ministries in our churches for years will only lead to diminishing results as the world changes at an ever-increasing pace. The changes, even in rural communities, are drastically outpacing the changes in American churches. People often label late-adopting churches as out of touch or completely irrelevant. That's a reputation that is hard to shed.

There are some ministries and activities that need to die to bring new life to our churches. There is no set list, but be aware that the more your church is doing, the lower the quality of each part of it. Especially in small and medium-sized churches, we want to try everything. We feel the pressure to offer the same set

of ministries that larger churches are offering. Instead, we need to understand who we are as a church. We need to understand our community. We need to understand our calling and vision. We need to be more intentional to develop ministries from those perspectives.

If you want to see new fruit in your church, you are going to have to do some pruning. When you prune any good fruit-bearing tree or vine, sometimes it's necessary to cut it back so far you think it might die. The church is the same way. If we want to bear new fruit, we are going to have to do some pruning of the ministries and activities of the church. Like old couches in the youth room, some ministries have outlived their usefulness, and they are starting to smell funny too.

Occasionally, we realize that our church has crossed a line of no return. Revitalization or turnaround efforts are not going to take us to better days in our churches. There are times when we recognize that it will take too long to turn around, and we believe we could do something new. There are times we realize the need to stop. When that time arrives, the best thing we can do, with hearts full of gratitude, is to say goodbye to what once was. Close the church, let it die, and start over.

As you discern God's calling upon your church, you will start to see sin, attitudes, and activities that do not fit God's vision for the church. You have to be willing to do the hard work of cutting, pruning, and weeding these things out for the future of the church. They must die.

New life always requires death. The seed goes into the ground, dies, and in the right time, grows into the new plant. Only then can we fully embrace a clear vision and walk toward new life and fruitful ministry. It is not easy; I don't write these words glibly or

callously. I have walked through that valley. I have laid to rest sin, attitudes, ministries, activities, and the church itself to see something new be born. It is painful every time.

Jesus used a metaphor to describe this truth in Matthew 9:16–17: “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

We, as church leaders, have frequently tried to pour new wine into old wineskins, and we have wondered why it just made things worse. We pour new programs into the same toxic consumeristic church culture, or outreach ministry into a church that has become inwardly focused. We pour new music into a church that has lost its passion for praise and celebration of God’s glory. We pour new ministries into a church already overscheduled, and we pour small groups into Sunday school. We pour a young, new pastor into a church that refuses to change. Then it bursts in our face. People feel hurt and betrayed. Leaders are confused and defeated.

There is another way: the gospel way. It is time for us to let some things die. Retire the old garments. Get new wineskins. Don’t be the church that dies on the slow, painful descent into long-forgotten memories. Recognize reality and accept responsibility. Then, fight for unity. Prioritize what is nonnegotiable, sacrifice whatever you have to sacrifice to join in with the great mission of Jesus’ kingdom.

Paul writes in the letter to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I

now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20). So, we too must be crucified with Christ and live by faith in Christ. He leads us through the valley of the shadow of death, and we will not be afraid. We can choose the death that leads to new life, or we will choose to walk into the slow, agonizing death that leads only to sadness.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Is your church choosing its own slow death in one of the ways described in this chapter? Which one? What would it take for people in your church to recognize that truth?
2. What are the ministries or activities helping to move your church or ministry forward?
3. What is hurting your church's ability to accomplish its vision?
4. What do you continue to do that is not hurting you, but not helping you either?
5. Is there anything missing from your church's ministry or strategy?
6. Based on these lists, what do you need to start doing?
7. What needs to die so that new life can come to your church?

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TRUST GOD TO WORK  
OUTSIDE THE LIMELIGHT.



On the afternoon of August 13, 2013, the website, social media pages, and signs for Goldsboro Wesleyan Church were all taken down. We went dark, closing the church. It died, and we stayed closed for five weeks. As I mentioned earlier, it should have been longer. This time is so important—a lesson we learned quickly, but too late.

The day after we closed, a season began of fifteen-hour days, seven days a week. Lots of important things happened while we were in the dark of our church's grave. We met with everyone once per week for vision casting and launch preparations. We took this time to complete a round of updates and renovations to the property. We built the stage, installed sound, lighting, and video equipment that was needed. We painted, changed signs, and developed child security measures.

We prayed. We prayed a lot.

We recruited and trained leaders for kids' ministry, audio and visual, first contact, nursery, kids, and outreach. We built the needed teams of volunteers and trained them to use the resources, curriculum, new methods, and procedures. Lastly, we scheduled the first six months of events and programming. We made volunteer schedules and planned worship sets and sermon series.

We prayed. We prayed a lot.

We marketed the launch. We designed, contracted, and marveled at our beautiful billboards. We created mailers with an open hydrant and well-worded invitation to our first service. We mailed 10,000 of those cards across our community, advertising the day of the launch. We hung door hangers in the neighborhoods around us and posters in every window and coffee shop that would let us. We had flyers all over town.<sup>1</sup>

One of our college students was so ambitious in her efforts on campus that the school called us and asked us to stop having students pass them out. They were becoming a litter problem. We had personal invite cards that our little group of people left on tables, gave to friends, and shared everywhere. We used social media and shared images, invites, and our website. We spread the word in every place and in every way we could.

Then we prayed again. We prayed a lot.

We planned our launch service to the minute. The band rehearsed, the message was clear, and the transitions were smoothed out. We practiced the elements of the service multiple times. We practiced one last time on Thursday night before launch with a live audience made up of the volunteers who would be serving on Launch Sunday.

We launched with as much fanfare as we could muster. Our fifty-six people swelled to just over 130. I was disappointed, but I shouldn't have been. I had hoped for 200 people, thinking that if we hit 200, then in a month or two, we would be past the 100-person barrier, be stable, and ready to make a difference. Within a few months, though, forty of our original fifty-six people had left. With them went 80 percent of the church's income. There we were, just three months after restarting, and we were once again fifty people rolling around in that room that now felt huge. It stayed that way for at least another year.

## THE VALUE OF OBSCURITY

Going dark allows us the time we need to become who we are meant to become. If we try to rush out of that season, God has a

way of leaving us there long enough to let us grow. I hated the idea of obscurity for myself and the church. God forced me to rethink obscurity. Life grows in the valleys that lie in the shadow of the mountain. Everyone loves the views from a mountaintop, but not much grows up there. We climb to the mountaintop, in Andy Andrews' words, to see the next place we are going to go.<sup>2</sup> We don't build a home on top of the mountain, because it is not a good place to stay. Nothing really thrives on the rocky, snow-covered peaks of the mountain.

Down in the valley, there are seasons to life and ministry. Unfortunately, not every season is a harvest season. Seasons of preparation, seasons of planting, and seasons of watering all precede the season of harvesting. No one wants to talk about those winter, spring, and hot summer seasons that come before the fall harvest. No one sees the farmer out in the field at 4:30 a.m. working the soil. No one sees him out there long after the sun has gone down, planting the seeds. No one is coming alongside to encourage or help when he is pulling weeds, mending fences, and running irrigation lines. No one notices, until it is time to harvest, the result of all the work that has come before. Remember what we said earlier. The harvest depends on the soil. It depends on the health, vitality, and life of what's happening where no one can see.

The same thing is true for those seasons of preparation in your ministry. People want to show up and enjoy the harvest of a healthy growing church, or meaningful worship service, or thriving kids' ministry. They often don't pay attention to what comes before. You will spend those early morning hours in prayer and reflection. You will toil away over the Scriptures for countless hours without anyone realizing the work you are putting into that sermon. You will weep for the lost and hurting people in the late

hours of the night. You will make hard decisions, pour out your soul, and sacrifice to solve problems. You will do much of the real work of ministry in obscurity.

## WRESTLING WITH PERSONAL OBSCURITY

Obscurity—this was the first several years of Hydrant, for us, but especially that first year. I was toiling away in obscurity. The excitement of the new launch had long since dissipated. We were trudging through the hidden seasons of preparing the soil, planting the seed, and caring for the little plants as they grew. No one noticed this small, tiny, church in the middle of nowhere. No one seemed to see me. My gifts and strengths all felt neglected and wasted. I felt forgotten. We had gone dark as a church for only a month, but the darkness for me was lasting much longer. In that darkness, I began to rethink the value of obscurity. I began to rethink what God was doing in our church and in me during this season of anonymity. I began to see this hidden season as a gift and opportunity.

Being in a small or rural church can feel like we are hidden away by God. It can feel like our gifts are bigger than our setting. It can feel like we, and our church, are unimportant in the broader community or in the denominational settings we serve. Let's face it, you are a bit hidden; some of your gifts and strengths probably are not being put to use—and certainly not used to their fullest potential.

In these obscure seasons, when we do not see a lot of fruit, results, or attention, we can feel unimportant or even worthless

in the kingdom. These seasons, however, are essential. They are about far more than waiting or paying your dues in the hard assignment. They are useful for more than just teaching us to hold on a little longer. These days can be formative and transformative. True leadership health and strength is developed almost entirely in the obscure years. Several authors use an iceberg as a metaphor to describe the way that success develops. Ninety percent of what we do is hidden, and only 10 percent is visible for the world to see. It is the 90 percent, however, that determines the 10 percent. As much as any leader wants to be the one exception, there are no overnight successes.

Alicia Britt Chole said, “The most influential life in all of history reflected the iceberg equation. Jesus spent 90 percent of his life on earth in obscurity. Jesus spent ten percent of his earthly life in the public eye.”<sup>3</sup> Like an iceberg, our strength comes from what is unseen. The power of the work that we do comes from what is unseen. In hidden times, we are setting the course for our future. We either shape ourselves for success, or we forge ourselves for failure. Do not take these times for granted, much less despise them as so many do. What you and I choose to do when no one is watching matters most.

Every leader will face temptations, ensuring that each of us must learn the lessons of character and spiritual development before we can step into the roles that God has for us. We only learn these lessons in anonymity. We will be graded on what we have learned when God thrusts us into the public spotlight. It doesn’t matter the size of the spotlight. It eventually shines through every facade to the heart within us. The spotlight reveals what we are and what is in us. If we are submitted to Christ, then he shines through. As with Jesus, the temptations we face reveal the strength of our

foundations. They show the world our source of identity and what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world.

Temptation shows what is going on inside of us. It shows the world what we care about. Stressful situations, likewise, reveal the church's heart and core. Who are you when vision is significant yet money is tight and nothing is working? What do you spend money on when there isn't enough to do everything you wish that you could do? When the church begins to grow, the leader's flaws are magnified, not hidden. Growth reveals the leader's foundations.

## BUILDING IN OBSCURITY

By going dark, a restart church takes the necessary time for the vision to take root. It also takes time to build the foundational values and systems that are needed for it to operate in the next season. Many churches find that they are given similar seasons of darkness or hiddenness as a sacred time of refocusing on God's vision and developing the foundational systems for being able to connect, fill, and overflow into the lives of more people. It can be a season of pruning, planting, or weeding.

At Hydrant, we rushed the obscure season and tried to accomplish in one month what we should have spent three to six months doing. Because we rushed, God had to extend our obscurity even further to give us all the time we needed. It especially gave me the time necessary to become the leader that I needed to become. I am quite confident that this is not the last season of pruning, planning, and refocusing that Hydrant will undergo. Each new burst of growth or fruitfulness requires a season of preparation.

Leaders learn to recognize and relish the obscure seasons that prepare you for what's next.

## LESSONS FROM OBSCURITY

During this season, I faced down several of the temptations that hide along the trails of ministry and learned the lessons that can only be learned in obscurity.

### **Be You**

One of the first lessons that God began to teach me during this time was simply to be me. I had to trust that he knew what he was doing with the church. It was never my job to build the church. As long as I was trying to do his job then I wasn't doing mine. I had to love and serve the people that he gave me and leave the empty seats to him. He is the only one that can woo people to himself. I invite, witness, tell the story, preach the Word, love people, and lead well with the purpose of making disciples. He builds the church.

I had to trust that God knew what he was doing when he made me, called me, and placed me in this situation. I had to be okay with my strengths and weaknesses. This self-awareness gave me the courage to bring strong people around me. Even more importantly, it released me from the lie that I am the only one who can do the job right. I had a recurring fear haunting me: "If I don't do it, no one will." It's a fear of insecurity, and a fear that comes with poor leadership.

## Start with the Foundation

I learned to start from the bottom up. I was doing everything I knew to do to grow the church and make it bigger. I was going fast, but I was going alone, because I had failed to lead well. I had not developed teams and leaders that I could trust to do the work of ministry. I had failed the biblical mandate found in Ephesians 4:12 “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” You have to start from the bottom and build a strong foundation in your church, otherwise it will collapse under its own weight.

For me and Hydrant that meant developing great teams, dynamic leaders, and effective systems. We patiently set about this work. It took some serious time, but it changed everything about how we approached ministry. By building these foundational elements first, we have been able to manage a constant flow of new guests, empower new volunteers, develop leaders, and make disciples through seasons of rapid growth. We were able to keep our systems ahead of our growth because we had a strong foundation.

## Get Better

During these seasons of development, I made the decision to keep getting better. When I couldn't fix anything else, I could work on me. I could work on my character. I could work on my health. I could work on my skills. I learned to balance contentment and desire for growth. We are called to be content in our situations, but I believe that we are also designed to keep reaching for our potential. We are meant to develop the gifts that God gives us as a gift back to him.

I can't make more people show up to services next Sunday, but I can work to be a better preacher this year than I was last

year. I can't make people give more generously than they did last month, but I can improve the ways that I communicate vision, need, opportunity, and successes. I can't make people sign up to serve, but I can learn how to recruit, train, and empower people to succeed. Every stage of ministry will require you to learn new skills. If we don't learn in obscurity to keep getting better, then we set a timer on our ministry effectiveness.

### Enjoy Each Stage

I am an INTJ (introverted, intuitive, thinking, and judging) on the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, and I have Strategic and Futuristic in my top strengths according the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder test. This means that I spend most of my imaginative space in the future. I like to dream of what could be in the future. I like to find the pathways to new locations. This can be a great asset in ministry, and it can also be a huge liability. I have a tendency to underappreciate the moment. I can see all the weaknesses of the current situations and the strengths of what's next. The season of obscurity taught me to be in this moment, to be present, and to enjoy each stage.

Every stage of life and ministry is beautiful and hard in its own ways. There are times that I miss the wonderfully deep connections that marked the times when Hydrant ran forty-five in morning worship. I remember all the time I had for meals with people. There was a season, until we grew to just over a hundred in worship, when all new guests to Hydrant Church found themselves at my dinner table within a few weeks or months of their first visit. Those times were hard on all our volunteers who filled multiple roles. They were stressful on the leadership team managing the finances. Pay cuts were hard for me and Anita to swallow for several consecutive years.

Every stage has its benefits and its challenges. You have a choice. You can choose to keep your head in the future, your heart in the past, or to be present to enjoy each stage for all of its beauty. Learn to look for the good in each stage; it's there. Don't rush ahead or push into the next stage before its time.

### **Expect Departures**

An extended season of preparation proved invaluable for us on so many levels. I learned to delegate the ministry and empower others to accomplish much of the work of the church. We developed our understanding of ourselves and our calling. We refocused on being the church that we were and not the one that we wished we were. This season is strangely one of the seasons I remember with the greatest fondness. We never depended on God more wildly or entirely than when we had nothing.

Many of those who were unhappy with the changes had a chance to leave. The first wave of people left. This wave consisted mostly of the people who were loyal to Goldsboro Wesleyan for generational family reasons and those who loved the church the way it was. In their grieving the death of the church, they were unwilling to give the new church a chance. There is no shame in their choice to leave. It was important to give people all the permission they needed to explore other church communities. In truth, we revoked permission to complain about our church during this transition. The old was gone and was not coming back. If any of us were unhappy with the new direction, the best thing to do was to find a church we could love. We expected people to leave, and we were ready.

We were not prepared for the way some people left. Some left with grace, mercy, and a prayer of support. It was a beautiful image

of passing on this place as a legacy to the next generation. Others left kicking and screaming—literally, kicking and screaming. One woman who wasn't sure where to direct her emotions found a target on my chest as the pastor. After roaming the hallways screaming about my eternal destiny, she found me at the front of the sanctuary with a gathering of board members. Marching down the center aisle, waving a finger and pointing at me, she screamed, "You are going to burn in hell for this. You are going to burn in hell." She marched out that day and never returned.

Her wrath had not yet been satisfied, though. In the weeks that followed, she used every relationship that she had in the community and social media to publicly ridicule Hydrant Church and me. You have to have thick skin to do something new. You have to be able to love people and handle the words they yell amid their hurt. In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown writes that leaders must have a "strong back, soft front, and wild heart."<sup>4</sup> Pastors deal with such a diversity of individuals and needs that they often find themselves across the table from people who don't realize how their emotions are affecting them. Pastors have to respond with empathy and compassion even in the midst of being attacked. The unique dynamics of pastoral and church leadership requires the kind of strength, gentleness, and courage that Brown is describing.

People leave; it is okay. You do not need to be burdened by the false pressure to be everything to everyone. Jesus refused this pressure. People rejected him and turned their back on him. Some of his closest followers betrayed him and denied knowing him.

I wish I could say there was just one wave of people who left. But that would be dishonest and not all that helpful. We found there were waves of people who left at different times along the

journey. Some left in the first six months after the restart. They had hoped that somehow everything being different would feel like doing everything the same, just better. When it was different—very different—things did not feel the same anymore. They wanted something that felt a little more like the church they had always known. They had genuinely thought they wanted to change, and they were indeed on board, but when it became real, it was more than they could handle.

The next wave of people left when we went from one service to two services. Things change as you grow, and not everyone is as comfortable with that growth as leaders are. As the pastor, you are very interested and hopeful for the growth of the church. There may be other leaders who are with you in this hope. However, the average churchgoer may not care all that much if the church grows. They are more concerned with how the church takes care of their family and any guests that they bring.

Other people love a very small church. We all have preferences. When your church does not meet their preferences any longer, they are likely to leave.

I usually let people leave. I do not chase them down and try to persuade them to stay. I want all followers of Jesus to be in a church where they can love, serve, and partner in ministry. I want them to be completely bought in and sold out. The church I lead may not be *that* church for everyone. So, I do not chase people who want to leave. We do reach out to those who may be drifting, struggling, or merely trying to find their way. But we don't try to keep people who want to leave. We let people go, and it's okay.

We all need to be comfortable with who God made us. We cannot reach everyone, and not everyone will like each one of us. Do what you were made to do, with God's help.

## Delegate Ministry

I learned to delegate ministry and empower others to accomplish much of the work of the church. This is an ongoing lesson for me. In the early stages of a church plant, revitalization, or restart, pastors carry a massive load using every one of the gifts that they have, and even doing things they don't feel gifted to do. In the earliest days, there are things that will only get done if the pastor does them. In that season, the mind-set that my father taught me as a kid was helpful. He would say to me every Saturday morning during chores time, "If you see something that needs doing, do it."

During my early teenage years, I took my life into my own hands once. I said to my dad, "You tell us, 'When you see something that needs to be done, do it,' but when you see something that needs to be done, you tell me to do it." My dad came across that room and was in my face faster than the Flash. I thought I might not survive the moment. In my comment was hidden the leadership growth potential that I would need later in life. Because I see things that other people don't see, and care about things that others don't care about, I could run myself ragged trying to do all the things that I see that need to be done.

## Share the Load

If the pastor or leader is doing everything, the people of the church are robbed of opportunities to use their gifts to further the kingdom work of the church. Simultaneously, the lid on the church's potential is lowered to the capacity of one person instead of being raised to the potential of the entire congregation. The leader has to move beyond thinking, "When I see something that needs to be done, I'll do it." At the same time, we don't need leaders who simply tell others to do all the things they see that

need to be done. Instead, we have to learn to share the ministry by understanding our fellow believers, learning their skills, strengths, and gifts, and inviting them to use those gifts for the good of the kingdom work. When you see something that needs to be done, it can be valuable to take a moment and ask yourself, “Who has God gifted in our church that could begin to pay attention to this and would be able to do this well in the future?” Make a plan to talk with that person and invite him or her to join you in the ministry. Remember that when you recruit someone to join you in the work, you are giving that person an opportunity to do what he or she were created to do and really want to do.

## REFLECTING ON OBSCURITY

We developed our understanding of ourselves and our calling during the season of anonymity. When we restarted as Hydrant Church, I was convinced of our calling, vision, and values. However, these were fresh and new to us as a congregation. They were untested and unproven, purely speculative and aspirational. The season of obscurity gave us the time to grow in our understanding of the people who were joining our movement. It also gave us time to drive the vision and values all the way down through the organization.

It was during this time that we began to really own the calling, and the calling began to own us. As we had this time hidden away from the watching eyes of friends and critics, we were able to come to terms with what we believed. We were able to build confidence in who we were and what we were trying to do. By the time others were starting to take notice, we weren't bothered by

the criticism or praise. We were too confident in our calling and identity to chase someone else's vision, ideas, or approval.

We refocused on being the church that we were and not the one we wished we were, and we learned to embrace and enjoy the benefits and joys of each stage of growth without rushing to the next. It is easy to dream of one day being this kind of church or that kind of church. I am often looking out into the future to see what's next and to design a plan to get there. In leadership these are valuable assets. They can also be a liability in leadership, especially pastoral leadership.

If my personality and strengths push me to look past people to the tasks and strategies of the organization, I fail to be available to serve the people God is entrusting to me. If this part of me keeps me focused on what I believe is coming in the future, then I will not be able to see what is beautiful, good, and wonderful about right now. During the season of obscurity, I learned that every season has monumental struggles, along with seasons of tremendous joy. Both the reasons for joy and those particular struggles are gifts of the stage and season. Embracing and enjoying them are important to sanity and survival. There are wonderful things about a church of forty that disappear when the church grows to seventy-five or a hundred or two hundred and beyond. Things change; don't miss out on the church you have and the joys of this stage because you are looking only to the next.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Describe the current stage of your ministry. Are you in a season of preparing the soil, planting, working the fields, harvesting, or resting?
2. What are the best parts of your current stage?
3. In what ways do you relate to the feelings of obscurity described in this chapter?
4. What lessons may God want you to learn in this season, before he chooses to trust you with more?
5. What system, or lack of system, is limiting your growth as a church ministry? What steps do you need to take to develop healthy systems?
6. Sharing the load can be tough for leaders, especially capable leaders. You are likely where you are because of your ability to shoulder a heavy load. However, what got you here won't get you to where you need to go next. What specific tasks and responsibilities do you need to share with another person? Who is that person? How will you share that load?



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DISCERN THE REASON FOR THE  
CHURCH'S EXISTENCE.



Our last Sunday as Goldsboro Wesleyan ended with fifty-six people in worship. Our first Sunday as Hydrant Church, we worshipped with 132 people. It felt amazing. We started that first service, and thus our life as a church, with a song by Rend Collective, *Build Your Kingdom Here*.

Some of those lyrics became our prayer and have remained at the heart of why Hydrant exists today. We have prayed to see God's kingdom erupt in our midst, as God does the miraculous. We prayed that we would become all that we were created to be and that the hope and passion of Jesus would overflow from within us. We refused to see our lives, work, and church wasted. We would lay them down, creating a place for the disconnected, disenfranchised, written off, and the people no other church wanted. We dreamed of the kingdom come and a place for all those seeking life in Jesus.

We believed great things were ahead. We had hope and believed big things were possible. Predictably, the family and friends that came to support the core team on our launch day went back to their church homes the next week. The following week, a few more people who had come to see what the commotion was about were gone. By the fourth week, we were running about eighty in worship, and the core began to crumble.

Staying closed for only a month turned out to be a critical mistake. Looking back, I believe we should have waited until at least January to relaunch. This dangerous mistake was caused by another misstep. We had failed to gain much outside financial support from our denominational district, a supporting mother church, or any other organization. We were pretty much going it alone. That is never a good idea. If you want to restart well, find those with a common heart, calling, and passion to come alongside you. As the full-time pastor, I was dependent upon the

church for financial livelihood. These factors necessitated a quick turnaround that nearly sabotaged the whole thing.

As I said, in our fourth week, the core began to crumble. We started to lose those who had stayed with us from the closed church. They assumed that the changes wouldn't be too drastic and that this new church would still feel like "their" church. I am not quite sure what they had expected from me or the church, or what I had expected from them. During the in-between season, I had personally met with each family to explain what had happened, what was happening at that point, and what to expect of the new church. I had asked questions, and attempted to answer as many questions as possible. For some, that conversation was enough to let them know they didn't want to be a part of the new church. That was okay, and I had expected some of that. I thought we had more unity going into the new church. Perhaps it was my excitement and rose-colored glasses. Perhaps they wanted to give it a chance and were just overwhelmed with the changes. Sadly, a lot of heartache for everyone could have been prevented by staying closed longer.

Hydrant Church didn't feel, look, or sound like the old church. The message of Jesus' gospel was loud and clear, but few of the methods and means of communication were the same. This change was, of course, the goal of the restart endeavor, and a problem for some of the remnant who had made this journey with us. They had heard the vision and had participated in the preview services. They had glimpses of what was coming. Seeing it come to life was still too much of a shock for some.

Some wonderfully kind people moved on, with grace and love in their hearts, to find a new church home they could love. I am grateful to those folks. There were also hurting people who hurt many others on their way out. Some angry people actively dragged

family and friends out of the church. By the time the dust had settled a couple of months later, 80 percent of our remnant was gone. Nearly all of the board members who had voted to restart the church left during this time. Seven of the team's nine leaders left. Eighty percent of our income was gone.

Strangely, the Sunday after the last disruptive people left, I felt peace. I didn't know if I would get paid that week, but I felt peace. The service started with as many people on the stage as in the seats, but I felt peace. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I felt peace. I chose to let that peace guard my heart and direct my thoughts, at least at that moment. This is probably the time I have most understood Paul's phrase, "You will experience peace, which exceeds anything we can understand" (Phil. 4:7 NLT).

When the exodus of the remnant began, our district leadership explained that there was nothing the district could do to help financially, but that because of our radical move to restart, there was one option that could help us a little bit. If I could convince the remaining board members to vote on a status change, then it would give us some financial reprieve on our district and denominational monetary obligations, along with other benefits. Those benefits included:

- ⊗ The lead pastor would be appointed by the district and report to the district. This step was invaluable in providing some freedom to lead without fear of being removed.
- ⊗ The denominational assessments that were customarily rated at 11 percent would be eliminated for a year and then incrementally increased over five years.
- ⊗ The church's board would be dissolved and replaced with an appointed advisory team approved by the district.

Based on that recommendation, we entered the “developing” status, and it was genuinely some relief at that point. Every little bit provided a glimmer of hope. I began to write letters and emails to everyone who had ever shown special love and support for my work in ministry over the years. I asked them to invest in me and Hydrant Church through prayer and giving, and they came through by giving about \$7,000. Their contributions bought us a couple more months, but I took my second pay reduction in as many years as we rolled into that first summer.

Our big dreams felt like nightmares. Key people moved, attendance and giving eroded. To make it through that summer, we had to dip into our emergency fund every week. I remember thinking, “If we can just make it to September . . .”

When September came, it went from bad to worse.

Goldsboro is an unusual little community. It is a military town, and it is one of those places that young, ambitious, and educated people leave. You can go to a city an hour’s drive in nearly any direction to make more money for the same jobs. So, as has happened many times now, we had a round of great and supportive people leave for jobs and military moves. It was devastating.

I was ready to give up on this absurd restart idea. I tried finding other employment. Nothing came through. The church was struggling, and we were taking on personal debt to make things happen. Depression, fatigue, disappointment, and negativity were my close companions. I knew something had to change: we needed a breakthrough. The breakthrough did eventually come, but the change that came started in me first.

I was holding on to small victories, every little success I could find during that season. I would tell the story of our first two baptisms to myself every day. I told the story of a friend who had

stepped out of addiction with the help of the church. I would tell stories of people who had given up on church but found their way back with us. I was holding on by my fingernails at this point.

One day I was asked a question that started a spiral. I was sitting in the office with a college student about to begin her first semester studying for ministry. She asked me, “Will the church be here when I get back?” At that moment, I wasn’t sure. I knew I had more on the line than anyone else. If the church closed, the people attending would land in another church around the community, and we would be soon forgotten. I would, however, have a major failure on my resume, lose my job, likely lose the home we had just purchased, and we would be yet again uprooting our family.

## GIVING UP

So I did the only reasonable thing: I gave up. I can remember telling God in prayer, “I have no idea what I am doing most of the time.” It was how I felt. Leaders aren’t supposed to feel that way. I have served in every possible area of ministry, including kids, youth, middle school, sports, discipleship, and outreach. I had started a venue in a large church. I had revitalized a church on the brink that remains sustainable today. I had trained in church planting. I know now that it was all used to prepare me for the restart and founding of Hydrant Church, but it was all insufficient.

There is a little truth that is rarely mentioned. What you are doing right now is being done for the first time. Sure, there are principles and ideas and similarities to other situations. However, the leadership of your group of people in your community at this point in history and culture has never been done before. You are

doing what has never been done before. I did something never done before with this group of people, in this place, and at this point in time, and I was feeling the weight of that reality.

I reached out to some friends and asked them to pray. I did not have a specific prayer to ask them to pray. I just knew I needed the support and to find hope again. It was the beginning of a turning point. I was not in a good place. I was drained emotionally from the constant concern for survival and the needs of our family. It made me irritable and irrational at times, especially with my family. I was physically drained and not taking care of myself. Mentally, I was fried; I felt like I had no ideas. I was spiraling. I could see later that I was in a depression spiral.

During my spiraling, doubting, and seemingly endless battles to persevere, two people stood unwaveringly beside me in the depths of my sorrow and feelings of failure. Jesus and my wife, Anita, never doubted that I would be able to do this restart thing. The two of them seemed calm in the face of my doubts and insecurities. They believed in me and the vision. They believed in the possibilities. They always reminded me that hope is more powerful than fear and that I needed to act on faith. I would not have made it without this support.

Something had to change for Hydrant to survive, for me to survive. I have been in and around the church all my life. There is no greater force for good in the world. Throughout history, no group of people in the world has done more to feed the hungry, heal the sick, educate children, lift the poor, and bring diverse people together. It is who we are, our identity. In the church, we are baptized, disciplined, empowered, and sent on a mission in the world. Churches bring life to people, make families stronger, and make communities better. The church is the body of Christ. It

leads us into healing, forgiveness, purpose, meaning, and the kingdom of God. Every neighborhood, every town, every city needs healthy dynamic churches. However, in our country, many churches have been unhealthy for a long time. It crept up on us over the last few decades. Our churches have traded making disciples for enabling cultural Christians. We stand for little and against a lot. Our churches are not mission-minded disciple brigades making disciples, starting churches, and serving the world.

I, most recently, came out of a church setting that was so toxic and in such denial that it had completely lost its identity. The church caused at least as much hurt as good. The church had grown for over fifty years to become the largest by far in its small community. It had done so with a mission to introduce people to Jesus. As often happens over time, the purpose shifted. Success in our goals can be the most significant inhibitor of future success. Success does not automatically lead to more success. Success is effective at producing more fear. We can easily become consumed with maintaining what we have accomplished, rather than staying focused on the mission. This particular church had reached a place where the singular goal had become to maintain at all costs what it had acquired.

On top of that, it seemed more important to extend the legacy and control of its leaders than it was to make Jesus famous. They lost Jesus in it all. They lost who they were in it all; they had forgotten their story. People were no longer the object of Jesus' affection to be pointed back to his salvation. Disciple-making efforts dwindled to another class to fill the minds of congregants with more Bible knowledge. Sadly, people suffered most as they became expendable resources that were used or tossed as needed.

I didn't fit the mold and get with the program well enough in this church. For a time, I was useful for cleaning up messes and

making the church look good. But it didn't take long for me to become a liability that needed managing. I was, like everyone else, expendable. I was not merely asked to resign or even fired. First, my work was undermined by top leaders. They believed more control was needed and started micromanaging in excruciating detail. They falsely accused me of stupid things to make me look bad. I was lied about and I was lied to. My family was tossed out like yesterday's trash.

When I complied and submitted my resignation, I was forced to sign an eighteen-month gag order pertaining especially to what I knew from being in elders' meetings about leaders' actions and decisions. Additionally, I was required to sign a noncompete clause. It was the only way the church would pay the severance they had promised. It was written in order to keep me from serving in any way in any church in that county or eight counties adjacent to that county across two states. According to the document, I was not even permitted to sweep the floor in a church within that radius. Then, they paid one-third of the promised severance. It was one of the most painful moments and seasons of my life. I was hurt and angry. I felt anger every day for nearly a year until God began to breed forgiveness in my soul. Forgiveness does not erase hurt. God does heal, but forgiveness is the soil in which healing grows. It is a part of my journey that helped me establish Hydrant Church's healing culture. It was terrible, but my pain was not wasted.

Today, that story does not define the way I think, but it does give me a valuable perspective, for which I am thankful. Many people who grow up in the faith come to a moment in their life when they are faced with overwhelming doubts and questions that a neat and overly certain Christianity cannot answer. Pastors

are not exceptions; many pastors struggle with their faith. Mike McHargue suggests that somewhere near 45 percent of people will undergo a significant faith transition in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Most believers can feel the cold fingers of doubt clawing for their attention at painful and uncertain times in their lives. The fear of what we have to lose forces most people to suppress or deny the existence of their doubts.

## GOING INTO THE DARKNESS

When I faced this loss, it shook me so fiercely that I began to question my identity as a believer and pastor. I could no longer respond with a rational, easy, spiritual answer. I think grief, pain, and loss have a way of doing that. They shake you so hard that only your questions remain. For some people, the shaking disrupts their faith to such a degree that they can't find their way to a new identity in Christ. For months, I was afraid to dive into the darkness and questions. In my mind, my faith, identity, career, and possibly my eternal destiny were at stake. When I did finally enter the darkness of doubt, questions, and grief, I was surprised by what I found. The questions and doubts remained, but there was a light in the dark. Jesus was in the darkness. I have not found all the answers that I sought. Instead, I saw the One who is truth in a new way.

As Jesus faced the cross, he fell to the ground in desperation, begging his Father for a reprieve. Luke says that even after an angel was sent to encourage him, he was in such anguish that he asked even more desperately. Later, on the cross, Jesus cried out, "Why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). My point is not to discuss

the theology of Jesus' experience. Instead, I want you to see the Jesus that I saw. When I let myself wander into my forsakenness, I found Jesus waiting for me at the bottom of that cliff. He did not show me a way back; instead, he showed me how to trust in the times when God's presence is found in absence. I would return to that place more times than I can count during this whole restart process.

When we had an opportunity to create a new church, to restart, we wanted to create a safe place for all those who had been through what we had endured. We wanted to create a place of healing and hope. It had to be a place where people could wrestle, ask any question, and not feel pressured to believe what they did not believe. We wanted to create a place for the misfits and don't-fits. We wanted to create a place for all the people who would never walk into a church or never believed they would walk into a church again. We wanted to create a place for the marginalized, written off, the forgotten, the no-names, the unacceptable, and the ones who didn't feel good enough. We wanted to be a place of second chances. We wanted to be a holy hospital of transforming grace.

From the outside, it may have looked like we just changed the name. That would have been a lot easier—not easy, but easier. When we restarted, so much needed to change for us to become the kind of healing place that our new name pointed to. We weren't just changing the name. We changed what we were doing, but that wasn't enough. We changed how we did what we did, but that wasn't enough. We had to go back to the drawing board and rethink why we were doing what we were doing and the way we were doing it. If the why of our church didn't change, nothing was going to change. Changing the why is way harder and more time consuming than changing the name.

Part of rethinking our *why* meant that our beliefs about the triune God, the church, and ourselves needed to evolve. Sometimes, people get nervous when you start talking about beliefs changing. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:1–2, “Knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.”

## DEALING WITH WRONG BELIEFS

A few things are essential to remember when it comes to our beliefs changing, growing, or evolving.

First, we all think we are right about everything. No one intentionally holds onto ideas or beliefs he or she is convinced are untrue. We all, at times, allow ourselves to live in denial or rationalize things, but generally we do not intentionally hold onto false things.

Second, none of us are right about everything. We don't know what we don't know. We are unsure of what is correct or untrue in our ideas or beliefs. The wise person, therefore, holds his or her beliefs with an open hand, heart, and mind. It looks like a person willing to risk everything for what he or she believes, while also acknowledging that there is a lot to learn.

Third, we especially need to remain open to God showing us new things about himself. If none of our beliefs have evolved or changed recently, there is a pretty good chance that we have stopped listening to and learning from God.

## Acting on What We Know

Some of the change we need is to begin acting on what we know to be true. We may have right beliefs, but we are not yet owned by those beliefs, nor have we owned them for ourselves. For example, we believe that Jesus instructed us to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the world. However, few churches are actively going beyond their own walls. Few churches are systematically demonstrating loving care and truth with the congregation, the community, the city, their hated cousins, or the world. Instead, we attempt to reach over our communities to serve the world. We are called to serve and witness. We are called to reach out into our communities. We are called to invest and invite. We believe these things as a church; we often don't believe them enough to act on them. We don't believe something until we pair our belief with action. I can say I believe a salad is better for me than a giant cheeseburger. However, I don't own that belief unless I eat salad voluntarily.

## Eliminating Wrong Beliefs

Wrong beliefs find their way into the church in sneaky ways and they need to be eliminated: We believe that the church should never change. We believe it is our job to stand up for our rights and what is right. We believe that we defend the gospel and that the church serves its members. We believe we are small because we don't sugarcoat the truth. We believe churches that grow must be compromising somehow. We think we need to reach everyone. We believe our way of worship, discipleship, kids' ministry, or evangelism is the right way. We believe there is an *us* and *them*. Like a virus, harmful beliefs that do not come from Jesus or Scripture infect the church.

## DISCOVERING OUR WHY

At Hydrant, we had to rethink our ecclesiology to discover our why. That meant we had to see the churches of our area as the body of Christ collectively. We each are different parts of the same body. We each have different functions, design, gifts, and calling. Therefore, we at Hydrant Church do not have to reach everyone. Anyone should feel loved, accepted, and invited into the kingdom of God at Hydrant, but we do not have to try to reach everyone. We can play our part in the whole work of the body in our community. Rethinking this belief set us free to do a few things exceptionally well and to have an open back door for those that needed to find another church.

We looked at the many churches in our area. Across denominational lines, most of the churches had very similar expressions of worship. They also had very similar programming. Most of the churches were designed to reach and minister to one small part of the population. Most of the buildings had a more feminine or traditional vibe. There were lots of doilies and fake flowers and mauve (read pink) carpet.

We decided that part of why we exist is to be a place where the people other churches reject could connect with God and others, be filled with grace and truth, and overflow in love and service. We exist to be a hospital for the sin-sick and those sick of sin.

We redesigned and decorated our facilities to be an environment where men wanted to be. We did this because we believe that if we reach men we are more likely to reach entire families. Men, by the way, often feel left out of many small churches. It is odd how many churches can be male-dominated and male-led, and yet create environments that are unwelcoming and

uncomfortable for outsider men. We need to rethink this whole mess. We need an egalitarian and shared leadership that creates a place where men and women are welcomed, engaged, and able to connect, grow, and live spiritually deep lives.

We designed our worship experiences, programming, and ministry approach to be a place of patient acceptance. We created a church where the outsiders could find grace and belong as Jesus was finding them. We wanted it to be a place where people could look for God together, whether they walked in as addicts, single parents, divorced, hurting, confused, alcoholic, agnostic, or gay. We designed our experiences young. We decorated young. We focused on the issues that younger adults are facing. We created a community.

We returned to the words of Jesus calling his disciples to make disciples who make disciples. Jesus instructed his followers to witness to what they had experienced in Jesus. To share his grace and love, to baptize believers, and to teach disciples the ways of Jesus' family. The heartbeat of Hydrant, and any healthy church, is making disciples. It is about helping people to be able to hear and respond to Jesus. It is about helping people to allow Jesus' healing to penetrate every hidden nook and cranny of their lives. It is about teaching people to help others on that journey. Everything we do should be making disciples.

When the church reclaims why it exists and allows that why to truly shape its actions, the church recognizes the call to an ever-increasing outward focus. It doesn't take anything radical to start: simply decide to reshape the things you are already doing. Look at every class, program, service, and activity that you currently are doing and ask some simple questions: Will an outsider feel comfortable participating in this activity? Can someone with

no church experience or knowledge of the Bible understand our speech? Will those who do not know us feel safe, accepted, and wanted? Who did we have in mind when we designed this activity, program, or service? How might we better attend to the needs and questions of the guests among us? Are the expectations clear and explained? If you take everything that you do and shift it just two degrees in the direction of those who do not know you, then you will end up in a very different place down the road. Eddie Gibbs writes, “The church is shaped by the mission of God rather than by a self-serving agenda of numerical growth or defensive isolation. In other words, growth is a byproduct and should not be the primary focus. At the same time nongrowth raises legitimate questions regarding the church’s faithfulness to its calling.”<sup>22</sup>

## MORE THAN NUMBERS

All church leaders need occasional reminders that we do not serve an agenda of numerical growth. We fill out annual reports and review monthly statistics that measure and count anything that we can count in the church. We say things like, “We count people because people count.” That statement never really made anyone feel like he or she mattered. We need to be driven by kingdom-building agendas. We are motivated by the hope expressed in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.”

We were each created with a purpose expressed from the very beginning of Scripture. We have been assigned a mission, clearly expressed by Jesus in the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Each one of us is a part of the calling to make

and multiply disciples. Each one of us has been given strengths and gifts to play a role in that collective mission. We will, without question, be held accountable for how we use the strengths, gifts, and opportunities entrusted to us. In Matthew 25, Jesus told the parable of the landowner and his servants, describing the time when we will be judged for the results of our lives. The chapter leads to the singular conclusion that the results matter. We must be mission-focused, but we have to be growth-oriented. We tend to get one or the other in many churches. We need both mission focus and growth orientation.

The statistics on church health are staggering. According to Exponential, a solid 80 percent of churches are stuck in survival mode. They cannot focus on mission because they are focused on surviving. They can't think about investing resources in opportunities because they feel stuck in decline or paralyzed by the need to take the steps that will help them grow. Sixteen percent of churches break free and find ways to grow. They are steadily adding to their ministries and church. They have stepped away from the ledge of oblivion and are moving steadily toward their communities. They solve problems and overcome obstacles. Only 4 percent of churches ever escape the clutches of this level of success to multiply. Only 4 percent of churches ever plant. Less than 1 percent of churches ever create a movement with the individual and collective capacity for kingdom results that we see in the early church.<sup>3</sup>

There was so much that we had to rethink when we restarted, but one of the most challenging transitions was this balance. We had to balance focusing on the mission while producing growth. We had to learn to expect of ourselves kingdom results. We had to learn to evaluate, change often, and try again. Everything had to

be designed to produce results, and everything had to help us to live by the mission, accomplish our vision, and generate growth. We did not—and do not—have the resources available to ignore unproductive activities. If we are not making disciples by connecting those alienated, filling those growing, and overflowing in service and evangelism, then we are not the church.

### EVALUATE, EVALUATE, EVALUATE

We in the church have to learn to evaluate. I mean transparent, honest, and caring evaluation, spoken kindly. In our context, we assess after every worship service. We evaluate after every event. We evaluate every leader. We evaluate every small group and class and gathering. We evaluate after every mission. Then, we formally evaluate every ministry, at least once a year. We evaluate our vision and mission focus regularly. When something works, we want to know why it worked. When something doesn't work, we want to know why it doesn't work. We fix what we can. We replace what we can't fix. We eliminate what is no longer helping us. We fan into flame the things that are working.

When I started consulting with other churches, I was amazed by the amount of stuff that churches are doing that is reaching no one, spiritually forming no one, and serving no one outside the church. I am amazed at what we spend money doing. I am also surprised at who churches give money to, as a way of outsourcing mission. We need leaders who can help us to step back, see the big picture, and refocus on the results that God has called us to produce. We have too little time and money to mess around with stuff that makes no real difference in anyone's life. We have to reach people. We have

to make disciples. We have to stand with the marginalized, written off, hurting, and lonely with the love of Jesus. We have to multiply. There are not a lot of other things that we have to do.

## THE NEED FOR GROWTH

If we look at the church's activity from the very beginning, it produced four types of growth. You may not be growing in all these ways all the time, but you should be growing in some of these ways at any time.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God, and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

First, they grew in spiritual maturity. They dedicated themselves to being and making disciples through learning, partnering in mission, eating together, and prayer. These activities provided the necessary environment for new and developing disciples to grow and mature in their faith and relationship to Christ. Second, they grew in unity. The believers were together and shared in

common. They came together daily, shared life in their homes, and praised God together. They had a single mind and shared a purpose. It produced in them unity. Third, they grew in favor. Their neighbors and community were grateful for them, which led to opportunities and connections and trust in the city. Finally, they grew in numbers. The Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved.

I believe that in nearly every situation, these four represent not just the different ways that our people and churches grow, but the progression of growth that happens in most churches. God entrusts new believers to churches that can and will help them to grow. As the people of our church grow in their love and faith, they mature. An immature church will see little growth. Maturity produces unity. With maturity comes the ability to love difficult people, forgive quickly, and work with others. Unity grows as a result. A unified church is a beautiful, focused church that meets the needs of those around it. It brings joy to its neighbors and community, giving it favor. That favor translates into opportunities. Those opportunities expand our capacity to make disciples. Positive attention is the attention you need in order to be heard. When the gospel is heard, God adds to our numbers.

Growth matters. We have, in some parts of the church, ignored for too long the need to grow. We have excused our ineffective work. We have wasted time, energy, and resources on things that didn't work. We are called to more, and given a purpose in our design as human beings. Focus on that mission, and fruitfulness is the result. Especially in smaller churches, we make excuses. We have a thousand reasons why it won't work in our place. Instead, forget all the reasons that you can't do something beautiful for the kingdom, and find one reason that you can.

Growth does not mean that every church is going to get big. It doesn't mean that every church should be trying to get big. Every church has a size that fits best. One way to orient toward growth is to design your ministry to serve twice as many people as you currently serve. What systems and changes need to be in place for twice as many people to worship with you each week? What leaders and groups do you need to make disciples of twice as many people? What do you need to do to reach out to twice as many people in the community? By creating the capacity to minister to twice as many people, you make growth possible. When you stay out ahead by always being ready to serve twice as many people as you currently serve, you will stay prepared for when God brings the harvest. If God doesn't bring a harvest, the improved systems are beneficial to the church in any stage.

## CONSIDERING A RESTART

Restarting, revitalizing, or staying focused on the right things will require you to rethink and name why you exist. Your "why" connects you to others and leads to the answers of how you will do ministry and what ministries are the right idea for you.

Restarting was the craziest and wildest ride that I have ever taken. It pushed me, tested me, and took me places that I never thought that I would go. Looking back over that first challenging year, I realize that we learned so much preparing for the restart, during the restart, and during the first couple of years that followed the restart. We did plenty of things that worked well, and we did a lot of things that made our lives more difficult than perhaps they had to be. If you are considering a restart, I recommend that

you read Dan Turner's book *Dying to Restart*. You must go into the process eyes open and with as much information as possible. Here are some things to consider.

### **Go Slow and Consider All Your Options**

There is no one right answer when it comes to rethinking a dying church with the hopes of initiating a new life cycle. There are great stories of pastors who led their church through a transformation that was slow and steady. It can take three years or five years or fifteen years. God asked us to have the perspective that we are in this for the long haul and that we have all the time in the world to do everything that God wants us to do. We have to spend the time discerning God's direction. Build maturity, develop unity, earn favor, and then reap the harvest. Whether you take one of the routes of revitalization or a restart route, you need to be slow and intentional.

Consider all the different options. Consider your community's demographics. Consider your church's history and calling. Consider the existing gifts and strengths in your church. Consider your commitment and the leaders' willingness to commit. Discern the reputation of the church in the community. Try some different ways of generating momentum. Consider the resources you have (or don't have) should you lose a large portion of tithing. If there is another viable way to get the church moving in healthy directions that do not include restarting, take the other way. There is no hurry to make it all happen right now. Refuse to overestimate what can be accomplished in a year; it always leads to underestimating what can be accomplished in a decade.

Cast vision in waves. Start with those closest to you. Give them time to think, pray, and decide if they also believe that God is in

the idea. Then expand to leaders. Develop your plan of attack and your timeline for restarting. Then meet with every stakeholder personally. Sit down with every family in the church and explain the vision, the strategy, and the schedule. Build consensus. Then, and only then, go public. These efforts will save you a lot of headaches, heartaches, explosions, and questions.

### **Get Support**

There is no way to overemphasize this point: Get support! We had excellent emotional support from our district. They encouraged me when I was frustrated. They stood up to bullies who called, wrote, or emailed the district office about what was happening. They met with our board or staff when needed. I am eternally grateful for Dan Leroy and Ernest Mullins who believed in me and let me do this crazy thing. My wife, Anita, believed in the work and in me, even when I did not. She prayed hard and often. She was often calm in my raging sea. If your spouse is not sold on the idea of restarting, don't do it. You will need champions in the congregation who believe when others doubt. Al Johnson, Tommy Gay, Mike Shearin, and Jeff Cannon believed in the dream, vocalized their support, embraced the pain, and walked the hard roads of the restart with me.

Get financial support and guidance. Don't do it alone as we did. This oversight was the greatest threat to the survival of the vision in the first eighteen months. Find an organization, your district or denominational authorities, or another church to serve as a financial partner and practical guide. You are stretching yourself and your church into new territory. You will need the guidance of wise and experienced leaders. You will need the camaraderie and coaching of a good mentor. You will need financial support to

restart. Often churches find themselves in need of restart because they have run out of financial resources and people to turn the ship around.

We were able to get a few thousand dollars to fund the marketing campaign for our restart. I am incredibly grateful to our district for that support. It was invaluable in making the vision of the first Sunday a reality. However, we went through financial purgatory personally and as a congregation over the next two years because we didn't have any outside financial support. God provided and was faithful, but it required a great deal of humility and sacrifice. We are still paying the price of this oversight.

We learned that we could depend on God, but it is not a lesson that we needed to learn in this way. I took pay reductions every year for the first three years. During that time, we acquired thousands of dollars in personal debt to make ends meet. I made contact with everyone I knew that had believed in me or my ministry at some point in the previous decade and asked them to consider a financial investment in the new mission. As I described earlier, we begged \$7000 from friends and family. That bought us six or eight more weeks at one point in the first year. We repeatedly dug into emergency funds as a church to cover necessary expenses in the first couple of years. If you do the restart right, your growth will far outpace your internal giving. Having outside support will allow you to focus on ministry and the challenges of those first couple of years without the fear of wondering how to feed your family.

No matter what support you are able to muster, you will still get bloody trying to go through this wall. Please, don't go alone.

## **Really Shut Down**

You need a hard stop that lasts at least three months. As I said earlier, we shut down, but only for a month. We did this, honestly, because my salary was dependent on the church. If we did not take offerings, I did not get a paycheck. Because of our short shut-down, some people that God was going to move away from the church didn't have enough time to get off the boat. As a result, we didn't feel like we had truly restarted until God had finished his "saint relocation program" three months after we started.

There has to be a substantial break with the past. The culture needs time to die. The name needs time to die. The old ways of thinking and working need time to die. Anticipation needs time to grow so that it can breed hope and excitement. A new life needs time to sprout. Newly planted vision needs time to take root. New leaders need time to get their bearings. The community needs time to discover the new church. The pastor needs time to breathe and prepare physically, emotionally, and spiritually for what is ahead.

You will not have a new life in a restart if you do not sufficiently shut down. Really shut down, go dark, disappear, and stay closed. Use this time to pray. Figure out who you are going to become. Identify your values and your niche in the community. Develop your strategy. Build teams and pour into leaders.

## **Have a Core Team Committed to the Cause**

Commitment starts with pastoral leadership. If you are going to lead a church through a restart, you need to be ready to commit at least five solid years to the adventure. Restarting is not something you experiment with; you have to commit. You are leading a church to its death and resurrection. It takes time, stable leadership, and significant commitment. Do not even think about it

unless you can commit yourself to see it through to completion—whatever that completion may be. Your commitment is necessary to inspire the commitment that you need from other leaders. Find like-minded people who will own the mission with you. Take the time to find and develop your team before you restart.

When asked what leaders in small churches can do to create the team that they wish they had, Mark Wilson, assistant professor of discipleship, multiplication, and renewal at Southern Wesleyan University, responded by saying,

Find one or two who share the vision and invest there. If you can't find them in your pews, pray them in and keep shaking trees throughout the community. In Hayward, I found two key leaders (one I had to prop up all the time; the other was more solid) and invested in them. The solid one remains the most significant leader in the church to this day. I had to find other leaders in the community—nurturing relationships, and then investing in their leadership. I took my leaders to conferences, bought great books for them, exposed them to incredible ministry leaders. They caught the vision that way.<sup>4</sup>

It is a long-view mission with a quick start.

It is easy to be tempted to think that a restart is a silver bullet to fix all that is dysfunctional in the church. Simply restarting fixes nothing. When a church is steady and a new leader brings momentum and renewed missional focus, it is like trying to score a touchdown starting at your twenty-yard line—a long, hard road. When you plant a church from scratch, you are starting at the one-yard line and trying to get to the end zone—an even longer, harder

road. The revitalization of a dysfunctional church feels like you're starting in the locker room. In a restart, it's like you discover that you're playing on the wrong field. The restart starts the moment you get everyone back on the bus to head to the right field. There is still a lot that needs to happen before you make it to the end zone.

I thought we would restart and everything would immediately get better. I was sure we would get 200–250 people to attend our launch day. Then we could settle in around a hundred a few weeks later. From that point, we would be rolling and able to focus on what was ahead. I was so wrong. Restarting is a long-range mission. Sure, it starts quickly. In restarting, you get to capitalize on some new momentum and excitement. The challenge of holding together the remnant and keeping them focused on the mission has the dynamic of a revitalization. The problem of reaching and assimilating new people into the family of God and the purpose of the church has a church-planting dynamic to it. Doing both of those at the same time while bringing the two groups into one new church is unique to restarting. It comes with its beautiful joys and torturous pains. It takes longer than you expect. Do not be fooled into thinking, “We will just restart, and it will be a quick and easy new adventure.” Grow maturity, grow unity, grow in favor, and the numbers will grow.

Restarting can be a beautiful witness to the regenerative power of Jesus in the gospel. It can be your greatest adventure. It will make you question everything you know, but if Jesus leads you to that grave, he will lead you to the resurrection on the other side. Hold on to your call and devote yourself to the mission. You will be able to say, along with the apostle Paul, “I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to [others] the word of God in its fullness” (Col. 1:25).



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What story would you tell to help people understand the reason you do ministry the way that you do ministry?
2. Are there experiences, moments of calling, or giftings that radically shape the way you think about ministry?
3. Could the best path forward for your ministry or church be to lay down its life for the sake of the lost? Is God asking your church to take up the cross and follow him?
4. Does the idea of a restart frighten you, energize you, or inspire you?
5. Is God asking you to be a part of a restart or to lead a restart?

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DISCOVER THE HIDDEN  
ADVANTAGES OF SMALL.



The church had died and been reborn a year before. Now it was time for my big dreams to die too, and for me to be reborn.

My entire ministry up to this point had been shaped by the belief that bigger is better. It wasn't quite that blatant, maybe something more like "Everything that is healthy grows." At least that is the way I understood it. Every ministry that I had led up to this point had grown significantly and relatively quickly. I view myself as called, capable, and extremely hard working. My capacity for stress and workload is higher than most. When things go the wrong way or become difficult, my default is to double down my efforts to find the solution. If I am tired, I work harder. If there is a problem, I solve it. When we began the restart, I believed I could make things happen by the sheer strength of my will.

This time, I couldn't make anything happen. I was broken and defeated. I felt helpless, and I could feel hopelessness creeping in. Depression and disappointment were always knocking at the door of my heart. Working harder wasn't going to fix the church's problems or my problems. The challenges we faced required more than additional time, effort, or money. If I was going to thrive as a pastor, and we were going to succeed as a church, we needed to rethink ministry. Our greatest need wasn't for more people, resources, staff, buildings, or money. We needed a different perspective.

That rethinking began in me. In this strange season, it was as if God pressed pause on my efforts for six months and started to work in me. He kept slowing me down and revealing new insights to me. He was shaping the way I thought. When my thinking about *big* changed, I started to rethink so many other things too. There were key moments that marked this season for me.

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- ❁ A mentor reminded me, while sitting in Cracker Barrel, “No one at Hydrant this Sunday will ever remember how many people were at your church service. Everyone will remember how you made them feel though.”
  - ❁ I stumbled onto a seemingly obscure book, *Anonymous: Jesus’ Hidden Years . . . and Yours*, by Alicia Britt Chole. I discovered in Chole’s writing a new perspective on obscurity and a new hope for my future.
  - ❁ God called my attention away from the empty seats in our worship center to the ones that had people in them. He whispered, “Son, you are not that good. If you were, you would be famous. Be thankful anyone showed up today. Love, serve, and teach the people that I send you. Let me worry about the empty seats.”
  - ❁ Kevin Meyers listened to my lament through tears and snot. I shared with him how much I resonated with the story of his first few years at 12Stone Church. Then he prayed over me for three ideas to break through the next barrier.
  - ❁ I stood by John Maxwell, who was praying for a couple of hundred church leaders to receive the spiritual gift of leadership from the Holy Spirit. I echoed his prayer. I can’t fully explain it, but there is clear evidence that the Spirit of God empowered me in a new way that day.
  - ❁ I sat on a balcony overlooking the beach as I read Karl Vaters’ book *The Grasshopper Myth*. There I was affirmed as a small church pastor. My calling, passion, and fire were affirmed. I found permission to enjoy each stage of ministry.
  - ❁ I wrestled with God for months over his question, “Will you pastor a church of sixty people the rest of your life, if that’s

what I ask you to do?” This was a tough one for me. I started vocational ministry working in medium to large churches and eventually served in a couple of very large churches.

It was during this time that an idea crept into my mind and took root. I think that it began with an innocent statement that went something like, “Everything healthy grows.”

The message behind the statement, I believe, was that spiritual and organizational health in the church would automatically lead to church growth. If you serve a larger or growing church, then that statement may seem to reinforce your ideas about your church’s health. It, however, also reinforces the cultural value that bigger is better. So, I believed that if a church was small, especially if it was under a hundred in worship, then it was because something was wrong. I assumed the pastor was a weak leader. I thought perhaps it was the people; they were probably selfishly clinging to ineffective things. I believed that they probably didn’t care about growing or didn’t want to grow. Undoubtedly, they must have become apathetic and lazy. I could not conceive of the idea of small church ministry done effectively.

When I began the search for the assignment that providentially led me to Goldsboro Wesleyan Church, I had no intention of accepting any position in a church smaller than a hundred people in average worship. I thought it would be too much of a step backward in my “career.” Now, there I was a few years later, and I had led this church to shut down and restart. We were a year into this crazy thing and running between forty-five to fifty-five in worship. Suddenly, all those things I thought about small churches and small church pastors came rushing to my mind, and I felt them about myself. Something was wrong. Things were not

supposed to turn out this way. We were doing everything that we knew to do, but we were getting nowhere.

My dreams of being the next big thing, doing big things, and leading a big church died. Turns out that was a good thing. It turns out that big is not always better, just different. I learned that there is something remarkable about every healthy church at every stage that can be enjoyed, embraced, and celebrated. God reminded me of the theological and biblical truth that we are not called to build or grow the church. Instead, we are called to make disciples; we are called to develop people. Jesus builds his church. Who was I to tell him how big his creation was supposed to be before it could be useful, beautiful, influential, and cherished? After all, a fruitful apple tree is not the same size as a fruitful stalk of wheat, but you need them both to make a great cobbler.

My disappointment and self-loathing led me to some horrible places. It triggered my need to prove myself and to work harder. I would dive into doing more and more. I would take on things I shouldn't have taken on. The pressure drove me to blame other people for the lack of growth. I blamed the people who left and took the money with them. I blamed the people who stayed because they didn't get it. I blamed the people who had attacked the church and me with crazy online rants. I blamed the people coming in for being too young and inexperienced in faith (that has always been kind of our target demographic, but still!).

Mostly, I blamed myself for failing. I lost faith in myself. I certainly must have heard God wrong. The vision that I thought for sure was so clear must have been distorted. I was confident at that point that we were never going to be a healthy church, much less one capable of reproducing. I lost vision and struggled to imagine the next steps. My courage waned, and I wanted to give up at

times. I especially wanted to give up during that summer run of several months when our giving didn't even come close to our expenses. I was not effectively doing ministry. In my most honest moments, I blamed God for bringing us to Goldsboro and letting me do this crazy thing that he must have known was not going to work.

When God started to get my attention, he wasn't there condemning my frustration. He listened and redirected me to see what I was too blind to see. God refocused my attention on the people entrusted to me. He showed me that it was my job to love them, serve them, and teach them. If I would empower them to become all he had created them to become, then he would send them out to overflow in a remarkable way. I stopped looking at the empty seats. I stopped thinking about the problems that I could not solve. I stopped imagining the church I wished I was leading. I stopped trying to do things like a big church. I stopped feeling like a failure.

Lots of things were happening in me during this time. One of the most surprising things that happened is that I fell in love with the small church. I never saw it coming. I never expected it. I would never have imagined it possible before it happened. I realized that there were things about our small church that were enabling us to reach people that the big churches could not reach. It was opening doors for us that weren't open to anyone else. It was almost like being small was a strategic advantage that everyone was overlooking.

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## ADVANTAGES OF THE LITTLE GUY

Malcolm Gladwell's book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* helped put words to the new things I was feeling. He explained that what many people see as a disability, weakness, or disadvantage may be the very thing that propels us into an unexpected success. Often the misfit or the underdog has a secret advantage that no one sees because it is accepted that there is only one way to fight the battle.<sup>1</sup> We can read the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.

The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels; on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him.

Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." On hearing the

Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified. (1 Sam. 17:3–11)

You get the picture—two armies on opposing hills with a valley between them. Neither enters the valley to surrender the high ground. Neither is interested in the massive losses to their forces that would come with days or weeks of doing battle. So, there was a practice at that time where each nation would send its champion into hand-to-hand combat. The winner would take all, the battle would be decided, and the losing army would surrender. Goliath was the champion of champions. He is depicted in the passage as a descendant of the Nephilim of ancient lore. He had never lost a battle. And everyone was terrified of him.

For forty days, Goliath called out his taunts to the men of Israel without anyone stepping up to take the challenge. David, the youngest—and likely smallest—of Jesse's sons, heard the taunt while delivering sandwiches to his brothers. He was outraged and immediately ready to take the fight. His brothers tried to dissuade him. All they saw was their runt of a little brother who wasn't even a full-time fighter; he was just a shepherd.

David persuaded the king to give him a shot, because he had killed a bear and a lion. The king saw a small man with no armor and thought he had to at least see if he could find some armor to fit this kid. He gave the boy his armor, but David insisted on taking it off. All the while, Goliath was starting to get wind of the challenger. He was moving closer and closer to what he saw as a mere pup. Then the unexpected happened. There was no way David should have been in this fight; he wasn't powerful enough to face the giant. David was not big enough or strong enough to win this fight. But David understood that power doesn't always

come from size. Power can come from other sources as well. Power can be found in changing the rules, using speed instead of strength, or in doing the unexpected.

As the enormous Philistine moved closer to attack him, David sprinted toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead and he fell facedown on the ground.

So, David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand, he struck down the Philistine and killed him. David stepped onto that field and changed the rules of the contest. He changed the game so dramatically that by the time Goliath figured out David was playing a new game it was too late.

David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone. Completely unexpected—or was it? Gladwell explained that as soon as David pulled out his sling, everyone but Goliath knew the battle was over. A slinger in David's day was the equivalent of a sniper today. He could stand back from the line of battle and sling a stone over one hundred yards with pinpoint accuracy. We read about a small, young man with a stone and a sling, and we think underdog. We believe he was under-equipped. He didn't have the size, strength, or weapons he needed to win. He shouldn't even have been in this fight.

Israeli minister of defense Moshe Dayan—the architect of Israel's astonishing victory in the 1967 Six-Day War—also wrote an essay on the story of David and Goliath. According to Dayan, “David fought Goliath not with inferior but (on the contrary) with superior weaponry; and his greatness consisted not in his being willing to go out into battle against someone far stronger

than he was. David's greatness reveals itself in his knowing how to exploit a weapon by which a feeble person could seize the advantage and become stronger."<sup>2</sup>

David knew two things that we should know too. First, David believed the Lord was on his side. David engaged in the battle for the Lord, with the Lord's strength, and then celebrated the Lord in victory. He knew God had called, equipped, and sent him into this battle. Second, David knew that what everyone else said was weakness and disadvantage was actually his advantage. He was strategically designed to win the fight; he just had to change the game plan.

Small churches and their pastors need to remember these two things too. The Lord is with you. You do battle against the forces of the world, sin, and spiritual apathy. You face the giants of fear, loneliness, addiction, divorce, baggage, and sin, but you do not meet them in your strength. You face them in the Lord.

## STRATEGICALLY DESIGNED

God strategically designed you for significant victory against your foes. God created you, small church pastor, and your small church for effective ministry in your community and beyond. You are strategically designed for making disciples. You are strategically designed for the lonely in search of families. You are strategically designed to empower people to use their gifts to serve others. You are strategically designed for more than inspiration, for impact in the lives of people. You are strategically designed to develop the called. You are strategically designed to go places no one else can go and do things no one else can do.

You have to stop seeing yourself the way you think other people see you. David ignored all the people who said he was too small, too young, needed armor, or needed a sword. He used who he was and what he had to lead God's people into a great victory. The small church can be instrumental in leading the church universal to a new day of victory.

Simon Sinek, working from the example of Bill Gore's business model and the work of anthropologist Robin Dunbar, argued that our organizations work best as communities of deep relationships. The number of meaningful relationships that any one person can maintain may differ based on personality, experience, and emotional intelligence. However, that number maxes out at around 150 people. Sinek writes,

The reasons groups function best when they do not get bigger than about 150 people make perfect sense when you look closely. The first reason is time. Time is a constant—there are only 24 hours in a day. If we gave only two minutes to everyone we knew, we wouldn't get to know people very well, and deep bonds of trust would likely never form. The other is brain capacity. We can't remember everyone. Which is why Dunbar's Number is about 150; some can remember more, and some remember fewer. Besides, as Dunbar has noticed in his research, when groups get bigger than about 150, the people are less likely to work hard and less likely to help each other out.<sup>3</sup>

In small organizations, particularly in small churches, people take personal responsibility for those they know. Leaders personally know everyone in the group. This group dynamic creates a

relationship in which leaders are directly involved in ministry to families. They are directly involved in making disciples and helping people become who God created them to become. This personal investment of love in people is why so many pastors felt and answered the call to vocational ministry. It is what wakes us up and drives us.

In healthy small churches, everyone takes responsibility and ownership. No one can assume that he or she is unneeded, lacks sufficient skill, or is unwanted. Every Sunday, every activity, every outreach is “all hands on deck.” Everyone is responsible and needed in the work of evangelism, discipleship, and outreach. We think that things get more comfortable the bigger that we get, but there is a point of diminishing returns. Ironically, I have observed at Hydrant that, as the church grows past 150, it gets harder to maintain some of the behind-the-scenes work with volunteers. For example, we once cleaned our building and cared for our lawn with teams of volunteers. Those teams and systems became harder and harder to maintain as we grew, and now we have to contract cleaning and lawn care.

Healthy small churches are agile and flexible. They can respond quickly to make changes and face challenges. Politics and bureaucracy are less distracting in the small church. It requires fewer people and fewer meetings to make decisions. It is easier to keep focused on mission and vision. In healthy small churches, we can focus on people and know the people that we serve. When we preach, we know where our listeners are spiritually and emotionally. When we design a ministry, we connect to the lives and schedules of those it will affect. This ability increases connection and impact, and therefore increases growth.

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## RECONSIDERING THE 200 BARRIER

So what does all of this mean? For some, it has created a barrier to church growth, commonly known as the “200 barrier.” The 200 barrier represents the fact that most churches, somewhere between 70 and 90 percent, never grow larger than 200 in regular attendance. Church growth experts have, for many years, observed and described the various changes that a church has to go through to break the 200 barrier, many of which are related to Dunbar’s Number. Pastors shift from leading people to leading leaders. We encourage people to find a connection in small groups instead of the church family. We help people become comfortable with less attachment to leaders. For some, then, it all means that we have to find ways of overcoming our natural tendencies to love, serve, thrive, and work with groups of 150 people.

What if the 200 barrier is God’s design? What if our tendencies toward groupings of 150 people are his idea? What if the fact that most churches are smaller than 150 people is not a failure of local church leadership, but the intention of the Head of the church? A church smaller than 150 people typically has the money it needs to thrive without fears of survival. A church smaller than 150 people might be able to add a second staff person but will have to empower leaders to do ministry for kids, teens, and outreach. There are lots of remarkable things about churches smaller than 150 people.

Maybe this means that we need to empower our pastors to lead small groups of people really well. We need to help these leaders to see their value, purpose, and potential. We need to empower small churches to have a relevant and remarkable ministry to their communities. We need to be reproducing.

We may have all read these statistics:<sup>4</sup>

- ☼ 3,000+ churches will close this year.
- ☼ 90 percent of churches are small or very small.
- ☼ 65 percent of churches are declining or plateaued.

But have you read these statistics?

- ☼ Adults under 35 are more likely than older adults to choose to worship in a small church.
- ☼ 83 percent of church attendees decide to worship in churches that average 499 or lower.
- ☼ 46 percent want churches under 100.
- ☼ Churches under 200 are four times more likely to plant.

We have such potential in our small churches. We need to rethink some things, revitalize some places, and even restart some churches. The opportunities are before you. You are being called. Will you respond?

Don't misunderstand me. We need big churches, small churches, medium-sized churches, microchurches, and megachurches. We need church plants, restart churches, and churches that are revitalizing. We need traditional churches, contemporary churches, and modern churches. We need house churches, bar churches, coffee shop churches, and cowboy churches. Wherever there are people, we need the church to be the church. It doesn't matter what size. Together, we are the body of Christ. No more than the eye can say to the ear, "We don't need you," can the big church proclaim to the small church, "We don't need *you*." Nor can the small church write off the big church.

Some advantages and challenges are unique to each situation. There are questions that we all share and some that are very different. We have to figure out who we are, what we are called to become, and where we are going, and embrace it with everything we have. I loved some of the things about working in larger churches and struggled with some of the challenges. I have things I love and struggle with while serving in the smaller churches too.

I have to come to the place where I can see the beauty of every stage of ministry and growth. There were things I loved about pastoring sixty people that I don't get to do now. The same has been true at every step of the way. There have been beautiful things and challenging things. I have come to the place where I can say, "I am a small church pastor, and I love it." I will be entirely grateful if God chooses to have me lead a small church for the rest of my life.

## BENEFITS OF THE SMALL CHURCH

I want to tell you some of the reasons that I love the small church, but I need to say something first. I have to be clear and direct. Brene Brown tells us that "clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."<sup>5</sup> So here it is: excellence is excellence in every environment. No one is asking for perfection, but you have to pay attention to the details and give yourself to being your best and doing your best work. Mediocrity that comes from half-hearted effort does not honor your people or show passion, nor does it glorify God. Do less, but do it with excellence. Being small is not an excuse for half efforts. Neither is having a modest budget or not having talent an excuse. You can find excuses or solutions. The excellence that comes from giving your best to continual improvement is within

your grasp; you might have to let go of a few other things to take hold of it. Feel the weight of your calling and the pressure of your mission. Rise to the challenge. Mediocrity stinks and it's time to take out the garbage. I hope that was clear and kind.

The small church that depends on the Spirit and operates in his direction with a focused vision, a clear strategy, and excellent execution has no limit to its potential impact. I love being in small churches that operate like this. You may be leading one; if you are, cherish it. You are one of my heroes. Don't let anyone persuade you to climb the ladder to something bigger because it looks better.

## WORSHIP IN THE SMALL CHURCH

I love to worship in the small church. *Don't get me wrong. There are times that it can be awkward.* For me, there is nothing better than a smallish room that is filled with divine energy as people sing and engage in praising their Savior. It is close and intimate and moving to my soul when it is done well. When the words are on the screen at the moment when I need them, when the lighting and backgrounds are not distracting, and when the band or worship team is leading well, it is fantastic. I love to worship with a hundred people in a small room even more than I love the big experience that happens in the big church or at a conference. I am not alone in this. You will reach people in your community who are looking for the experience of worship in the intimacy of a small church. I love when the energy of the big church pairs with the intimacy of the small church in worship. Worship well.

Without question, it is incredibly hard to pull off the experience of quality music in the small church. There are Sundays that we have to

go acoustic and worship with a couple of singers and a guitar, because that's the only musician available that week. All small churches deal with this kind of thing. Find a way; the key is whole-hearted worship of the triune God. The style, instruments, and lighting are far less important than the heart and energy. Make it work. Whatever you do, do it well. If your small church can't lead music at a high level yet, don't make it the centerpiece of your Sunday morning experience. Use other elements to create a meaningful and memorable experience of God in worship. It is the intimacy of the environment that makes worship so special in a small church. Do what you are great at first, last, and every time. I am convinced that God will give us everything we need to do everything he asks us to do, when we are obedient to his leading. If you don't have it yet, he's not asking you to do it yet. Don't force something that doesn't fit.

## DISCIPLE-MAKING IN THE SMALL CHURCH

I love discipleship in the small church. I interviewed once for a job as a small groups pastor in a very large church. After the initial interview, they asked me to write my vision or philosophy of small group ministry. After they reviewed the document, I received word that I was not the right fit for their church in this position. They let me know that I was "too strong of a leader for this position," and that it required more of a manager. "The position is essentially herding cats." I appreciated the brutal honesty of the leaders in this church. The necessity of providing discipleship opportunities for such a large number of people naturally predicated a factory mind-set. I would not have thrived in that

environment where the discipleship pastor becomes an administrator of a massive program and system of leaders and groups.

In churches under a hundred (which is most churches<sup>6</sup>) you are one big small group. In small churches, everything is discipleship. In small churches, the pastor's most tremendous privilege is direct involvement in the lives of the people that he serves. The pastor can sit after worship to counsel and talk with a teenager struggling with temptations. The pastor can build a mentoring relationship with the young woman called into vocational ministry. The people will sit in the pastor's home for dinner and long conversations. Preaching is more personal than ever. Groups, if you have more than one per age group, can be designed to meet people where they are.

The ministry of discipleship in the small church is not like a factory in which we are imprinting knowledge and skills upon people. Discipleship in the small church is like tending a garden. We work the soil in season, pulling the rocks, sticks, and junk that prevents future growth. We plant good seed. We patiently wait and care for the seedlings as growth begins. We pull weeds and tend to the fruit. Discipleship in the small church is close; it is personal; it is everything.

## KIDS' MINISTRY IN THE SMALL CHURCH

I love kids' ministry in the small church. There may or may not always be an intentional team of leaders and teachers developing the children's ministry in small churches. Hopefully there is a team of trained and loving adults investing in kids. After worship, kids' ministry is usually the first hire in a small church.

Kids' ministry in the small church is such that it becomes the ministry of the entire church. Every adult is involved in loving, serving, and creating family for all the kids of the small church. Kids provide explosive energy and drive to the local church that cannot be found in any other way. In smaller churches, kids know the church as their home, their place, their people. They grow up as an integral part of the church, not extras.

Anyone who has had kids or grandkids in the last fifteen or twenty years knows that kids drive the minivan. The kids choose where we go out to dinner or if we go out to dinner. Kids choose the movie. Kids' sports, dance, music, and other activities direct the family schedule. Kids are usually the ones that pick the church. I am convinced that in a church that is trying to revitalize, restart, or start doing better, kids' ministry is essential. Get the worship service right; then kids' ministry is the next step. If you aren't doing kids' ministry well, you are spinning your wheels. Kids choose the church. If your kids love your church, families will come, because parents talk. People want their children to know Jesus and to be a part of the church. But today's parents are not going to force it on their kids as our parents did. If kids' ministry is safe, fun, and exciting, then your small church is poised to make a lasting impact. Be known for your love and ministry for kids.

## YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE SMALL CHURCH

I love student ministry in the small church. Discipleship begins with our children but comes to life in middle school. These students are developing abstract thought and a new sense of identity while

forming a community. They are taking ownership of the things that matter to them. In a small church, the church belongs to the youth. They are a part of everything. In large churches with ample “people resources,” the goal of a high level of quality in all aspects of ministry means that few inexperienced people have room to try out their gifts. In the small church, students own the church and grow, while becoming equipped as the present and future leaders of the church.

At Hydrant, middle school and high school students serve in every area of ministry in the church. They help plan events. They are the team leaders for some departments. They teach. They have preached. They lead in worship. They run lights, audio, and video equipment. They work in the office. They help with social media. They welcome guests. They own Hydrant Church. It is their church at least as much as it is my church.

## COMMUNITY CONNECTION

I love community service from the small church. Small churches do not have the financial capabilities or people needed to meet the significant needs of a community. That should not stop them from engaging. Our small churches can partner with existing organizations doing great work in our communities. Find the organizations that match your vision, and get involved. There is so much that our churches can do that we should not be distracted by what we cannot do. I also love community service in the small church because it is so uniting. We call our community service events, days, or activities “all hands on deck” moments. We need everyone contributing and doing what he or she is good at, all at the same time, to make it work. When it works, it is admirable,

fun, and surprising to the community, and also empowering to the people of the church.

I love the food. Small churches can eat together. The larger the church, the more difficult it becomes to eat together. The larger a church grows, the less time the pastor can give to anyone in the church. So much good happens across the table. Strangers become friends across the table, sharing good food, and those friends become family. There are ways to make it work for medium-sized to large churches; it is just so much easier and more natural in the small church.

I love the connection with people. In a small church, everyone is connected. It is one big family (sometimes it is literally one big family). In this family, people help each other out. People look out for each other. They are committed to each other in the ways you are committed to a family member. No one gets written off when he or she messes up. Instead, he or she is encouraged, coached, and helped. These connections can be a challenge too. It becomes unhealthy if we get too protective of our little church family. We always have to be ready to invite and integrate others into the family. Family connections done well are incredibly attractive to young adults today. Increasingly, young adults prefer and look for a small church. They find in the small church the family they missed growing up or had to move away from in pursuit of their dreams. Many will even sacrifice their preferences, if their kids love it.

After the newness of the restart wore off, Hydrant Church found its niche in the community. We are the church that brings together many of the best parts of the big church with the best parts of the small church. Most people walk into a big church and expect that it is prepared for guests. They expect the music and the preaching to be excellent in a big church. They expect their kids to be safe

and to have fun in a creative environment. They expect there to be good coffee and a well-cared-for facility. They also plan to feel kind of alone in the sea of people. They expect to be overwhelmed by the size. They expect it all to be a little impersonal. They have those expectations because that is what they have often found before. These are natural strengths and weaknesses that accompany large numbers of people gathering in one place at one time.

Most people who walk into a small church expect to be pounced on the first Sunday that they attend. They assume that it will feel like a family over time. They hope to be able to get involved and use their skills. They expect the people to know them by name and care about them. They assume that the music will be old and poorly done and the service and preaching to be thoughtful, but less than impressive. They may be surprised when their kids get herded out halfway through the service to some unknown location with people they don't know. (By the way, please find another way!) People expect the building to be, at worst, run down and at best, out of date. They expect their kids to be with loving people who care about them, but that their kids will hate it. They have those expectations because that is what they usually find. These are natural strengths and weaknesses that accompany small numbers of people gathering in one place at one time.

I find many people try churches of different sizes, weighing their options. They assume they will have to sacrifice community for good teaching and excellent ministries, or that they will sacrifice excellence for connection. Hydrant's niche became excellence in the city. At Hydrant, the facilities are well cared for, designed to reflect relevance, and be a comfortable environment for men. Hydrant prioritizes kids' ministry and provides excellent kids' worship and regular events. Hydrant's music is exceptional, and

the preaching practical and spoken in common, everyday language. The atmosphere is relaxed and comfortable. The church is small. We learn your name and remember it. We are prepared every Sunday for guests. We have systems in place to assimilate people as quickly as they are ready to take their next step with Hydrant. People immediately feel welcomed and like they can be a part of the family. People own the ministry and use their gifts. Over 80 percent of those who attend regularly serve in some capacity.

We regularly meet people who have tried all the big churches in our community; then they attend Hydrant, get locked in, and begin to grow in unexpected ways. When thinking about how your church could function, try changing *or* to *and*. I believe God unleashes power in the *and*.

The kingdom of God is made up of big churches and small churches. Each one is significant and vital to the mission. Too many of our small churches and their leaders don't understand this. We hang our heads and feel sorry for ourselves. We become chaplains caring for a faithful few instead of pastors leading a mission of kingdom agents making a difference in their community. The problem is not how the denomination, community, or unreached see small churches. The problem is how we see ourselves.

Karl Vaters has been a champion of the small church and small church pastors. He explains that we are too often like Israel standing ready to enter the promised land. When Israel sent the spies into the promised land, all twelve reported back on the abundance, fertility, and beauty of this new land. All twelve also noticed that the inhabitants of the land were giants—warriors.

Caleb and Joshua saw the land and the giants and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it” (Num. 13:30).

The other ten spies saw all of the same things as Joshua and Caleb and knew the same promises of God. However, they had a different interpretation. They reported, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are. . . . The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there. . . . We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Num. 13:31–33).

The ten Israelite spies saw themselves as grasshoppers. They believed that their enemies saw them as grasshoppers, something they could only have assumed. Their perspective limited their vision. Their perspective limited their possibilities. Their perspective limited their potential. Their perspective limited their action. Their perspective kept them from the promised land.

Has your perspective been limiting you and your church? Are you acting like a grasshopper?

Karl Vaters calls us to more:

OK, fellow Small Church pastors, now that all this “everybody’s so mean to me” whining is done, what are we going to do about it?

Let’s start by acknowledging what we all know. Very few of us are coming close to doing the task we’re called to do and are capable of. Yes, there is far more good ministry being done in Small Churches than we’re usually made aware of, but the flip-side of that is also true. A lot of small churches are not very good, and that’s why they’re small. We are grasshoppers by choice. We can do better. Much better. We have to.<sup>7</sup>



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What presuppositions do you have about small (and big) churches?
2. Reflect on the idea that the 200 barrier and other growth barriers may not be hurdles to overcome, but placed by God for his purpose.
3. What are some things you love about your church at its current size?
4. What frustrates you the most about your church at its current size?
5. Is there something you or others have believed was a liability in your church that could really be a strategically designed advantage?
6. How could you leverage that asset?



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BECOME A SELF-AWARE,  
PEOPLE-FOCUSED LEADER.



I knew that I could do better as a leader, but that it would look different from anything I had ever imagined. I needed to grow. I needed to improve. I am convinced that if the leader improves, everything else follows. So I set to work. It was uncomfortable and unnatural, but it was the path God was calling me to walk.

I researched and intentionally developed myself as a relational leader. Embracing a relational approach to leadership was the most significant change that has ever happened in Hydrant. It started with me and rippled through our church. It was how I rebelled against the notion that I needed to act like a big church pastor so that we could grow to be a big church.

I have always had a more task-oriented personality. In the past, it had helped me to identify what needed to get done, focus on those tasks, and make things happen with excellent work. That focus allowed me to take more college classes in a semester than most. It allowed me to try new things and learn new skills. My willingness to take on any task, big or small, and accomplish that task in a timely manner had helped me earn respect and credibility. People respect a leader who will not ask them to do something he or she would not do or has not done. People trusted my word and knew that I could handle difficult challenges.

Like the change in your pocket, credibility builds up with each positive encounter, decision, or result you create. When it comes time to make an unpopular decision or risky maneuver, leaders reach into their pocket and spend the necessary credibility to make a move. If you have no credibility, because you are new or because you recently spent a chunk of change on something else, you may not be able to persuade people to go with you into another move.

I was earning credibility with positive changes and results, but I had a hole in my pocket. I knew that I was a “get things done” person, not a people person. Howard Plummer, a mentor, once came into my office and said, “Tim, you have everything that you need to succeed in ministry, except you lack one thing. You have to learn to step toward people in relationships.” I knew my personality; I did not realize how much it was affecting the church and how much it was costing me.

On Sunday mornings, I would arrive early to get things started. I unlocked the doors, then adjusted the thermostat. I started the coffee and set up the coffee bar. I double-checked the cues for the visual presentation. I created the lighting schemes and checked the sound. I swept the sidewalk and made sure the glass doors were clean. I made sure bulletins were in place and called any missing volunteers. I checked the bathrooms. More often than not, I would run from one task to another, making sure everything was perfect for the service, while walking by arriving guests with little more than a quick hello. Occasionally, I would sprint by so fast and be so focused that I would give no acknowledgment to all the people I passed.

One time, on a Sunday when we had an after-service event scheduled, I arrived to discover that the person who mowed the church lawn had left piles of dead grass in an area where we were going to be hosting people. I spent nearly an hour—right up to the service time—raking grass like a crazy person. People would ask Anita many Sundays if I was upset or mad about something, and she would say, “No, he is just trying to get so many things done.”

Every time someone asked that question, every time I rushed by someone or just said a quick hello, I was widening that hole in my pocket. Every time I wasn’t there to talk about whatever happened

in someone's life, I lost a little credibility. The change was falling out of my pocket faster than I could put it in. Something had to change. I had to change.

Credibility, another word for trust, is formed when a leader is perceived to have both character and competency. Integrity and genuine motives build the trust that others have in you as a person. They believe in you. That belief is essential; it lets people know that you want something for them and not just from them. However, you also must have competency. I am not going to trust you to drive my boat if you have never done it before. Competency provides the assurance that you have the knowledge, skills, and the will to do what you say you will do. Credibility requires both character and competency. The opportunity to develop that trust or credibility is found in open relationships.

What I needed was a new perspective, a new focus, and new skills. My attitude began to shift. I started to believe what I had always known, at least intellectually. The church is not built upon my shoulders. Christ is the cornerstone of the church and it is built upon his shoulders. The church is not dependent on my gifts, strengths, and skills. The Holy Spirit has empowered every believer with gifts, strengths, and skills for the building up of the body of believers, and everyone is an integral minister of the church. Each one needs to be released into ministry to use their gifts, skills, and abilities for the good of the ministry and mission of the church. I realized that if the church was going to reach a stage of stability, it was dependent on me, a leader, to be a catalyst for that growth. It wasn't going to happen by working harder and doing more tasks, though. I had to be the face, the connection, the point of the church's relational and evangelistic spear. I had to become a people-person pastor, a relational leader, if our church was going to stabilize.

I discovered a new focus during this time. I realized the new focus was actually just a development of my ministry of discipleship. All discipleship is ultimately designed to help people to participate in the redemptive story of Jesus and lead others to do the same. One side of my focus became building a connection with everyone that walked through our church's doors. This strategy doesn't work once you are past the hundred barrier, but it is essential to breaking through into stabilized finances and ministry over time.

If you came to Hydrant more than once during that season, you likely sat at my kitchen table for dinner, where we talked and learned each other's stories. I look back with such fondness and joy on that season. If your church is smaller than a hundred, the pastor has to be the relational catalyst. Everyone will find their central connection to the church in you. I focused on helping people take their next step of faith and helping them find their place in our little community of believers. Later, you will have to teach them to find that fundamental connection in others, but for now, you had better be connecting. You become the person who helps people connect.

A second new focus was building teams of leaders and volunteers to do the ministry of the church and serve the mission of the church. We developed new teams of people and empowered leaders to do everything I was doing on a Sunday morning that wasn't preaching or connecting with people. That remains true even as we have grown. Now my focus is on connecting with the new people and hurting people each Sunday.

## RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

I worked hard to develop new skills during this time. Every professional ministry review in every church I had served had sounded like my mentor from years before: great preaching, excellent administration, great ideas, great leader, great services and programs, . . . stinks at relationships. I had learned to lean on my strengths to succeed, but I had failed to manage my weakness. It became my liability. It was time to change. I started with a friend and mentor's book, *Relational Leadership: What I Learned from a Fisherman about Leading a Church*, by Kerry Willis.

I found such great insights that began to challenge me. I spent time learning and reading about servant leadership, relational leadership, personal growth, and relationships. It was all a bit overwhelming at first. For an introvert, connecting with people, especially engaging in small talk, can be intimidating and emotionally draining. We need time alone to avoid a breakdown or burnout. I am an introvert from a family of introverts. I learned that my grandfather felt the exhaustion so profoundly that he spent much of his life praying for God to permit him to leave the vocational ministry.

I read some authors who suggested that if God could change our hearts, he could change our personalities. I suppose it is theoretically correct, but seems to deny the need for different parts and personalities in the body of Christ. It denies that we have been intentionally made, woven together in our mother's womb, by an intentional God. It does not seem to be God's usual *modus operandi* to change a person's personality. He certainly didn't change my nature. He just asked me a question, "Will you care more about the souls of those you meet than you do your comfort?" He then said, "If you will, I will give you rest."

At Hydrant Church, we have developed a way of training and thinking about leadership. We call it relational leadership; it is our take on leading through relationships in service to others. We are not called to lead an organization. We are called to lead people. If we lose sight of that reality, we lose our ability to lead well.

A people-person pastor should not be confused with a people-pleaser pastor. Leadership often involves disappointing people and helping them see how happy they are about it. A people-person pastor has the skills to navigate the complicated interpersonal dynamics of the church and relationships while influencing the church toward God's ways and will.

At Hydrant, we have five characteristics that we believe are essential in the life of a relational leader. We also hold leadership values that define us as leaders. These serve as tools for identifying, recruiting, and training potential leaders to succeed. Here are the five characteristics that I believe best describe a healthy, effective relational leader.

## God-Centered

It all starts with God. As leaders, God calls us and gifts us for ministry. Our strength comes from God. All authority comes from God. Any leader who aspires to do great work must first learn to follow God's leadership. All other influence flows from submission to God's authority. We are not creating our kingdom. We are not building our church. We are not leading our people. He is the Great Shepherd. We are the under-shepherds among his flocks. We are the caretakers and leaders of his followers. He remains the head, and he raises those whom he chooses for leadership. Our role is to connect people to Jesus. We do not gather

followers or even leaders for our vision; we point people to him. He must, therefore, be at the center of all that we do.

Relational leaders are dependent upon the Spirit. We must acknowledge that Jesus is the leader, and we are the first followers that help others follow him too. The mission to which the Christian leader is called is more than any of us can handle in our own strength. We must find our strength regularly renewed in our Father. We must find our direction in the guidance of his Spirit. Time in prayer, reflection, and study of the Scriptures serves as a primary guide to teach us the wisdom of heaven. The Spirit of God fills us and strengthens us and develops in us the fruit for good work.

Relational leaders are prayerful. Relational leaders recognize that God is the source of power for ministry. Their relationship with God is the first and most important relationship. They must plug in consistently and regularly to be recharged, refocused, and repurposed for the work of the kingdom. Martin Luther famously said, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” Without prayer that tunes us into God, we will soon tune him out. We will be operating in our strength and accomplishing little of eternal value. John Gray puts it this way, “The leader who has not committed themselves to prayer has started the countdown clock on their relevance.”<sup>1</sup>

God-centered men and women are people of character. They are leaders who lead with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God-shaped character may be the single universally nonnegotiable characteristic of a Christian leader. Leaders whose characters are formed by God are trustworthy, dependable, and credible. They can lead with transparency, vulnerability, and courage. Leaders are humble

because they realize that everything they are and have, and everything they accomplish, is a gift from God. God-centered leaders know that the heart of their leadership is following Christ first and foremost.

### Self-Aware

John Calvin wrote in the opening of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess . . . consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.”<sup>22</sup> It is remarkable how little effort leaders spend on knowing themselves. We must be able to answer the simple question, who am I? Who am I apart from work and ministry? Who am I apart from my relationships? Who am I?

Self-awareness allows us to receive and maximize the gifts and identity that have been given to us by Christ. When we encounter God, it always leads to us seeing ourselves more truthfully and fully. Isaiah is an excellent example of this reality. He met the Holy God high and lifted in the temple. His response was worship, followed by falling on his face in confession. He saw himself honestly in the presence of God (see Isaiah 6).

When we first begin to explore our own identity, it is like looking into a dirty mirror and we see so little. With time, effort, and reflection, we begin to see more of who we are. This reflection prepares us to be able to take on one of the most difficult leadership challenges of all: leading ourselves. How can we expect to lead anyone else if we are unable to lead ourselves?

To know one’s self involves first knowing our own story. Many times, it requires the help of a trusted guide, friend, or counselor. Whether we engage the aid of another person or not, every leader

needs to spend time understanding his or her story. What has happened in your life that has made you the man or woman that you are today? What experiences have had a lasting impact on you, good or bad? Digging deeply into this story and our family of origin can help us find things that have shaped us through pain and celebration. Likewise, what have your relationships taught you, and how have they formed the way you engage others now?

In addition to learning our own stories, it is integral to the process of knowing ourselves that we take time to assess our beliefs and values. What are the one, two, or five values that shape you most? We all live by our values. Do your life and actions match the values that you claim to hold? What are your strengths and weaknesses? God formed you from the beginning with particular strengths, weaknesses, and personality traits. Are you operating in strengths? Are you managing your weaknesses so they are not a liability? Are you aware of your personality type and how that affects your motivation, work environment, and joy?

Emotional health and care may be one of the most neglected areas of development among spiritual leaders. We have a tendency toward self-sacrifice that is more codependent than Christlike. We carry burdens for so many people without sharing our troubles. We rarely take the time to assess, name, and deal with what we are feeling. Emotional exhaustion drains us and robs us of clarity and focus. It takes away our ability to respond carefully and intentionally. It takes more than a good night's sleep to recover, and too many Christian leaders have no idea how to recharge emotionally. It is essential to our ability to lead. Emotional intelligence—the ability to identify and respond to our emotions and the emotions of others—is more indicative of success than any other trait the leader possesses, including IQ.

Self-aware leaders can lead themselves well. They can see who and where they are personally. This perspective allows them to grow in practical, professional, and personal ways that benefit the ministry. They can invest in themselves and offer their best to God and the people they serve. They realize that through personal growth, they place themselves in God's hands as the best tool to be used for his purposes. Self-aware leaders know where they are capable and operate from those places of strength most often to create the greatest impact. They also are aware of their weaknesses. They have learned to overcome what they can overcome, to manage those weaknesses, and share leadership where they are weak.

Self-aware leaders are confident and comfortable with themselves. Self-awareness protects against overextending, the need to prove ourselves, and the need to please others. Self-aware leaders have recognized their inability to fix themselves, and therefore, aren't trying to fix others. Instead, they can accept and love others. They can protect others. They can offer others the room to learn themselves and grow the way God is leading them. The confidence of the self-aware leader does not require affirmation or approval from others. They can offer themselves to serve others and become a guide for others on the journey toward emotional health.

Self-aware leaders' confidence and comfort with themselves allow them to be genuine with others. They can offer their authentic selves in any situation. That authenticity brings connection with others by creating a context for leadership. A leader must learn, however, the difference between authenticity and intimacy. Authentic leaders are the same person in every situation. They are not hiding behind facades, nor are they coming into situations looking to meet a personal need from those they lead. However,

the self-aware leader recognizes that the appropriate level of intimacy defines openness in each relationship. A stranger will not know the same things about a leader as a long-time friend, trusted mentor, or spouse. Recognizing the appropriate level of intimacy and testing the waters to develop deeper levels of trust over time is a skill that self-aware leaders develop.

### **People-Focused**

Relational leaders are people-focused. This focus is not my natural tendency. I am better at completing tasks. I can see, define, understand, control, and manage tasks. I can strategize for the organization. I can accomplish everything on a checklist. People are a bit more complicated. People have minds of their own. People are unpredictable. People crash into one another. People have needs, interests, beliefs, and preferences that can get in the way of my agenda of task completion.

In my younger years, I unwisely joked that ministry would be easy without all the people. This mind-set does not value people; it uses people. It is the exact opposite of the leadership that Christ models for us. Ministry is people. Leadership is all about people. We may be able to manage the church, but we lead people. Many problems come from the reversal of these perspectives. Too many church leaders are trying to manage people. They are trying to get other people to fill the holes and do what they want. No one wants to be managed, but they all want to be led. Leaders lead people. They show people the way. They help people see in themselves what they did not see in themselves. They empower people by training and investing in others. They are focused on the growth of people.

Kerry Willis writes, "If everything rises and falls on leadership then leadership rises and falls on relationships. If we can't make

and keep meaningful relationships, our effectiveness as a leader is limited.”<sup>3</sup> Our calling is not to lead the organizational church, but the body of Christ—the people. Leading involves a shift in focus and the development of skills that enable us to connect, listen, love, serve, and empower people. Learning to see people as a calling, and not a distraction or interruption, is a sign of maturity.

People-focused leaders want more *for* people than they want *from* people. They want to see people become who they were created to be by discovering and using their gifts for God’s glory. The people-focused leader prays for others, listens to their needs and desires, spends time with them, and helps them to meet those needs and achieve those God-given dreams. These leaders realize that in serving people, their dreams come true too.

I had all the excuses for not being a people-focused leader.

- ☼ “There is so much that has to get done. If I don’t do it, no one will.”
- ☼ “Relational skills are just a weakness of mine that I have to learn to live with; I will never be good at relationships.”
- ☼ “I am an introvert.”
- ☼ “People don’t want me around anyway. I am just bothering them.”
- ☼ “Who wants to hang out with their pastor?”

I had a hundred more excuses too. But all my excuses were garbage. There really can’t be any excuses when it comes to leadership. Regardless of personality, temperament, energy, or fears, the leader is responsible for making the first move. God spoke to me in my excuses with the simple question. “Will you care more about others than you do about your comfort?” It convicted me

to my core. I hear it every time I meet someone new. Now, I take the first step.

### **Service-Motivated**

It's common to say that if service is below you, then leadership is beyond you. One Sunday, I came into the office building before things were getting started. A small group used the large meeting space during our first service each week for their group gathering. However, the cleaning team for that week had not cleaned the area. I started to sweep the floor and complain. I was ranting to myself about how I should not have to sweep this floor. I had more important things to do, especially on Sunday morning. I was getting angrier with every movement of the broom. Then I sensed God ask, "What is it you are always saying about leadership and service?" I quoted back, "If service is below you, then leadership is beyond you." My attitude changed, and I thanked God for the chance to serve the small group.

Servant leadership as a theory was first developed by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s and later published in his book by that title in 1977. Robert Greenleaf gave ten characteristics of servant leaders such as listening, imagination, acceptance, foresight, persuasion, and conceptualization. Others have expanded that list to as many as forty-four attributes of servant leaders. At the top of those lists, you find empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship.

The critical reality is that the leader's primary task is to serve. Leaders in the church serve God, people, the church, and the mission. The further up the org chart you rise, the more people you have to serve. Jesus said, "Anyone who wants to be first must

be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35). In Jesus’ mind, it was perfectly acceptable to want to be first, to aspire to greatness, and to possess the ambition to lead. Jesus was casting a new vision for what that looks like in the kingdom and the future church. Greatness is achieved in serving. Therefore, importance is not fame, prestige, power, or achievement. Leadership in any context, especially in the church, is not about power or even authority. It is about serving. No service is beneath a true leader, especially if it helps others or moves the mission forward.

### **Passion-Fueled**

When a leader is passionate, it draws people into the mission. It provides momentum and brings people together. When a leader loses passion, it becomes hard for people to follow. Only the ridiculously loyal or apathetic followers stick with a leader that has no passion. Passion is like fuel for the engine in your church. Passion develops in leaders who have found their purpose and live fully into their calling.

Find your passion. When you explore your story, what points in your life produced great joy, excitement, anger, or disgust in you? Often our passion is found when we encounter something in the world that is not as it should be or could be. Other times our passion is found in where we can contribute to the good of others. Sometimes, we discover our passion in the pure joy of doing the things we seem to have been created to do. In our youth, we are gifted with time and opportunities to try new things, step into new contexts, and explore the world. Search with open eyes and self-awareness.

I found my passion in the church. I grew up in the church. I have served in the church for nearly twenty years. I have loved

being a part of a healthy small church that thrives. The church becomes the connection point to the hope we find in Christ and family. It brings out the best in us. It is a place where God heals, restores, reconciles, and rebuilds lives. Healthy churches make a positive difference in individuals, families, communities, and the world. An unhealthy, inward-focused church is dangerous. Likewise, people who are healthy and empowered to live the life God created them to live are influential change agents in their world. They are joyful, loving, remarkable people.

An unhealthy church hurts individuals, families, and communities. It is destructive and painful to be a part of, at its worst. At its best, an unhealthy church is inconsequential in the world and work of the kingdom. Unhealthy churches break my heart, as they limp around their communities weak and emaciated. A church with no vision for the lost and no purpose in their community is such a waste. I can barely stand to see a church that is squandering opportunities and resources as they tread water—hoping to survive another year. Likewise, my heart breaks for people who live without vision and purpose, aimlessly grabbing for the next thing that might give their day meaning.

I found my passion where what I care about meets what I am capable of doing. My passion has become healthy, thriving churches—especially small churches. Too many have given up and wandered into a desert of pointless, self-serving, dead works. Here is how I put that passion into words:

I am an innovative, visionary leader, who leverages experience and knowledge to help people to maximize their gifts, skills, and opportunities strategically. I love teaching, mentoring, leading, and investing in people and organizations

by creatively imagining and developing new paths that lead into the future. I value opportunities to learn, grow, and try new things. I am at my best when I am dreaming about the future and have the freedom to try new ways to make things better. Both my heartbreaking and exhilarating experiences in the church fuel a resiliency and passion for empowering others to fulfill God's call.<sup>4</sup>

I have this saved in my phone and also printed and taped to the mirror in my bathroom. It reminds me of why I get up and what I am supposed to be doing. It is the passion that keeps me moving when I want to quit or give up or feel like I am not making a difference. It energizes me and my work. It fuels my preaching, teaching, writing, and daily actions. Passion focuses my decisions and keeps me on task.

Have you found your passion? You can start to look for it in your story and experiences. What makes you angry? What hurts your heart and cuts to your very depths? What energizes you and brings you joy? When do you feel fulfilled and purposeful? What could you do every day, even if you were not being paid? What keeps you up at night? Find your passion, and you will find the fuel for the engine of your life.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How is your credibility? Do you need to develop your competency, character, or relationships to increase trust with those you lead?

2. How would you rank yourself from one to five on each of the areas of relational leadership?

\_\_\_ God-Centered

\_\_\_ Self-Aware

\_\_\_ People-Focused

\_\_\_ Service-Motivated

\_\_\_ Passion-Fueled

3. God asked me to care about others more than my own comfort. What is God asking you to set aside so that you can step toward others?

4. What is your next step?

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GET OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY.



Our first summer nearly led to our ruin. It was fresh in our memory as we approached our second summer. We were bracing ourselves for round two. Summertime can be severe for nonprofits and churches for several reasons. People are traveling, especially if you live close to vacation attractions. Volunteer schedules are unpredictable. Discretionary funds in the family budget get diverted to extra childcare, camps, vacations, and weekend activities. Giving is usually down. Participation is often down. If your perspective is focused on the challenges, it can just be a tough time. We were ready.

We shifted our focus in the second summer. We stripped down the regular schedule as much as possible. We were pretty much doing Sunday mornings with ministry to kids and worship. We decided that the summer would be our time to let volunteers and leaders breathe a little. It has become a sort of partial sabbatical each year. The summers then became time for the staff to work on the church instead of just in the church. We made use of this time for extra evaluation of every ministry. We focused on strategic planning for the coming year. With a focused strategy, we could begin to identify those with the character, chemistry, and competence to be on the team to help move the vision forward. We used the summer to recruit and train leaders. We trained leaders for kids' ministry, worship, audiovisual, hospitality, and discipleship. We put all the pieces together to kick things back off in the fall.

We were steadily averaging about sixty people each weekend. We kept asking the question, "What would it take to connect, fill, and overflow with 120 people?" By this time, we also believed that God was calling us to help multiply healthy, dynamic small churches. However, we knew that we were not ready yet to live

into this vision. It would require learning and growth before we were capable of answering that call. We knew that we had to escape the clutches of the survival mind-set that dominates the actions of many small churches and new church plants. We had to consistently expand the capacity of our local church so that we were strong enough to plant and had a culture worth replicating.

These perspective shifts turned out to be providential. God gave us a breakthrough in the middle of our second summer. Between the beginning of July and the end of September, we grew by 50 percent. It was the first real breakthrough that we had experienced since the restart. That season marked the beginning of new momentum that led to the next four years of growth between 20 and 50 percent each year. Over those years, there were plenty of setbacks, plenty of times when we faced challenges, and times when we lost that momentum and had to fight to get things moving again.

Truthfully, the breakthrough that we experienced that summer began a year earlier. Looking back on that season, the first year was spent preparing the soil and growing in maturity and unity. The second year, we began to plant seeds and grow in favor with our community. As we came to the end of that second year, we were receiving the first harvest from those first two years of work.

It may seem counterintuitive to some leaders, but we didn't experience a breakthrough by doing more. We didn't experience a breakthrough because of a big marketing blitz or outreach event. We didn't experience a breakthrough because we had the coolest band or the best preacher in town. I am convinced that what God blessed and what led to our breakthrough was a simple vision of life transformation, a simple strategy for making disciples, excellent execution, and relentless focus on loving people.

We did not look around at more prominent churches or fast-growing churches to figure out what we needed to do next. We did not try everything that folks who came from other churches told us we should do. We did not even do everything that our people asked us to do. We found momentum with three objectives, five ministries, three initiatives, and one big project.

## THREE OBJECTIVES

Three objectives define everything about Hydrant. They are how we describe our local ministry and move people deeper into the church.

### **Connect People to God and Others**

Hydrant exists to connect people to God and others in love. We create environments and experiences that help people to make those connections. We teach people how to connect with God and how to connect with others in genuine, honest, healthy, and loving ways. We model love for one another. We model love for strangers and love for our community.

### **Fill People's Lives with Grace and Truth**

Our second objective is to fill each other's lives with grace and truth. Romans 10:17 reads, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." We each have faith because someone poured into our lives the grace and truth of the gospel. Hydrant Church is a people who intentionally create environments where we can grow, as we allow God to fill our lives with grace and truth. We also believe that we

are called to help each other by offering each other the same grace and truth that has been given to us.

### Overflow

Our third objective is to overflow. We provide platforms and opportunities for people to invest their gifts and strengths in loving service within the church's ministry and the mission to the world. Our lives are to be more like a reservoir than a pipeline. A pipeline spills out before it fills up, and may never actually get full. An overflowing reservoir fills up until it overflows. A reservoir remains full when it floods. A reservoir is a better image of Christian discipleship. A disciple has not reached maturity until he or she begins to overflow.

## FIVE MINISTRIES

The best way to live into those three objectives is with five ministries. We are most effective in those ministries when we are not distracted by other less important things. Those five ministries are worship, discipleship, kids, youth, and outreach. Hydrant worships. We create a place, time, and environment that allows people of all ages and backgrounds to gather for an unforgettable experience of God. We gather to praise and worship, to pray, to give, to listen to relevant Bible teaching, and to respond to the experience. We do life groups. It is how we create an environment designed to re-form our lives as disciples. We make disciples by eating together, praying together, learning from the Bible together, and serving together. We do ministry to, for, and with kids. We create a ministry to make disciples of middle school and

high school students. We also overflow or do outreach ministry. We invest in our community and invite people to follow Jesus.

### THREE INITIATIVES

During any given year, we will be working on three initiatives. During the latter part of the summer or early part of the fall, we gather leaders together for a time of reflection, vision casting, prayer, and planning. During this time, we develop three initiatives for the year and usually assign one big project that we all come together around. We have used different plans and tools to help us evaluate and discern the initiatives for the next year. Usually, it's all internal, but at times the process has involved an outside consultant.

During this gathering, we identify where we are right now as a church, with brutal honesty. We figure out what is working for us. We want to know what is helping us to accomplish the mission and live into the vision to which God is calling us. For us, that means identifying what is helping us to connect, fill, and overflow. In this time of evaluation, we also want to know what is hurting us. What are we doing that gets in the way of connections, life re-forming, filling, and overflowing mission? Is there anything getting in the way that is hurting people or the ministry? Then we name what is not hurting us but not helping us either. We are trying to figure out what is moving us forward, holding us back, or keeping us stuck.

After we have figured out where we are right now with brutal honesty, we discuss where we are being called by God to go. For the most part, the long-term vision does not change much. We

begin to focus on the steps we need to accomplish in the next year. We are working together to discern what we see God putting in front of us next. We ask questions about who we want to be in a year or what the people of our community need right now. We ask questions about what we want to be known for and how God is burdening us.

With a clearer picture of what is in front of us and where we are going, we ask strategy questions. We start to figure out what it will take to arrive at the new destination from where we are right now. It is kind of like when you put an address into your phone's map app. It gives you two or three possible routes. Based on your priorities for the day, you may take the fastest way, the most direct route, the highway route, or the scenic route. We look at all the possible routes from where we are to where we want to go and begin to choose the right one for our church. I believe it is not the only right answer, but we are looking for the best route for us.

One time, a friend and I were traveling from eastern North Carolina to western Virginia. The maps were unintentionally set to provide us with the most ecological route. The trip took us on every possible back road and mountain pass. It took an extra three hours to make our journey. We were too immersed in conversation to realize how far lost we were. By the time we realized our mistake, it was too late to get back on track. Many churches are in the same predicament—so immersed in what they are doing, they don't even realize how far off track they are. Most are so lost that it will take several extra years to get back on track. A time of regular reflection and planning can prevent detours and keep you on the right route.

With a clear picture of where we are, where we want to go, and our preferred pathway between the two, we choose our action

steps. We are looking for the types of things that are most important right now. We are also trying to figure out which items will make the most significant impact in moving us along the chosen route. We start with brainstorming anything that might move us down the path. Then, we prayerfully narrow this list down to three. These three become our priority initiatives for the next year. If we don't accomplish anything else, we attempt to achieve these three things.

During this meeting, we assign a point person responsible for the initiative, brainstorm potential goals in the initiative, and discuss possible team members. This 3-5-3 approach provides focus to our decision making, events planning, outreach, and budgeting for the next year. It also creates momentum and direction.

Three initiatives triggered our breakthrough, but it was extremely challenging for us as a church and me personally as the leader. Keep in mind, we were a restart in an old building, running about sixty people. We had an annual income of around \$70,000. The church was way too dependent on me to do way too much during the week and on Sunday mornings. We wanted to be a church that could connect, fill, overflow, and in time, replicate healthy, dynamic smaller churches. The distance between where we were and where we felt called to go looked like a trackless wilderness.

Our first initiative that year was to transition from pastor-dependent to team-based ministry. This initiative required that we improve assimilation pathways, volunteer recruitment and training, leader development, and trust. One of the primary goals was that, as lead pastor, I would give away all responsibilities on Sunday morning except connecting with people, preaching, and praying.

The second initiative was better preparing the property for guests by improving external and internal signage, redesigning our welcome area with more defined points of connection for

guests, coffee, and a small store where we could take on-site digital donations.

The third initiative was the next generation ministry. We knew that the key to the long-term viability of our church and being able to answer God's call was a ministry that made disciples among the next generation. This ministry became our big project for the year and birthed something new at Hydrant.

We were still very far away from the point where most small churches begin to think about hiring a second part-time staff pastor and even further from hiring someone full-time. We knew this, but we had a burden, a calling, and a vision. We had only about five or six children in the kids' ministry at the time. We believed, however, that if we could invest in children and young families then we could one day have the opportunity to minister to the entire next generation.

## ONE BIG PROJECT

The third initiative turned into a big project—hiring a full-time children's pastor—which in turn birthed a big *annual* project. I think about the big project in terms of a football game. The big project is like the one creative and risky play the coach is holding on to for just the right time. When everything aligns in a critical moment of the game, we call that play, believing it will lead to a disproportionate gain and possibly the difference in the game.

At Hydrant, we call it VisionNext. Each year, we have VisionNext Sunday in February. We start the day with a celebration of the last year. Each year, I stand with a shepherd's staff from Israel, and I retell the story of ancient shepherds who received their staff

around the age of twelve. This staff was the tool of their trade. They used it to guide, correct, and protect the sheep in their care. It was with them the entirety of their lives as a special reminder of who they were. They would use this staff to mark the moments that marked them. They would carve notches in their staff for the weighty moments in life. Each evening, as they sat around the fire with other shepherds, they would run their hands over the notches and tell the stories of their lives. They would tell the stories of when their son was born and the time they killed a lion protecting the herd. Their staff was a symbol of the faithfulness of God, providing, guiding, and protecting through their lives. In this new context, I read Hebrews 11:21, “By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.”

I then share about five or ten stories from the life of Hydrant in the last year. We tell the stories of marriages saved, baptisms, ministry accomplished, people fed, leaders growing, and so on. I lean on the staff as we praise God and celebrate his faithfulness in the last year. After the report, we remind our people that the mission and ministry of Hydrant is not the result of work by pastors or elders. It is the work of the people of Hydrant. Every participant and partner is involved in writing the beautiful stories of transformation in the church. We give out volunteer awards for connecting, filling, overflowing, student leader, and volunteer of the year. Then we celebrate everyone by bringing something special into the middle of the service and playing some crazy happy song. Some of the things we have brought into these services are gourmet cupcakes, hotdogs, cheeseburgers, ice cream cones, and popcorn.

The treat forms the transition in the service. I stand back up after the celebration and remind our people, “We aren’t finished.”

As long as people in our community do not know the love of Jesus, we have work to do. As long as kids go to bed hungry or in need of homes, we are not finished. As long as students need to be mentored and encouraged in our community, we have work to do. As long as drugs, gangs, or sex trafficking exist in our community, we have work to do. As long as there are communities like Goldsboro that need a church like Hydrant, we are not finished. I remind our people of our vision.

Then, I cast the vision for the big play, the big project. It always stretches us and pushes us. I challenge people to give of their time, energy, and resources to accomplish this big thing together. Our first year, as a church of sixty, bringing in \$70,000 a year, I challenged our people to give toward hiring a full-time children's pastor. We set the goal of one-time gifts over the next six weeks and pledges over the next year that equaled the cost of one year's salary for a full-time staff person. We came close enough that, after I took one final pay cut, we could make it happen. Pastor Liz has now been with Hydrant for many years, and God is multiplying the kids' ministry. She leads a team of over twenty-five volunteers that serves around sixty kids every Sunday and has led to a student ministry of another twenty-five students.

We planted the seeds in good soil. God did what Jesus says he will do in his Word:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and

ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.” (Matt. 13:1–9)

The plain facts are that most churches are stuck or subtracting. This reality has nothing to do with the size of churches and everything to do with health in churches. We are failing to make disciples committed to living in the way of Jesus. We are failing to plant new churches in new areas that continue to reach new people with the gospel message. We are not acting like the church Jesus died for us to be. We have to see more than 4 percent of churches planting churches. That means big, small, medium, house, and cell churches all have to replicate.<sup>1</sup>

To do that, we need stable and healthy existing churches that develop disciples, teachers, evangelists, apostles, and leaders to do the work of ministry. We have to increase the capacity of our local churches. Before we can run, we have to walk. Before we walk, we have to crawl. So much of this book is written to help those who are stuck. It is to help the pastor whose pathway feels like a trackless wilderness. We need existing churches of all sizes to get healthy, make disciples, and release people into the kingdom mission. Most of us don’t know where to start.

Breaking out of a survival mind-set requires, as we have already discussed, a renewed healthy culture. I believe the most practical place to start is to get out of the way. One way of describing Jesus’

strategy is three concentric circles. In the outer circle, Jesus drew a crowd. He was exceptional at drawing a crowd, but he knew the crowd was just the first step. When the crowd gathered, Jesus taught and invited them deeper. He urged people to take the steps of discipleship. By the time Jesus died after three years of ministry, there were 120 disciples in the upper room waiting on the Spirit. More than 10,000 people gathered to hear him teach on the mountain and get a free fish and chips combo. Only 120 took the step across the line into the next circle of disciples. Of this 120, Jesus invited twelve into the closest circle. They were his core, his leaders. They would be the ones to whom Jesus entrusted the mission of multiplication.

Frankly, we stink at all three of these levels in most churches today. Fewer people are showing up to our churches, and we are giving them little reason to show up. Our devotion to the truth of the gospel message is admirable, but our commitment to antiquated and ineffective methods is deplorable.

We rarely make disciples who make disciples. We have discipleship curriculums, courses, and classes. We act as if we can learn to be disciples by learning about discipleship. People learn discipleship the same way that we teach and acquire other meaningful knowledge. While it is our default mode of teaching, rarely is anything learned best in a classroom. Science is learned best in the lab, and history is best discovered on location. We learn mathematics best by doing mathematics. We learn to be disciples by being disciples of Jesus with other disciples of Jesus. We learn by eating together, being in the Scriptures together, praying together, loving together, and serving together.

Likewise, we do not even try to form and develop leaders in our churches. We couldn't describe what an evangelist, apostle,

teacher, or shepherd looks like, much less effectively help someone develop any of those gifts and callings. Our small churches are naturally perfect places for people to learn, grow, try, fail, and get better at their skills and gifts. We have an opportunity to be the training ground raising and empowering the leaders of the church for today and tomorrow.

## KNOCKING DOWN BARRIERS

We talk a lot about getting out of the way at Hydrant. We must break down the barriers that we have mistakenly and unintentionally built around our churches. One of our most valuable ministry teams is called the first contact team. I realize it sounds a bit like something out of an alien movie. It is the team that makes the first contact with our guests, attendees, and partners on Sunday morning as welcoming as possible. Some of our best people open the doors for people on Sunday morning. They are warm and friendly. They don't wait for them to open the door but watch and open it for them at just the right time so that they won't feel rushed.

Most importantly, they are taught to get out of the way. Many people hold a door open for you while standing in your way. People first push the door open, then stand in the doorway with their back holding the door. It leaves you about twelve inches of space to contort your body and squeeze past them. If you are pushing a stroller or carrying something, it gets even more awkward. We teach our people to open the door and hold it with their hands from behind the door. This method maximizes the space for someone entering.

It is the perfect metaphor for how the church often operates. We open the door but then stand in the way. We often become an obstacle by doing the very things we think are helping. Often, the blockade to people connecting to God or the church is not spiritual; it's practical. So, what are some of the common barriers that may be keeping people from finding their way into your church?

### **Untrained Church People**

Your people can actually get in the way. The people of your church are the first introduction to your church most guests will experience. The way that your people talk about your church is either a considerable turn-off or a major selling point for your church. Make sure you as a leader know how to describe what your church is about and what it is like in a few sentences. Describe what makes your church enjoyable and remarkable. Describe what your church loves and does for the community. Say it so often that your people know it and can share it.

It is remarkable how often, when people tell a friend about their church, they talk about the things they don't like or that aren't yet great. It is almost as if we are trying to convince people not to come as our guests. Your people need to be ready because you never know when someone might ask. One of our parking lot team was wearing his first contact team shirt in a restaurant after services one Sunday. The front of the shirt has the logo and our name on it. The back of the shirts reads, "Ask Me." My friend was standing at a urinal when a stranger standing behind him says, "Okay, I'll bite."

My friend's reply was, "Excuse me?"

"I'll bite," the man said again. "What's a Hydrant Church?"

## Online Presence

Your online presence may be an obstacle to people connecting with your church. Most people check social media first, then a mobile version of your website, then a full site. So, if someone went online and checked out your church's social media and website, what would he or she find? Look at each of them from a stranger's perspective. Are you posting inside information on social media, or information that's useful to inquirers? Is your website designed for your congregation or your potential guests? An outdated website with old information is worse than no website. Either one is like a closed door to guests.

Guests are looking to figure out if they will fit in at your church. They are trying to discover what kind of experience they will have. They want to know what type of ministry exists for their kids. Design your website for people who have never been to your church. Include pictures of people from your church. You need a page that describes what to expect. Add music and sermons for people to hear. Present your church honestly. Start with one social media platform and post regularly. Pay someone to build a quality website. Keep it updated.

## Facilities and Property

The experience people have finding your church and driving onto your property may be a barrier to people connecting in your church. People begin to decide immediately about whether or not they will likely return to your church. What is the experience people have pulling into your parking lot? Most people will immediately notice the quality of lawn care and the condition of the building. They will look for signs and signals showing them where to park. They will see how others dress, and if they have dressed

appropriately. They will try to determine which door is the main entrance. Your guests will notice, so it's best to pay attention.

Make sure the lawn is mowed in the summer and the snow is removed in the winter. At Hydrant, we place a happy person with giant cartoonish Mickey Mouse hands waving people onto the property. It seems silly, but it is hard not to smile when you see them. We have had lots of people tell us that they drove by our church for months or even years. When they decided they needed God in their lives, they trusted Hydrant because we seemed happy and joyful. We place attendants to show every person where to park and to greet them as they walk through the parking lot. We have door greeters who open the door and welcome you to Hydrant. Floaters in the café show where to take your kids, get coffee, find the restrooms, check out Hydrant Church gear, or head to the worship center.

## Signage

Your signage may be a barrier to people connecting. Good signs allow the people to know where to find what's most important, like the restrooms, without having to ask someone. Signage is a detail for which your introverted guests will silently thank you. It gives people time to get comfortable and engage when they are ready. Your outdoor signage is equally as important as indoor signs. These signs should reflect the nature and style of your church, while indoor signage should be clear and understandable. Call things what they are, without using inside language.

## Kids' Ministry

Your kids' ministry may be an obstacle to people choosing to connect with your church. Parents ask three questions about your

children's ministry: Are my kids safe? Did my kids have fun? What did my kids learn? These are the most critical questions, and usually, their importance to parents ranks in that order.

It starts with safety. There are some basic minimal expectations parents rightfully have. The kids' ministry needs to be in a securable part of your building. No one should be able to enter the building directly into the kids' area. You must have a system of checking kids in and back out after the service that ensures the child leaves with the same person with whom they entered. You must background check every adult who comes into contact with children. You must keep unauthorized people from entering the kids' ministry area.

Please, do not have kids in worship at the beginning and then dismiss them to go somewhere else for a kids' church message. One or the other throughout the whole service is better, safer, and more comfortable for guests. The half-and-half practice is common in small churches, especially. You will find new parents rarely send their kids with you. You may trigger a panic attack in a protective, first-time guest. It feels to guests like a random adult they don't know herding children into an unknown room somewhere without telling them where to find them afterward. I understand why some might think that this whole thing is a good idea, and it probably was at some point in time. It is not a great idea anymore. The only way this might still work is to have kids go ahead and check in to kids' ministry when they arrive. Then, the children's ministry workers can lead them into the sanctuary for musical worship and then back to the kids' area. This could maintain safety and create participation.

Your kids' ministry has to be fun. Flannel graphs, worksheets, or kids in rows listening is not fun anymore. Children today are

overstimulated. They have an extremely low tolerance for boredom. Their attention span lasts about as many minutes as their age. If kids do not have fun learning in and growing in your church, soon it will not be a problem because you will not have kids in your church. Years ago, Leonard Sweet used the acronym EPIC to describe a method of ministry needed to reach people in the postmodern era. I am not sure whether we are still in a postmodern era or have entered something more of a post-postmodern, cosmodern, digi-modern, or post-truth era. Regardless, Sweet's paradigm for shared spiritual learning that is experiential, participatory, image-driven, and connected still provides excellent guidance to the creation of learning environments for kids today.

When we are teaching the next generation, we have this great hope that "it will stick." We all know the statistics reflecting the importance of reaching kids before their teenage years. If we are going to give our kids something that will stick and last with them through their teenage years and into adulthood, it has to look, feel, and be different from how we taught in the past. One of the critical factors that I see most often ignored in kids' ministry is the fact that children under the age of ten cannot yet think abstractly. Everything in their world gets interpreted literally and experientially. So many curriculums and leaders try to teach kids principles. We think that if we can teach them principles then they can handle any situation. They can't relate to principles yet. So, we need to think as they think and teach them where they think. Teach kids to engage with a story. Teach them that the story of the Bible is their story. Teach them how to experience the God they already intuitively know. Teach them to ask great questions. This approach provides the foundation that can be used in their teenage years to apply principles to their day-to-day situations.

## The Worship Experience

Your worship experience is one of the biggest things that you do. It may not be the front door of your church, but it is likely the heartbeat of your church. You will get a second and third chance based on whether or not you have knocked down the high fences. Your ability to help people engage and choose to be a part of your church for the long haul is mostly dependent on your worship experience. The Pew Research Center's study of churchgoer behaviors reveals that the top reasons people choose a church are related to the worship experience.<sup>2</sup>

According to Greg Atkinson, a church consultant, most people make their decision about returning to your church within the first ten minutes. He explains, "You've got ten minutes before a first impression settles into someone's mind. From the moment they drive onto your lot, until they enter your building, everything they see, hear, smell, and experience matters."<sup>3</sup> Most first-time guests intentionally arrive a few minutes late or right on time. It helps them avoid awkwardly standing around or sitting alone in a near-empty sanctuary. That means what you do at the very beginning of your service is critical as a part of that first impression.

Most small churches have trouble recruiting quality musicians and worship leaders. We still start our service by singing. Karl Vaters, an expert on small church health, writes, "Operating a small church within a template more suited to a larger church isn't healthy. Instead, we need to implement methods that suit our size."<sup>4</sup>

Every church has an order of worship. Most follow that order every week out of habit or tradition. Most never even consider the thought of changing the script. Toss the script. Start and end with what you do best. Consider the flow. Eliminate distractions. Consider eliminating the "meet and greet" time in your service.

I know your people may love it; it is terrifying and awkward for guests. Even worse is if no one speaks to them during your meet and greet time. It is a barrier, so go ahead and knock it down.

## TWO SECRET HACKS

Find a way to create a positive memory and connection at the end of the service. Surprise people with kindness, generosity, and attention. At Hydrant, we accomplish this with something very simple that costs us nothing in the church budget. Each week a different group of bakers bakes homemade cookies. Older children walk around the coffee area with baskets overflowing with delicious homemade cookies for adults and kids after the service. Bakers offer their time each week to bake these cookies, and time is love. People choose their cookie and connect with the people around them, and they leave with a smile and positive memory. It can be how you open the door. It can be a waving happy person by the exit. There are lots of ways. Find one that fits your people and leave guests with a sweet taste in their mouths.

Develop a system for remembering people's names. There is no more important word to any person than their own name. If you can remember people's names and call them by name when they return, you show love and care for them as a person. It was easy when we were a church of fifty and would have one or two guests each week. One team leader and the pastor can usually manage to acquire and to remember names. As you grow, though, you will need a system.

Our system starts with our door greeters. They meet anyone they don't know with a simple, "I don't think I have met you

before; I am . . .” Never ask someone if he or she is a guest. Oh yeah, change your language from visitors to guests. Visitors visit and do not return. Guests are friends welcomed into your home. The door greeters write down the names and description of the family or person. These volunteers are also responsible for introducing themselves to anyone they don’t know. During the service, people can fill out a connection card digitally or manually. During the staff meeting, the staff shares about anyone new they met that week. A volunteer secretary gathers the names and finds pictures on social media. We keep a board in the production room of new guests, photos, and names. The first contact team reviews the board before each service in preparation to greet those coming in by name. The board may seem odd at first, but our guests who discover the board are actually in awe and appreciative of how much effort we expend to remember and know them.

We saw the breakthrough harvest begin, not overnight, but with patience and intentional focus on three mission objectives, five ministries, three initiatives, and one big project for the year. This focus, paired with breaking down the barriers that churches build that keep people out, led to seeing hundreds of people experience God in our small church. Be patient. Stay focused. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9).



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Evaluate each ministry and activity of the church based on whether or not it accomplishes your vision and helps you make disciples. Which ministries would make the cut if you were to eliminate everything that doesn't help you make disciples?

2. If you were to walk through the Sunday morning experience as a guest, what would be confusing or difficult? What barriers have unintentionally been erected around your church family?

3. What could you change this Sunday to create a more welcoming and genuine environment for someone unfamiliar with church?

4. If you could focus all of your resources and energy on a few ministries, what would you prioritize?

5. If you were starting from scratch in your church, what would you do? What's stopping you from doing that now?



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FOLLOW A SIMPLE,  
HOLISTIC APPROACH TO DISCIPLESHIP.



In August 2013, our family visited Surf City, North Carolina. The trip was meant to be a little break just before we dove into the work of closing and restarting Goldsboro Wesleyan. We arrived at the house where we were to stay, dropped our bags, and immediately headed to the beach. Our kids romped, splashed, and played as we all walked down the beach. I stopped for a moment of quiet and stared out at the waves crashing against the shore. The sound envelops you, drowning out everything else. The waves of energy, moving water toward you and back out again, are hypnotic. The experience of staring out at the ocean reminds me of how small we are and how dependent we are on God.

As I stood staring out at those waves, I sensed God's presence and his voice speaking to me. I suppose I am never fully confident that it is God's voice I'm hearing and not some combination of wishful thinking and the other voices in my head. But I felt as if God was saying to me, "Hydrant Church is going to be a lot like these waves. Things will happen, and people will come in like the waves. You need always to be ready to ride whatever waves I bring. Some waves will be tiny, and some will be so big they are hard to ride." That was it. I feel like he left out the part about sometimes feeling like all the waves were going out instead of coming in. Even worse, there would be times when you feel like you are caught in a riptide. I guess God only tells us what we can handle.

I was ripped out of the daze by the joyful squeals of my kids jumping back and forth over the last remnants of waves hitting the sand. We walked down the beach for a few more minutes and came across a man fishing. His line ran high overhead connecting his bait to the rod resting in a rod holder driven into the sand. I asked if we could walk under the line instead of walking around him. He laughed and said, "Sure, maybe it will bring me luck."

We walked under the line, and I whispered a prayer. “Lord, you are the God of the sea. You provided miracle catches in Scripture more than once. Would you send something to this guy?”

We walked on down the beach for about a mile before turning around. When we arrived back to where the man was fishing, he started laughing. He said, “As soon as you guys walked under my line, I caught a shark.” I began to thank God for his generosity and kindness when he interrupted my prayer. “Son,” he said (that’s what Father calls me sometimes when he really wants my attention), “that was not for him, that was for you. It was a gift to show you that our little conversation about the waves was real.”

About a year later, he reminded me of this experience when he said to me, “Son, you are not that good. Stop worrying about the empty chairs. Love, serve, and teach the people that I send you.” It has been God’s way of keeping me focused when things aren’t happening as fast as I think they should be happening. He was assuring me that if we keep the main thing the main thing, then he could handle the rest. That main thing is loving, serving, and teaching people. In more biblical terms, it is the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. We love and make disciples. That’s our job, and his responsibility is building the church at whatever size and pace he chooses.

At the heart of our call as the church is the task of making disciples. When everything extra gets stripped away, this is the essential element and directive of our work. If there is anything that we do that gets in the way of our ability to make Christlike disciples, then it should be stopped immediately. Every method is negotiable in the mission of making disciples loyal to Jesus and spreading his good news of a world reclaimed by God and reconciled through his Son.

Alan Hirsch challenges churches to rethink their approach to ministry. He suggests that at the very core, the church has changed in America so drastically that it is no longer designed to produce healthy disciples. Instead, our churches are creating a culturally acceptable form of Christian who can check off a few spiritual boxes but who has not submitted the entirety of his or her life to the ways of Jesus. Hirsch writes,

This is a fatal flaw in the system—it is not built to produce disciples but rather to attract and retain religious consumers. Conversely, every movement that changed the world has a primary emphasis on discipleship and disciple making. If we are not producing disciples, the problem is in the design of the system.<sup>1</sup>

I have been struck in recent years by how much of our discipleship is designed to pass information from one person to the next. We share information about the gospel. We help people to know about Jesus. We teach about church beliefs and ideas and even Christian practices, but rarely connect people to God. The failure of the church's discipleship strategies became painfully obvious during the recent coronavirus pandemic. We were isolated from our people, and the first thing we thought about was the church's survival and how to deliver content online. We had created a dependence in our people and ourselves. We felt compelled to keep feeding their minds, but we were not connecting their hearts or releasing their gifts into service.

There is a movement in American churches sensing the need for a more in-depth focus on disciple making. It usually triggers a reaction in us; we respond the way we have in the past. We create a

new initiative. We designate a new leader. We come up with a new class or program for everyone to go through. We teach them a lot of information as if teaching people about being a Christian can make them more Christlike. We attempt to stamp out disciples like a factory, with a one-size-fits-all set of answers and studies. We end up creating spiritual fatheads who know a lot about Jesus but don't know him well enough to hear what he is asking them to be and do.

The other disconcerting trend in spiritual formation and disciple making is a thinly veiled form of behavior modification. It is discipleship by which a person receives instructions to behave within specific parameters because "that is what God wants." We create Christians who know what they are supposed to do and, more importantly, not do. They become well-behaved citizens instead of world-changing disciples. It is a modern-day form of pharisaical religion of which Jesus said, "Woe to you. . . . You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matt. 23:27-28).

In our efforts to fix people, we take on the role of the Holy Spirit as if it was our own. We genuinely want to help but fail to realize that none of us has the power to fix anyone else. We are like the monkey who saw a fish struggling and was moved to help. He grabbed the fish and quickly pulled him up on shore so he could rest in the shade. The fish took a few gasping lunges and then peacefully rested. Pastors, church leaders, and churches are too often monkeys trying to help. We unintentionally create codependent relationships with others. We need them to change so that

our ministry is validated. Even more, we need them to need us so that we can keep fixing them and feeling good about ourselves. We cannot fix each other. We do not do the healing. God is the only one that can change the heart from which everything else flows. Instead, we need to make disciples by helping each other learn how to listen and respond to the leading of our Rabbi, Jesus. We have to stop trying to fix one another.

These informational and behavioral approaches to discipleship fall short of equipping people to follow Jesus as his disciples. Even more, it perpetuates to another generation of disciples the false compartmentalized Christianity that has little power to change lives. Spiritual formation is about our entire lives being transformed by the Spirit of God in us. What we need are simple holistic approaches to making disciples.

Discipleship involves learning the Bible and theology. Discipleship consists of the transformation of many of our attitudes and behavior. Growing in maturity as a disciple will change the way we handle money, operate in relationships, do our work, parent, pray, and every other area of life. For this kind of transformation, discipleship has to connect people to Jesus and help them learn to follow him in the context of the community of his followers. It is a process of yielding more and more of ourselves to the filling of his Spirit of grace and truth. It is not discipleship unless it overflows. Disciples live the lives God created them to live. It is full and free and fruitful. It is the natural result of someone following Jesus wholeheartedly.

The one making disciples has the ultimate job of helping the disciples to see that they do not need a discipler; they have Jesus. We are a kingdom of priests. We each have the full capacity to hear Jesus invite us and teach us his ways. We each have the ability to

respond in the power of the Spirit. We need each other to help as co-disciples to stay on the path. The best disciple makers release people who don't need them anymore.

## DISCIPLE GARDENS

Instead of factories designed to stamp out disciples or reprogram people, we need churches that are more like gardens and greenhouses where disciples can grow together. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth with these reminders:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. (1 Cor. 3:5–7)

In our churches, we need to get back to planting and watering, and let God take responsibility for what grows first, second, and third in someone's life. This takes trust in Jesus to take as long as he wants to take to make things grow in people. After all, the disciples that Jesus was making did not seem to have much figured out after three whole years of learning directly from Jesus.

I planted a backyard garden for four or five years—three thirty-foot rows with things like tomatoes, peppers, beans, squash, lettuce, and cucumbers. I learned a lot about things that grow. I learned that nothing grows much overnight. Too often we expect to have the faith of the elders while in our twenties. We fail to

realize they spent fifty years walking with Jesus to acquire that faith. We are in way too much of a hurry. The expectation of instant gratification created by our American culture, paired with a puritanical work ethic, has produced a lot of guilt for Christians.

We think that if we work hard enough we can make our faith grow faster and our spirituality deeper. We do not know how to wait on the Lord, persevere through the ordinary, or accept that we do not grow by our own efforts. We need to learn to receive and give grace. We need patience. We need patience with our spiritual formation that leads to loving patience with the journey of those we teach and serve. We don't make things grow; we create the right environment for growth to happen. We make sure the soil is good, the seed is planted, the seedling is protected and watered.

While working in my garden, I learned that different plants require different nutrients and differing amounts of sun and water. Every believer will need different things to help them grow in the various seasons of their lives. God finds each person in a different place in life. Each one carries their particular baggage, expectations, dreams, challenges, and calling. Disciple making, at its best, addresses the challenges and needs of those seeking growth. The Wesleys and their friends, known as the Methodists, gathered regularly to share their struggles, sins, and temptations. They then asked for the strength from God and wisdom from the Bible to fight those battles, overcome those temptations, and avoid sinning. They made disciples of one another in the real-time, real-world situation that they were each facing. We see Jesus speaking differently to Peter than he does to John, Nathaniel, or Bartholomew.

The gardening taught me that every plant looks different as it grows and produces different fruits at different times in the year. I can't expect snap peas in the fall or peppers in the spring.

I cannot expect the discipleship journey of anyone else to look just like mine. Everyone needs to go through their own process of growth toward producing the fruit that God has for them to produce. Connected to this, I learned that the goal is fruitfulness, not big beautiful green leaves. Sometimes, that fruitfulness will feed those around them. Sometimes, that fruitfulness leads to the reproduction of a new plant. I once raised my zucchini poorly and ended up with big beautiful green leafy plants that filled the row, but the zucchini all rotted on the vine as soon as they sprouted. The plants looked terrific but produced no fruit. A healthy disciple will produce fruit, not just look good.

Good gardeners know the needs of each different kind of plant in their garden. They know when to plant beans, squash, or peppers. They know when to use fertilizer, when to expect fruit, and how to prune. Discipleship, especially in the small church, has way more in common with a garden than a factory. We are just so caught up in mimicking and trying to implement the programs and systems produced by and for the big church that we can't see the joy of patiently walking with people to release their God-given fruitfulness.

## SIMPLE DISCIPLESHIP

At Hydrant, we have found three questions fruitful in our efforts to honor the journey that each person is taking with Jesus, while helping them to grow. These questions empower people to take ownership of their own walk with Jesus. These questions show up all the time in life groups, in conversations around picnic tables with students, and in our kids' ministry. Staff and mentors

all around the ministry of the church use these three questions. They are:

1. What is Jesus asking you to do?
2. Do you have the courage to do what he is asking you to do?
3. How can we help?

### **What Is Jesus Asking You to Do?**

There is so much going on in the first question: What is Jesus asking you to do? Foundationally, there is a conviction that each person is as much a disciple as the one seeking to make disciples. Jesus called each of us. He put his same Spirit in every person in the church, even your teenagers. Jesus then speaks to each of us, not a select few mediators. We can offer each other the grace of acceptance, love, and hope that points to Jesus as our shared solution and promise. We have to leave behind the need to fix others or even direct their steps.

Our discipleship then models and teaches the skills of connecting and listening to God. We read the Scriptures together to learn how to hear God there. More importantly, we help each other learn how to read the Scriptures as one of the sacred places we encounter and hear God's guidance. We pray together and help others learn to pray. We worship together to enliven our connection to God. We share the stories of when and how and what God has spoken to his people in the past. The more connected we are, the more we know him, the more likely we are to discern what he is asking of us.

## **Do You Have the Necessary Courage?**

I find that most often, disciples know what Jesus is asking them to do. He makes so much of it clear to us. He makes it clear what he expects of us in our relationships, our finances, our work, our spiritual lives, and our physical health. Most of us know the things that he is challenging us to do next; the disconnect between knowing and doing is our courage. What God asks of us nearly always requires courage. Courage involves vulnerability, but we run from vulnerability. We hide our weakness. When we come beside one another in acceptance, encouragement, and shared strength, we find the courage in our vulnerability that we did not realize we possessed.

## **How Can We Help?**

Lastly, we ask, how can we help? Sometimes, we feel that God is asking us to do something that we cannot do alone. We need someone to stand with us as we offer or seek forgiveness. We need mentors to point us in the right direction when we have no idea of the first steps toward what God is asking of us. Sometimes, we merely need to know we are not alone. We have to be careful not to assume we know how we can help. Our presumptions have gotten us into trouble in the church. We seem to have lots of answers; unfortunately, they are to questions no one is asking. By asking how we can help, we respect the journey others are taking and only get involved when we receive permission. Unwanted help doesn't help.

Romans 8:14 reads, "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." The Spirit of God leads his disciples. They hear the Great Shepherd's voice and respond to him, finding strength in their weakness and courage in Jesus' presence. Those

who love Jesus obey Jesus. Making disciples is about helping one another to follow Jesus more and more closely. It is not information based. It is not behavior modification. It is a whole new way of life, surrendered to Jesus, empowered by the Father, and led by the Spirit. If a disciple can ask and answer this question, I have no doubt he or she will become everything that God created him or her to become.

## HOLISTIC DISCIPLESHIP

From this perspective, it is all discipleship. Every song is discipleship. Every teaching, sermon, or word of witness is discipleship. Each act of prayer and sacrament is discipleship. Every conversation between disciples is discipleship. Every meal together is discipleship. Every act of service in ministry or mission is discipleship. We sometimes lose sight of how everything we do shapes everything that we are. There is a Latin phrase that has been a motto among Christians for centuries: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. It means the rule of prayer is the rule of faith. Everything we do is prayer and shaping our souls.

This method is a simple approach to making disciples. It helps parents as they seek to make disciples of their children. It guides leaders, mentors, and teachers as they try to make disciples. It is a wonderfully useful guide in discerning the loving response in situations. It flows smoothly from Jesus' final and one command to his disciples, "Love as I have loved you." It is also a holistic approach to discipleship. It takes the entirety of people's lives seriously as they seek to trust God.

Sin and rebellion against God are like a disease that eats away at the whole person. It destroys more than just our souls. It destroys

our integrity. It produces in us the ability to do destructive things we never thought we were capable of doing and become the kind of person we didn't know we could be. Selfishness and self-loathing cause us to push people away and hide from those who would love us most. Sin steals our resources. It takes our creativity, imagination, and hope. It robs us of our ability to become who we were made to be. It distorts every part of our lives and hides our true identity.

## HOLY HOSPITALS

Therefore, we need churches that can be a hospital where healing takes place. We need more than to get saved and forgiven for our sins. We need a new heart to beat for loving and serving others. We need fresh eyes to see God, ourselves, other people, and our world as Jesus sees them. We need new minds that have been cleared of the infection of sinful thinking. We need hands and feet motivated to do the work we have been given to do, as if it was all for the Lord. We need truth as the antivenom, purging every toxin of sin from every part of our lives.

Discipleship is a holistic therapy that ensures the surgery of the Spirit takes. When you get a joint replaced, you must enter weeks or months of physical therapy to relearn to use that part of your body again. If a person neglects this therapy, he or she will be in more pain and more immobile than he or she was before the surgery. Therapy ensures the lasting intended effects of the operation. The Spirit likewise replaces our hearts of stone with a new heart. Everything else flows from the heart. For that heart replacement to have its lasting intended effect, we need

discipleship therapy to teach us how to live again. Neglecting this therapy leads to weak and powerless believers.

Discipleship is not a program; it's people. Every one of us is different. We come to Jesus with all sorts of stories, setbacks, disappointments, and baggage. He meets each of us where we are and invites us to take the next step toward him. My job as a disciple maker is to help a person choose the action that Jesus is asking him or her to take, not to push them into whatever step I think he or she should take. Leaning (like the old rabbis) on questions as a guide keeps us from getting in between someone and Jesus. For too long, our methods of discipleship have had lots of answers. It is time we learned to ask better questions.

Learning to ask better questions makes us better disciples and better disciple makers. Too much of American discipleship is focused on the individual and their personal relationship with Jesus. We are given tools, tips, and tricks for getting closer to Jesus, as if somehow he had not already given every disciple his entire self. By using these three questions, we empower people to live their day-to-day lives as disciples. However, we also empower them with a tool to encourage others in their journey of discipleship. This plays out as disciples making disciples.

The real goal of discipleship is for people to be reconciled to God, then learn how to know, love, and serve the people around them. The “go and make disciples” instruction of Jesus is for all of us who claim his name. The word we translate as “go” could better be translated “as you go.” Jesus is trying to instruct us to live every day, every moment, in the mind-set of disciples who make disciples. Everywhere we go and all that we do is discipleship.

From this perspective, not only is everything discipleship, but also evangelism. Evangelism has been used to describe our work

of helping people to be reconciled to God. Discipleship is helping people to love God and love others as Jesus loved us. The two are really the same thing. We don't have to bring Jesus to people. We are, instead, helping them to see how God has always been there. We help them see the love, mercy, grace, and protection that he has already given them. In both discipleship and evangelism, we are attempting to nudge one another nearer to an awareness of God's presence and work in us and our world. We are helping one another to hear, taste, see, touch, and smell Jesus.

Leonard Sweet writes, "Evangelists always nudge. They travel the Emmaus and Jericho Roads as often as the Damascus and Roman Roads. They end up praying, 'God is great, God is good' as often as 'The Sinner's Prayer.' Their words when spoken are not so much 'You are lost in sin' as 'You belong to God.' Their attitude is less 'Look at what you're doing! What are you thinking?' than 'Look at what God is already doing in you!' Nudgers give attendance more than they take attendance or count attendance."<sup>2</sup>

We as disciples are nudgers who reveal through our love the goodness of God, the radical depth of God's love, and the persistent pursuit of God's grace. God is in us, for us, and with us in every moment. We are the people who get to point him out, and say, "Hey, did you see what he just did?" God's love has all the time in the world to do all the work that he wants to do in any person's life. We can patiently nudge one another into an awareness of how close he is and how much love he has for each one of us.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does your ministry or church define what it means to be a disciple?
2. Is your discipleship pathway focused on behaviors, knowledge, or life transformation?
3. Is your discipleship strategy simple enough to be done by teenagers or older children?
4. How could you design everything you do to focus on shaping disciples?

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COMMIT TO BEING  
A RETHINKING LEADER.



The need for leaders in the church with the ability to unlock the potential of God's people has never been greater. Leadership has always been about moving people and organizations from one place to another. The church needs leaders to help it follow Jesus into the uncertainty of a quickly changing world. The best recognize that leadership is a combination of art and skill, creating meaningful influence. We cannot rightly call power, control, coercion, manipulation, or another violent, forceful enforcement of our wills upon others' leadership. Leadership embraces when it is difficult, loves when it is painful, and releases others to thrive.

Every leader creates an environment around them. The kind of environment you create reveals what kind of leader you really are. It takes a particular type of leader to revitalize or restart a church. It takes what I call a rethinking leader. A leader who can rethink the status quo, rethink what is possible, and rethink the church. Rethinking leaders create innovative environments in which others feel safe to grow, try, stretch, and act. These environments bring out the best in people. They help others to believe the best about themselves, each other, and the world. Leaders create environments filled with trust in others—giving away real responsibility, held within accountability.

Rethinking leaders create environments that are creative and extremely disciplined. Many new and young leaders enter organizations hopeful of having an impact, but soon feel micro-managed and like their creativity is stifled and boxed in. They long for an environment where they are free to creatively experiment with all the ideas that stream through their imaginations. Often, experienced leaders in an organization are reluctant to grant such freedom because they do not see the discipline in young leaders

necessary to discern the difference between a good idea and a right idea. Other times, they do not observe the required discipline to follow an idea from inception to fruitfulness. Too many times, the great ideas birthed in the heart of a young leader have been dropped unfinished in their laps because it became difficult. So, the experienced leader often overcompensates with a short leash.

Rethinking leaders recognize that we need both creativity and discipline. Creative environments are not chaotic groups of people chasing every good idea that pops into someone's mind. Creative environments thrive on discipline. Discipline releases and focuses creativity. Discipline and creativity thrive together. Too much discipline locks the organization into traditionalism, mired in what once worked. Undisciplined creativity is a chaotic pursuit of the wind. Discipline is the map that leads creativity out of the forest.

Rethinking leaders create environments that are safe by being gracefully honest. Environments overrun with unhealthy competition, siloed departments, or fear of failure are never going to thrive. People operate at their best when they feel safe, cared for, and protected. The church, however, is not always known as a place that is safe for the innovators, the risk-takers, and those still working out what they believe. We too quickly write people off because they think, dress, or act a little differently. The church has sacrificed many of its future leaders to protect the status quo. Our typical behavior has been to label someone a rebel or heretic, thus making them expendable, at best.

Ironically, we will also sacrifice the mission for the feelings of a stakeholder. We refuse to be honest with each other for fear of hurting someone we care about. It is this strange, broken environment that honors no one. When we speak this way, we truly are not loving anyone enough to be gracefully honest. It is this false

sense of security that breaks down in time. The room for genuine trust and safety is created through graceful honesty.

We are always a little embarrassed but grateful when a friend points out the spinach in our teeth. That friend cared enough about us to tell us the truth even if it embarrassed us for a moment. We need places where we can expect that people will tell each other about the stuff in their teeth. We need environments where it is safe to think, question, grow, and try new things because it is safe to speak the truth. Honesty requires courage from us all as we face our insecurity and pride. We have to submit our emotions to the mission of the kingdom. It requires leaders who are willing to hear and speak graceful truth.

Rethinking leaders create environments where people succeed as teams by taking individual responsibility. Rethinking leaders know that the early days of revitalization or restarting ministry requires a leading pastor to do a lot of the new work. They also recognize that they cannot continue to carry this load alone for long. It is imperative that leaders recruit others, build teams, and develop leaders. It is one of the highest mountain ridges that leaders have to traverse if they are going to break out of a subtracting or plateaued ministry.

The highest peaks of this mountain ridge often exist in the leader's own mind and heart. It takes a lot to trust others with the care and leadership of what the leader has created. Recruiting others, building teams, and developing leaders begins with the lead pastor, so in most cases, it dies with the lead pastor. We need collaborative effort and the creative ideas of everyone involved. Leaders have to overcome their fears and insecurities and invite other capable leaders and teammates into the work of ministry. Leaders are given to the church for this very purpose—to equip the saints for ministry.

Leaders have to build teams, but the teams that rethinking leaders form are not like the team that worked on your middle school history project. You know what I mean, right? You were probably the overachiever worried about your grade who did way more of the work than anyone else. There was that one team member who finally jumped in the day before the project was due, and the one who stressed over one small component of the whole project, and the one who was just lost. Rethinking leaders build teams that are high functioning because they are made up of high-functioning, accountable individuals.

The team members hold each other accountable. That accountability begins with leaders who hold themselves accountable to the vision, values, and the mission. Too many leaders get burned by carrying the load for a team member who never seems to carry his or her share of the burden. This dynamic can be incredibly frustrating. It can cross a line into being insulting and unfair when the top leader refuses to hold the slacking team member accountable for his or her actions. Leaders must walk the narrow path of empowering others and holding them accountable.

## EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF A RETHINKING LEADER

This kind of environment feels like freedom to people willing to give themselves to one another for the sake of the mission. It requires a rethinking leader who will step up and lead.

I believe that there are eight characteristics common to the rethinking leader. These represent many of the tendencies, desires,

and passions required to thrive in a rethinking church, whether revitalizing or restarting.

### **A Rethinking Leader Has a Kingdom Mind-Set**

I did not grow up in an environment that talked a lot about the kingdom of God. We heard a lot more about getting saved, going to heaven, and avoiding hell. We mistakenly interpreted a small part of the gospel as the whole point. We had a myopic focus on being born again and obeying Scripture with rigidity. We thought our obedience could create in us holiness to preserve us blameless unto life everlasting.

We should find it strange that the good news that Jesus preached was not about some eternal by and by in another land, but the restoration and reconciliation of all things to the Creator. It was about the kingdom of God on earth so powerful that every spiritual and earthly selfish rebellion would be overcome by love. Jesus came to give us back to one another and to give us creation back. He preached and modeled an alternative way of being in the world that did not require any violence toward one another. He came to set us free. Every person willing to secure their identity in Jesus discovered a freedom and a new beginning. He called this freedom and way of life the kingdom of God.

Jesus instigated a vast and broad rebellion against everything that divided human beings from one another and God. It was a cry against every abuse, manipulation, and power that sought to step on the head of others to reach higher. It was a rebellion of love. It was a religion that made a sacrifice of personal rights for the love of others. Ours is a faith that chooses to win a sister or brother rather than win a fight. It is hope, and we are all invited.<sup>1</sup>

Rethinking leaders are fascinated by the beauty of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. They are not enthralled with the idea of the church they think they can build. Rethinking leaders recognizes the wonder of God's grace extended to them and the power of truth to set us all free to live. Rethinking leaders are loyal to Jesus, devoted to his mission, and pursuing the vision that God has placed on their hearts.

These leaders are willing to sacrifice as a part of something greater than themselves. Rethinking leaders are not trying to build up their names or their platforms. They are about lifting Jesus up in the conviction that he will draw people to himself. Rethinking leaders are ready to sacrifice for the vision and for the sake of those Jesus loves. Kingdom economics of abundance shapes them. They know that God can replenish, restore, and rejuvenate. Therefore, they are not afraid to sacrifice.

The kingdom mind-set fuels their vision. The rethinking leader will either be visionary or have the ability to recognize how God is presenting a vision to the group of leaders. These leaders have a discerning ear to hear the voice of Jesus and open eyes to see what is possible in the future. They believe that God is building a church that can storm the gates of hell, and they are ready to be a part of the invasion.

The kingdom mind-set creates a cooperative spirit with other churches in the community. Rethinking leaders aren't competing with any other church. They are not trying to put on the best show. Instead, they are looking for opportunities to cooperate in efforts that point people to Jesus. They pray for the shared kingdom work of the church.

The kingdom mind-set creates a multiplication itch within the ministry of the leader and the church. Jesus mandated a mission

of making disciples in all that we do (see Matt. 26:16–20). He gave us a spirit that produces fruitfulness in us (see Gal. 5:22–23). Jesus sent his disciples into the world, just as he was sent (see John 17:18). When we genuinely connect with Jesus, something begins to grow in us that cannot possibly stay within us. It connects us to others in love and creates a pathway for the message of life-transforming truth to be shared. While many growing churches have designed themselves to add to their numbers, rethinking leaders have their eyes fixed on something different. They recognize the call to see the church become a revival movement that does more than add to the number of people in their congregation. The rethinking leader carries the burden of the call to multiplication.

Rethinking leaders refuse to be content with growth by addition. They believe the call of Jesus is to multiply on both individual and corporate levels. They want to see disciples within their influence growing and eventually making disciples themselves. They also want to develop the capacity of their local church to the point of multiplying beyond their walls into surrounding neighborhoods, communities, and regions. It is a sad reality that only 4 percent of churches ever reproduce. It is not beyond our reach. Rethinking leaders with kingdom mind-sets are set on seeing those they lead multiply and become a part of a multiplication movement.

### **A Rethinking Leader Has Character**

A leader is a person full of all sorts of contradictions, strengths, weaknesses, successes, and failures. Rethinking leaders own the entirety of their stories. They do not pretend to be perfect and are always uncomfortable on the precarious perch of the pastoral pedestal. Rethinking leaders know, however, that who they are

is far more important than what they do. If they are broken and untrustworthy, everything they attempt to build rests above a sinkhole.

Because leadership is always about people, it is always about our character. Rethinking leaders root themselves first in their relationship with God. Their identity is secured in who God declares them to be. He is the one who breaks the bonds of sin, fear, addiction, and the past. He is the one that gives the leader's work meaning and purpose.

Rethinking leaders take responsibility for their most overwhelming leadership challenge: leading themselves. This type of leader is committed to the transformation of their interior lives until they submit every desire to God's will. They are committed to the development of their character before ever assuming the role of leader. They are consistently accountable to others and work to maintain not just the appearance of integrity, but true integrity. Rethinking leaders know that if they cannot look at themselves in the mirror without dropping their eyes, they won't be able to honestly and effectively lead others.

This type of leader is pursuing holiness. They are submitting more and more of themselves to the Spirit's watchful gaze and penetrating fire. They are becoming more and more a product of their surrender. Aware that each decision directs the path of those that follow, they are vigilant to protect and maintain a posture of repentance, trust, and reliance on the Holy Spirit.

### **A Rethinking Leader Has Chemistry**

Chemistry is an essential characteristic of a rethinking leader. A rethinking leader cannot be a bully, a tyrant, or a lone wolf. When I say "chemistry," I do not mean that rethinking leaders

get along with everyone all the time. I definitely do not mean that they have the secret of keeping people happy all the time. Leaders who are going to do anything good will accept the idea that not everyone will like them. Their leadership will draw some people to them and repel others.

It is okay; leaders do not have to be best friends with everyone. They do have to be able to get along with others and work with anyone on the team. Chemistry is not some mysterious bonding that exists between certain individuals on special teams. It is more about a willingness to love and care for one another. Chemistry is supporting one another, believing in one another, and helping one another to succeed. Chemistry is the body of Christ acting like the body of Christ.

Paul spent the entirety of chapter 12 in his first letter to the Corinthians explaining the different gifts that the Spirit gives to individuals. He explained that the Spirit provides each gift for building up the group and reaching the lost. Paul continued by emphasizing the importance of different voices in leadership and different people in the church. He used the image of the body of Christ as a metaphor to describe the way we care for one another. Paul encouraged Christ followers to ask for the higher gifts from the Spirit. Then he wrote these words:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. (1 Cor. 13:1–10)

While these words are most often read in the context of a marriage ceremony, that was not the kind of love that Paul was trying to describe for the church in Corinth. He was writing about how people operate together as the body of Christ. He wanted them to see that there is a more excellent way than any other, a way of love. This love is the greatest gift of the Spirit to the church. This love never fails. When every other spiritual gift seems to be lacking, love still works. When no strategy is working, love still works.

When I describe the leadership characteristic of chemistry, I am describing the ability to live, work, and operate with love. To understand one's own emotions and respond appropriately while also identifying and responding to the feelings of others. It is about forgiveness, hope, courage, honor, patience, and forgiveness.

### **A Rethinking Leader Is Hungry**

When I reflect on some of our most challenging years—the years when I was not sure Hydrant would survive—I can see that I was hungry. That hunger can be lacking in more comfortable

times. In many ways, I had more at stake in the survival of Hydrant Church than any other human being. The few people gathering with us in those early years would have gone on to find another church if we had failed at this experiment. I believe some would have been heartbroken. Some may have taken some time to recover from it all, but the next day, they would still have had their jobs or careers. They would not have had to worry about their kids' school clothes much less how they were going to buy groceries the next week. No one else's mortgage was on the line. No one else's reputation or career would have taken a hit. No one else would have been updating his or her resume.

This kind of pressure can be frightening for some. It keeps many pastors from rethinking, revitalizing, and certainly from restarting. We know that God is ultimately our provider, but I have never seen worms fall into a bird's nest. Most of the time, the pressure made me hungry. It kept me aware of my own need to grow, to learn, to get better. The hunger was a mixture of determination fueled by a willingness to work hard for what I believed was possible. About six months before we relaunched, I was desperate for ideas. I found an old firehouse for sale. I thought it would be a fantastic place for a hydrant church. I walked around and around that property, asking God to give me a chance to try something radical. I did not mean restarting the church—I just wanted a cool building.

Once we restarted (not in a firehouse), I realized that he had answered my prayer. That opportunity gave me a determination to offer everything that I had to try to make it work. The most resourceful leader, communicator, or visionary cannot reach his or her potential relying on talent alone. It is easy to rely on our skills or spiritual gifting to succeed. We need to be hungry enough

to put in the hard work if we want to become who we are created to be.

Rethinking leaders are hungry to grow and learn. They give their very best back to God as an offering. Success or failure in any one endeavor is up to us; we decide to fail when we choose to quit trying. Professor Mark Wilson describes grit as one of the three most important characteristics of small church leaders. He wrote, “Grit is resilience—it is getting back up when life knocks you down.”<sup>2</sup>

Ministry will knock you down. Then it will kick you when you are down. It is especially true of revitalization or restart ministry. You are messing with something that people love and believe will spontaneously work again. You are going to get punched in the mouth once in a while (hopefully not literally). You can complain and whine. You can stay down or move on to the next opportunity. Rethinking leaders get back up because they are committed, devoted, and determined. Rethinking leaders are too gritty to stay down, no matter how bloody they get.

### **A Rethinking Leader Is a Servant**

Can I repeat this? Rethinking leaders must be willing to serve. It requires a servant’s heart to love a remnant of people who believe in what could happen in their church. It requires the same Spirit to help people who are hoping to connect to God begin to find their way. The most challenging thing is to bring these two groups together in a shared mission and vision of the kingdom work God is calling you to do together.

Only a servant leader can do this. Rethinking leaders know that their identity is that of a servant. They do not outgrow servanthood nor do they get promoted out of servanthood. It is an

identity that has defined them, as it did Paul, who continually called himself a “servant of Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Rethinking leaders are humble. They serve everyone on the team and are ready to do whatever is needed to see the team and its members succeed. They can ask for help when it is required, because it is not about appearing great. It is about doing great work together. This kind of leader shares the credit or simply gives it away whenever possible. Humble leaders are not trying to make a name for themselves. They are lifting others up and lifting up the name of Jesus.

### **A Rethinking Leader Takes Responsibility**

At Hydrant Church, we do not have church membership. Being in the southern United States, we found that church membership was too often reflective of club membership instead of membership in the body of Christ. We found the best way to redefine the connection was to use a new term. So, now we invite people to partner with us in the ministry and mission of Hydrant Church. While club members often pay their dues or fees to receive benefits, partners invest themselves and their resources in the purpose of the organization.

I hate the word *fellowship*. To be more precise, I hate the way that Christians use the word fellowship. We use the word fellowship to describe hanging out together or to describe a big room that we use for eating and playing games. We use it to describe a meal shared. We even invite people to come to enjoy some food and fellowship. We have no idea what the word means or meant to the early church.

The Greek word κοινωμία, transliterated as koinonia, means much more than having a good time hanging out together. Strong’s

Dictionary defines the term this way: “partnership, i.e. (literally) participation, or (social) intercourse, or (pecuniary) benefaction:— (to) communicate(-ation), communion, (contri-)distribution, fellowship.”<sup>3</sup> The fellowship that the early church enjoyed was a partnership in a mission, connection to Christ, and sharing in the needs of one another. That kind of fellowship required commitment, sacrifice, devotion, and determination. It reflected a sense of shared ownership.

Rethinking leaders hope to develop leaders, build teams, and invite people into the mission. It requires people to be willing to take ownership and responsibility for the church. I am confident that as long as I am the pastor of the people of Hydrant Church, no other person will care more about this church than I do. So, I must demonstrate the responsibility and ownership that we hope to see others take for the mission of the church. Jesus described this ownership and responsibility as the difference between a good shepherd and a hired hand:

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore, Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep, and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (John 10:1–18)

Rethinking leaders are good shepherds of the Good Shepherd’s flock. We cannot run at the first sign of danger; we must lay down our lives and stay the course until the end. You cannot see the change you are hoping to create in a year or two. Give yourself at least five. Believe in what is possible. Take ownership and stick with it.

## **A Rethinking Leader Exhibits Humility**

James the brother of Jesus quoted Proverbs when he wrote, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (James 4:6). Ministry is hard enough on its own; it is especially hard in a small, struggling church with a dream of new life. There is no need to make ourselves enemies of God by being prideful. Pride will always bring us down if it is allowed to linger in our souls.

Pride has a way of separating us from others. Pride and arrogance are really cover-ups for a deeper problem of insecurity. When we allow our insecurity to convince us that we are not worthy of love or that we are incapable of leading, we are bound to compensate. We compensate by pretending, hiding, keeping people at a distance, and trying to be perfect. Rethinking leaders are leaders who have discovered that their calling, authority, and identity are secured in Christ. They are anchored in a spirit of servanthood to Jesus. They have nothing to prove.

Leader with secure identities are capable of rightly assessing their own strengths and weaknesses. They are capable of leaning on their strengths and managing their weakness. They build well-rounded teams of the best people that they can find. They aren't afraid to bring people onto the team that are strong in areas of their own weakness. This leads to a genuine confidence. Like pride is the opposite side of the coin to insecurity, confidence and humility are two sides of the same coin.

Lastly, humble leaders will take anything to help the team succeed. They are not concerned with whose job it is or who will get the credit. They are excited to see others succeed. Therefore, they can set aside their own desires, position, or agenda to help someone else thrive. There is no job that is too big, too hard, or too small for rethinking leaders. In a moment of need, they are

ready to do whatever it takes and play whatever role is needed for the team to win.

### **A Rethinking Leader Is Healthy**

Rethinking leaders value, protect, and pursue a healthy lifestyle. In the middle of my first revitalization project, I found myself depleted. I was frustrated, lonely, and overweight, and temptations seemed more present than ever. I was not sleeping well. I had little patience or energy for the family. I ate poorly and did not exercise at all. I took pills to help me sleep. I took pills for acid reflux. I took pills for pain. I took pills for high blood pressure.

I began to sense God speaking to me about my health. He was not talking to me about my size or weight. He began to show me that the different areas of my life were all intertwined and that neglect in one or two areas had quickly spread. I was no longer spiritually, emotionally, relationally, physically, or vocationally healthy. A diet was not going to fix my problems, though eating healthy certainly helped. In fact, I discovered that a more disciplined diet helped me to resist my occasional bouts with depression and rebound from them more quickly. Our emotions, spirituality, physicality, and even our work are all connected.

Rethinking leaders are going into battle and need to be strong and healthy. They need to be pursuing physical, relational, spiritual, emotional, and vocational health. These operate like the spokes in a bicycle wheel. When they are all tight and healthy, the wheel rolls true. When you allow one to get loose, it loosens others and soon you will crash.

The good news is that discipline is contagious and grows exponentially. Developing one good habit leads to others; getting physically healthy results in the time and energy for spiritual

disciplines. Getting emotionally healthy leads to better relationships at home and work. These better relationships lead to less stress and more energy to focus when you are at work.

Leading a revitalization or a restart may be one of the hardest things that you ever do. You need to be healthy to take on the challenge. For me, I am motivated by an experience the disciples had with Jesus in Matthew 26:36–46. Jesus was at the end of his life, a fact that had not yet been revealed to the disciples. For three years, Jesus had only wanted things for his disciples. He had not asked them to do much for him. Jesus came to this critical moment of temptation in his life and asked his three closest friends in the world for a favor. He asked them to watch and pray with him.

He went off a little way away from them and started to pray by himself. Jesus was waging a spiritual battle in his praying. He asked his friends to be his backup in this contest. After just an hour, Jesus returned and they had all three fallen asleep. To paraphrase, Jesus said to them, “Can’t you just do this one thing for me? I know your spirit is willing, but your flesh is weak.”

Jesus’ meaning haunts me. “Your spirit is willing, but your flesh is weak.” Rethinking leaders must fight for their health so that they never hear those words from Jesus.

Not every leader will be a rethinking leader. Not every leader has to be a rethinking leader. Christ gave the church five types of leaders; the church needs apostles, teachers, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds. Figure out who you are. Figure out what you are called to be and do, then find the best place for you to answer that call. We need men and women who will rise up as rethinking leaders and lead our subtracting and plateaued churches into a new day. You may be just one of those leaders. If you are, give it everything thing you have. Don’t hold back. Don’t give up.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Are you a rethinking leader?
2. Evaluate yourself on a scale of one to five in each of the rethinking leader characteristics.

- \_\_\_ Kingdom mind-set
- \_\_\_ Character
- \_\_\_ Chemistry
- \_\_\_ Hungry
- \_\_\_ Servant
- \_\_\_ Responsibility
- \_\_\_ Humility
- \_\_\_ Healthy

3. In which of the characteristics are you strongest?
4. Which of these characteristics do you need to develop to take your leadership to the next level? What can you do to improve in this area?



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## epilogue

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**T**here is one inevitable fact of leading a struggling church to new life: You cannot do it alone. Without the grace and strength of God empowering you in his Spirit, the weight and pain of leading this type of change will crush a man or woman. Those who embark on this journey of gospel transformation in their churches will face pain and crises. The Enemy will attack any great work with ferocity. He will use every weapon in his arsenal to distract, weaken, deceive, and take out the leaders.

The spiritual attack of the Enemy is so heavy in seasons that it is nearly crushing. You need to be secure in your armor. You need the belt of truth to protect you against the lies whispered to you and about you. You need the helmet of salvation to protect your mind from the temptations of toxic thinking. You cannot stand with sure footing any place other than upon the peace of Christ. Faith must be your shield in every battle. You must have a deep-seated belief in the God who calls you, the mission you have embarked upon, and the vision that the Spirit has placed in your heart. Finally, you fight only with the sword of Scripture. Speak as an advocate, love in Jesus' Word, rely on his presence in the heat of spiritual battle. Remember, it doesn't matter how dark the path becomes; you do not need to know the way if you stay close to the

One who is the light. Walk intimately with the One who knows the way.

External spiritual attack is not your only battlefield. Your greatest struggle may be spiritual, but it is not your only battle. You will face betrayal, letdown, disappointment, and personal attack from those you love. You'll lay down your life for your people. You will put your career, your financial future, and your family at risk to take on this challenge. Some people will never understand or care about any of that sacrifice. You are changing a thing that has remained unchanged in their lives for years. You are messing with the sacred, and there is no measure to the lengths that some will go to attack, shred, and tear you down. Love them anyway. Serve them anyway. Forgive them anyway. Be gracious and gentle. Be gentle as lambs and shrewd as serpents. Always be for people; do not stand against them even when they stand against you.

Your greatest battle will always be the one within yourself. This battle will test your spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational health at every level. Any insecurity or neuroses in you will quickly come flooding to the surface. You will feel anonymous and unproductive and be tempted to find affirmation and approval in the people you serve. You will be tempted to use people to accomplish your vision and prop up the facade of being a good pastor. Vulnerability feels like a weakness, but you must wrestle your way through the vulnerability with courage. You must let people see you rather than a false perfected image of you. Your authenticity is a significant weapon in the battle against your own worst self.

I had a season when I was sinking in the pits of negativity and becoming increasingly pessimistic with every passing Sunday. I couldn't pull myself out of it. I would walk into the office on Monday after another rough Sunday and feel discouraged, beat,

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up, and like a failure. It affected my mood for the rest of the day and the rest of the week. All I could see was what was not working. It was, after all, what I was looking to find. It was consuming every thought. I had to fight back. I had to change my day off to separate from the negativity when it was at its worst. I refused to look at giving numbers or attendance until the end of the week. I focused my Bible reflections on passages of joy, mercy, and grace. I started a journal that I filled out nightly. In the journal, I wrote down in the margin the words *true*, *noble*, *right*, *pure*, *lovely*, *admirable*, *excellent*, and *praiseworthy*. Then each day, I would write one thing from that day that was true and one thing that was noble and one thing that was right, and so on. Over time, my thoughts shifted, my mood changed, my perspective grew, and my actions followed.

There will be pain, and crises, and battles. Count the cost. Prepare your body, soul, heart, and mind for action. Then face it with the confidence that greater is the One in you than the one against you. Believe that the One who called you on this adventure is quite able to bring it to completion.





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## notes

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### Chapter 1: Rethinking the Call

1. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 24.
2. Ephesians 3:7 and Galatians 6:9.
3. Heath and Heath, *Power of Moments*, 12.
4. Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “atom,” <https://www.etymonline.com/word/atom>.
5. Erwin McManus, *Seizing Your Divine Moment* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 18.

### Chapter 2: Rethinking First Steps

1. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “perspective,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perspective>.
2. Andy Andrews, *The Seven Decisions: Understanding the Keys to Personal Success* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 147.
3. Sam Chand, “Culture Trumps Vision,” Leadership Network, June 23, 2015, <https://leadnet.org/culture-trumps-vision/>.
4. Jim Powell, *Dirt Matters: The Foundation for a Healthy, Vibrant, and Effective Congregation* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2013).
5. George Barna, *The Power of Vision: Discover and Apply God’s Plan for Your Life and Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009), 26–27.
6. Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.
7. Aubrey Malphurs, *Look Before You Lead: How to Discern & Shape Your Church Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 34–35.

8. See Ephesians 1:15–22; 2:11–21; Philippians 3:1–14; and Colossians 1:15–20, 2:19–23.

9. Malphurs, *Look Before You Lead*, 60.

10. Malphurs, *Look Before You Lead*, 60.

### Chapter 3: Rethinking the Way Forward

1. Dennis McCallum, “Vision and Christian Leadership,” Xenos Christian Fellowship, <https://www.xenos.org/essays/vision-and-christian-leadership>.

### Chapter 4: Rethinking the Death of a Church

1. Rob Bell, *What We Talk about When We Talk about God* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014), 194.

2. The early church began among faithful Jews. It took years for it to begin to spread to the Gentile world. This means that the earliest followers of Jesus maintained their commitment to Judaism’s rituals, traditions, and laws. Paul, an apostle to the Gentiles, preached a gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. Jesus was the author and finisher of that faith, and the only commandment of the new covenant that Jesus created was to love as he loved. However, early Jewish Christians (Judaizers) expected Gentiles who came to Christ to live under the Jewish law. The demonstrative expression of that law was circumcision. Paul’s disdain for these expectations, and for those who heaped them upon new believers, was so great that he wished they would just go all the way with their circumcision and castrate themselves.

3. Thom Rainer, “Why Some Churches Choose to Die,” *Church Answers* (blog), November 4, 2015, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/why-some-churches-choose-to-die/>.

### Chapter 5: Rethinking Obscurity

1. Special thanks to the North Carolina East District of the Wesleyan Church. After presenting to the appropriate committees, we were given a small budget with which to market the new launch.

2. “Everybody wants to be on the mountaintop, but if you’ll remember, mountaintops are rocky and cold. There is no growth on the top of a mountain. Sure, the view is great, but what’s a view for? A view just gives us a glimpse of our next destination—our next target. But to

hit that target, we must come off the mountain, go through the valley, and begin to climb the next slope. It is in the valley that we slog through the lush grass and rich soil, learning and becoming what enables us to summit life's next peak." Andy Andrews, *The Noticer: Sometimes, All a Person Needs Is a Little Perspective* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2009), 8.

3. Alicia Britt Chole, *Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years . . . and Yours* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 5.

4. Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Random House, 2017), 147.

### Chapter 6: Rethinking the Church's Why

1. Emily McFarlan Miller, "Jesus Rode a Dinosaur: Conference Looks at What Churches Tell Teens about Science," May 18, 2018, Religion News Service, <https://religionnews.com/2018/05/18/jesus-rode-a-dinosaur-conference-looks-at-what-churches-tell-teens-about-science/>.

2. Eddie Gibbs, *LeadershipNext: Changing Leaders in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 85.

3. Todd Wilson and Dave Ferguson with Alan Hirsch, *Becoming a Level Five Multiplying Church Field Guide* (Exponential, 2016).

4. Thoughts shared by Professor Mark Wilson around the topic of leadership issues in the church during an interview conducted as a part of my doctoral studies.

### Chapter 7: Rethinking Big Dreams

1. Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 6.

2. Gladwell, *David and Goliath*, 12.

3. Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last Deluxe: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 142–43.

4. Barna State of the Church 2016 (<https://www.barna.com/research/year-review-barnas-10-read-articles-2016/>).

5. Brene Brown, *Daring to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (New York: Random House, 2018), 48.

6. <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/vital-congregations-report/>.

7. Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth: Big Churches, Small Churches and the Small Thinking That Divides Us* (New Small Church, 2012).

### Chapter 8: Rethinking Leadership

1. John Gray, “Critical Components for Christian Leadership” (message delivered at The Leadership Collective, September 22, 2014).

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 1*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages. Used by permission from The Westminster Press, 1998), 81.

3. Kerry Willis, *Relational Leadership: What I Learned from a Fisherman about Leading a Church* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2009).

4. I worked with NEXLeaders through their IPSAT program that explores identity through five different layers, then helps you to understand yourself and live from your personality into the world. The final step was a 360-degree leadership survey and evaluation of the above statement. Learn more at [myipsat.com](http://myipsat.com).

### Chapter 9: Rethinking Strategy

1. Exponential has done a remarkable job researching and describing five levels in the life of the church. They call church leaders toward steps that will make them a level five multiplying church in their book *Becoming a Level Five Multiplying Church*. Ninety-six percent of churches fall within level one (subtracting) and level three (adding). Most of us feel like we have accomplished the mission at level three. The real call is to be multiplying people at both the micro (personal) level and the macro (congregational) level. We must dually focus on making multiplying disciples and multiplication-minded congregations. You can receive a PDF version of the book for free at the Exponential website.

2. Pew Research Center, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” August 23, 2016, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/>.

3. Greg Atkinson, *Secrets of a Secret Shopper: Reaching and Keeping Church Guests* (USA: Rainer Publishing, 2016), 52.

4. Karl Vaters, *Small Church Essentials: Field-Tested Principles for Leading a Healthy Congregation of Under 250* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 110.

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### Chapter 10: Rethinking Discipleship

1. Todd Wilson and Dave Ferguson with Alan Hirsch, *Becoming a Level Five Multiplying Church Field Guide* (2015), loc. 521.
2. Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 31.

### Chapter 11: A Rethinking Leader

1. For more on the gospel of the kingdom of God, see Scot McKnight's *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* and N. T. Wright's *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*.
2. Professor Mark O. Wilson, quote taken from a personal email interview on leadership within the church.
3. Blue Letter Bible, Strong's Lexicon, s.v. "*koinōnia*," <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=g2842>.

