THE MISSIONAL LEADER

Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World

ALAN J. ROXBURGH
FRED ROMANUK

Foreword by Eddie Gibbs

A Leadership Network Publication
The Missional Leader

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Since 1984, Leadership Network has fostered church innovation and growth by diligently pursuing its far-reaching mission statement: to identify, connect, and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact.

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Foreword

by Eddie Gibbs

The past few years have witnessed a plethora of books addressing the challenges facing the church in the midst of profound cultural transition. These titles, addressing the situation of the churches in the West, are set against a backdrop of persistent church decline experienced by most, if not all, of the traditional denominations. Some of these books have focused on the cultural context, providing evidence that the changes taking place at least during the past four decades are deep-rooted and comprehensive. They have an impact on every institution, including government, business and commerce, the military, education, and health care.

The church is not immune to the loss of confidence in our human ability to come up with solutions to fundamental problems relating to the environment, a growing world population, the purported clash of civilizations, and a technological revolution that has advantaged the privileged (who both contribute to and benefit from scientific advances) over those who are excluded from enjoying the benefits (through lack of education and work skills). All this is within a global context and amid fear of terrorism that has created a climate of uncertainty. Along with leaders in every other institution, church leaders are overwhelmed by the flood of facts, theories, and opinions let loose in this information age; they experience a loss of place amid increasing pluralism and the prevailing culture of relativism.
There were also, especially in the 1970s and through the 1990s, a spate of books from leaders of megachurches, whose growth has bucked the general trend. They trumpeted a message of success, inviting other leaders to adopt their methods in order to achieve similar results. Their expectations were seldom realized. It appears that the impressive growth of many megachurches was in fact mostly at the expense of other churches. This raises the question as to what their future will be once they have drained the pool dry. Yet they must not be so readily dismissed, because some of these large churches have made a significant contribution in reactivating lapsed church members by offering a worship experience and need-based ministries. These offerings established their relevance to a constituency that left out of boredom or frustration.

Then we have seen still other books that perceive the missionary challenge and gospel opportunity of the present state of uncertainty. They call for a new kind of church, envisioning one that is far less hierarchical, much more mobile, and outwardly focused. They emphasize the need to move from a church shaped over many centuries by the dubious assumptions of Christendom. Such churches operated on a come-to-us basis, in which the surrounding community is invited into the worshiping community on its terms.

This model too has now passed its “sell-by” date in most locations. It needs to be replaced by a missional model of church, one that is outgoing and expressed in countless local initiatives. This is the church of the first two and a half centuries of its existence, as recorded in the New Testament and by the Apostolic Fathers, before the conversion of Emperor Constantine. It is also the kind of church that is experiencing such phenomenal growth in Africa south of the Sahara, in Latin America, and parts of Asia. These churches, which are the fruit of missionary initiatives from the West, are in turn reaching out to the West and contributing increasingly to revitalizing the old Churches of Europe and North America, and to evangelizing those who have abandoned the church—or never ventured through its door.

A growing number of church leaders are beginning to catch the vision of another kind of church. Some of these leaders are to be found
within traditional denominations, which is where the authors of this volume work, primarily as consultants. Others are arising within independent initiatives, which either stand alone or establish links with wider networks. These networks themselves birth new faith communities. But these emerging churches are not clones of existing ones, a process that characterized so much of the church planting endeavors of past decades. Rather, they are based on a missional understanding of church that emphasizes an incarnational, servant approach and sees church not as a once-a-week gathering but as a community to which one belongs that relates to the whole of life. It is a community in which each person makes an active contribution, during gathered worship as well as dispersed service. These churches emphasize hospitality and are therefore small. They are small not because of their limited appeal but because they are committed to maintaining their values of community, accountability, and service, and to being reproducible on an exponential scale. This is indeed an inspiring vision.

The challenge for so many church leaders, whether or not they have received formal training, is that they are not equipped to lead such a church. They were trained to pastor and teach in an existing church context to the satisfaction of its members. Our training models are conditioned by a Christendom mind-set and the agendas of the academy. As a consequence, we neglect the three other areas of ministry listed first in Ephesians 4, all of which are of crucial importance in the missional church: the gifts of apostle, prophet, and evangelist. (As one Australian denominational executive lamented, “We are suffering from a dire shortage of APEs!”)

To break out of such a shrinking, we need the entrepreneurial leader who can birth new faith communities. We need the prophet who has learned the discipline of listening to God and is able to impart a clear vision and discerning counsel. We need the evangelist who can commend Christ with grace and authority and equip local churches to communicate the good news as a choral statement.

The frequently heard cry of church leaders who have captured the vision is, “How do we transition from a consumer model of church to one that is essentially missional in nature?” Or, “How do we birth
such a church, when we have never had the opportunity to be involved in one?"

This is where the present volume makes a unique contribution. It is the first book I have come across that addresses, in a very practical way, how to make the transition. It identifies the critical issues that every leader must consider before beginning the process and then offers wise counsel on how to navigate the process, giving frank recognition to the fact that the passage will almost certainly be stormy, disruptive, and disorienting. This is not a book of quick fixes and slick slogans, but one that sets out a comprehensive and in-depth treatment. Some books can be mastered in one read. This is the kind of volume that leaders will want to return to again and again as they face fresh challenges. The insights contained in these pages are a timely guide not only for the paid staffs of churches but for their entire leadership team, to afford mutual understanding and a common vision. Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk draw on years of experience as church consultants, and their insights are now made available to a much wider audience. I am convinced they will make many more grateful friends as a consequence.

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The question is familiar: “What do you mean by missional church?” Even though the term is now used everywhere, there is still confusion about it. As we begin this book, here is a brief description of what we mean by the phrase.

God is about a big purpose in and for the whole of creation. The church has been called into life to be both the means of this mission and a foretaste of where God is inviting all creation to go. Just as its Lord is a mission-shaped God, so the community of God’s people exists, not for themselves but for the sake of the work. Mission is therefore not a program or project some people in the church do from time to time (as in “mission trip,” “mission budget,” and so on); the church’s very nature is to be God’s missionary people. We use the word *missional* to mark this big difference. Mission is not about a project or a budget, or a one-off event somewhere; it’s not even about sending missionaries. A missional church is a community of God’s people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.
The Missional Leader
The Context and Challenge of Missional Leadership
Six Critical Issues for Missional Leadership

Alan was leading a workshop at a Youth Specialties/Emergent conference in San Diego. The group comprised some one hundred church leaders from all kinds of churches—experimental, long-standing, mainline, and congregational. But from all the groups the common question was, “How do we lead and form these missional/emergent congregations you keep talking about? How do we form missional congregations without blowing up the churches we’re serving, or losing our job?”

This book is written out of the conviction that we need a new approach to leadership for missional communities. We come away from countless encounters with pastoral teams and denominational executives with the pressing sense that the tools and resources they are using will not address the critical issue of forming missional communities of the Kingdom in a time of rapid, discontinuous change. We believe there are six critical issues in developing a missional leadership in our day.

Issue One: Missional Leadership
Is the Key—But How Do You Do It?

There’s a lot of good theological and biblical conversation going on about creating missional churches and communities, but little sense
of or assistance for how such leadership can actually be developed. Alan was sitting in the office of a denominational executive talking about the church’s need for change. This executive had read the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.* He turned to Alan and said, “I love this missional theology. I believe in what you folks are saying. The critique of culture, the evaluation of the church and the theology are wonderful. But what do I do with it? Pastors come into my office asking me for help. And I know that just giving them ‘how-to’ programs isn’t going to help them.

“But neither is this book. It’s too academic. Most of my pastors will read it and have no idea what to do with it at the end (if they understand it at all). You see, when a pastor walks into my office and asks for help with other kinds of issues or problems, I can reach onto my shelf and pull off any number of programs that will help them know what to do. But this missional conversation is just that: it’s a conversation, but there’s nothing to help us know how to do it in the real life of our congregation.”

At the end of a workshop at a convention for emergent leaders, a similar thing happened. This time it wasn’t a denominational executive but a young pastor in an experimental congregation in the Midwest who said, “Al, what you’re saying about the church and our culture is absolutely right! It resonates with my heart. I was feeling excited and energized as you spoke. But where does someone like me go to learn how to be this kind of leader?”

Alan didn’t have an answer for him. Leaders are eager to engage in the missional/emergent conversation, but their most pressing questions suggest they’re struggling to make sense of how to actually lead in this new way after they go back home.

**Issue Two: Most Models Repackage Old Paradigms**

In response to demand, numerous books are being published with missional language in the title. What is disappointing about most of these books is that they use missional language to repackage the familiar language of church effectiveness, church growth, and church health. In other words, the writers have not engaged the nature of the change a missional paradigm requires and are simply offering a few
more good tactics for doing the same thing more effectively. Leadership models are borrowed from psychology (counselor, therapist), medicine (health and healer), the business world (strategist, coach, manager), and the educational world (teacher). A lot of congregations and leaders have been socialized to view these models as the only viable ones. A denominational executive told us about one extreme but real example. He met with a congregation of about 150 people. Describing the profile of the new pastor they wanted, they told him they were not interested in anyone wanting to bring about change. They wanted their church to be like a hospital with a pastor who looked after their needs and metaphorically changed their IVs when required. This is a pastor-medical model of leadership, and it is based on palliative care. It may be extreme, but it is a sign of the borrowed cultural images that shape our understanding of church and our expectation of leaders. The executive admitted that although this was a gross example of a church’s pastoral search, it was not far from what many actually wanted.

In another case, a congregation called us to ask how it could remove the current pastor because she wasn’t an effective change agent. The job description they developed called for an entrepreneurial leader who could make things happen—clearly a business model. Both examples demonstrate that the leadership models currently shaping the church are inadequate to forming a missional church. In their own context and setting—medicine, the business world, counseling—these images of leadership are appropriate, but when the church borrows and applies such models to the community of God’s people it misses an opportunity to shape leadership around the biblical sense, in which leadership is about cultivating an environment that innovates and releases the missional imagination present among a community of God’s people. What do we mean by the language of “environment”? We use the word in much the same way as we would say we want to create an environment that enables our children to thrive. In other words, what are the skills, capacities, and habits that we as parents would want to cultivate that give our children all the things they need to thrive? When we talk about the water quality of a lake, we seek to describe those elements in the water that contribute to the fish in the lake thriving, or making sure that what we put into the lake as human beings helps to maintain high-quality water for drinking and swimming. In
other words, we cannot make our children into what they will become, just as we cannot make water in that sense. But in both cases we can, as parents or responsible citizens, set the context for the child or the lake to thrive as it should. In the same way, missional leadership is about creating an environment within which the people of God in a particular location may thrive.

**Issue Three: Discontinuous Change Is the New Norm**

At a meeting with a dozen executive staff members of a denomination, we heard one, reflecting on the dynamics of the congregation, say that she felt every time she turned around things changed. The executive responsible for resourcing Christian education spoke up: “The very nature of change has changed, but I can’t quite get my mind around this discontinuous-change idea. How is it different from continuous change?” After a while, another executive looked at his associates around the table and said, “The reality is that discontinuous change has become the new continuous change, and we were never trained to deal with this kind of world!” Everyone nodded in agreement. It’s a new kind of world!

We heard similar sentiments from an executive leader of a major denomination in a series of three-day meetings concerning some critical issues of innovation in the denomination. We had just brought to this group of some thirty people a comprehensive report (based on about one hundred exhaustive interviews from across the system) on the primary issues confronting its congregations and leaders. The executive looked over the report, sighed, and said: “I’m just plain tired of all this change; I don’t have energy left to address it all anymore!” After a pause, he smiled and said, “But I know these are accurate descriptions of what we’re facing, and I know I need to address the new changes!”

Almost every book one picks up these days and most conferences on leadership begin with the same theme: our culture is in the midst of rapid, extensive transformation at every level. We are moving through a period of volatile, discontinuous change. Change is always happening; that’s not the issue. There are two kinds of change we want
to consider in this book: continuous and discontinuous. Let us illustrate the difference between these two types of change.

Continuous change develops out of what has gone before and therefore can be expected, anticipated, and managed. The maturation of our children is an example. Generations have experienced this process of raising children and watching them develop into adults. We can anticipate the stages and learn from those who have gone before us how to navigate the changes. We have a stock of experience and resources to address this development change; it is continuous with the experience of many others. This kind of change involves such things as improvement on what is already taking place and whether the change can be managed with existing skills and expertise.

Discontinuous change is disruptive and unanticipated; it creates situations that challenge our assumptions. The skills we have learned aren’t helpful in this kind of change. A friend became the executive vice president for finance in a college at quite a young age. One day, just before Christmas and about a year into the job, he returned from a fundraising trip and was immediately invited into the president’s office. He assumed it was for a regular meeting, but he discovered a member of the board in the room as well. The president passed a letter across his desk to the young VP and told him not to go back to his office; there was a career counselor waiting to see him because his job in the institution was over right then and there. This friend found himself suddenly in a world he never anticipated and for which he had no coping skills. In discontinuous change:

• Working harder with one’s habitual skills and ways of working does not address the challenges being faced.
• An unpredictable environment means new skills are needed.
• There is no getting back to normal.

Discontinuous change is dominant in periods of history that transform a culture forever, tipping it over into something new. The Exodus stories are an example of a time when God tipped history in a new direction and in so doing transformed Israel from a divergent group of slaves into a new kind of people. The advent of the printing press in
the fifteenth century tipped Western society toward modernity and the pluralist, individualized culture we know today. Once it placed the Bible and books into everyone’s hands, the European mind was transformed. There are many more examples, from the Reformation to the ascen-
dence of new technologies such as computers and the Internet, that il-
lustrate the effect of rapid discontinuous change transforming a culture.

Discontinuous change and developmental change are not the same. Developmental is about more of what has been; it’s change within a familiar paradigm. Examples are everywhere. One buys a new car or introduces drums or drama or video into a worship service; a book written about missional leadership has a familiar chapter on the need for high commitment to church membership rather than asking the deeper questions of membership and belonging. These instances are all about change within a world. They don’t address the deeper, underlying issues. The skills and competencies for leading this kind of change are learned by habit and training within the system. Thus the churched culture of the twentieth century said to aspiring leaders, “If you want to be a pastor in this denomination you must go to Semi-
mary X and learn skills Y and Z; then you will be ready. We know skills Y and Z are the right ones because they have worked well in the past and will continue to serve us into the future.”

For more than a century, North American churches were at the center of culture; they were an essential part of most people’s belief and value systems. Therefore, leadership skills and capacities were de-
veloped around how to most effectively engage people when they came to the church. It was about training men and women who would faithfully run effective branch plants of the denomination so that when people came they would be well served with a set of expected resources, experiences, and programs. Leaders who ran these churches really well grew in prestige, respect, and influence.

Discontinuous change is different. There is a wonderful IBM ad that captures something of what it means. A team of people evidently starting up a business, after working hard to develop an online mar-
keting strategy, gather around a computer as their product goes on-
line. They look hopefully and expectantly for the first Internet sale. When one comes through, they nervously look at each other, relieved that something has happened. Then ten more sales come through.
Muted excitement runs through the anxious room. Then, suddenly, a hundred or so orders show up on the computer screen. The team is cheering and hugging one another in exultation; all their hard work has paid off. Then they stare at the screen, beyond disbelief: instead of hundreds of orders, which they couldn’t have imagined in their wildest dreams, there are suddenly thousands. Everyone is overwhelmed. No one knows how to deal with this; it’s outside their skills and expertise. They are at a loss to know what to do next. The organization has moved to a level of complexity that is beyond the team’s skills and ability to address.

In a period of discontinuous change, leaders suddenly find that the skills and capacities in which they were trained are of little use in addressing a new situation and environment. What do congregational leaders do when the skills that have been effective in drawing people in and building it up no longer get the same results because the growing numbers of emerging generations are no longer interested in being attracted into a church building or joining the church programs?

**Issue Four: Congregations Still Matter**

Despite the claim that congregations are so hopelessly compromised they cannot make the adjustments required to missionally engage our new context, a congregation can become a center of missional life.

We are not naïve about the challenges. Many congregations are in significant decline. For a lot of people, the congregation is little more than a haven in a heartless world, a dispenser of religious goods and services to individuals. Nevertheless, it is still populated by the people of God. God chooses to create new futures in the most inauspicious of places. Through the Incarnation, we discover that God’s future is at work not where we tend to look but among the people we write off as dead or powerless to make things different. If the Spirit has been poured out in the church—the church as it is, not some ideal type—then we are compelled to believe that the Spirit of God is at work and alive among the congregations of America. Congregations matter. But they need leaders with the skills to cultivate an environment in which the Spirit-given presence of God’s future may emerge among the people of God.
A denominational executive sits listening to a group of pastors share their convictions about the shaping of a missional church for their denomination. His arms are folded across his chest, his legs crossed, as he listens in silence. His body language suggests nervousness and resistance; yet, like a good leader, he has chosen to come to this meeting and listen to these men and women share their hearts with him. A veteran of many years, he has given his heart to his denomination and gotten many a bruise from his efforts. He knows the statistics, just like everyone else. This once-proud mainline denomination is bleeding members every year, budgets are plummeting, reserves are running low, and the remaining staff are being obliged to carry more and more work. Something needs to be done.

After the pastors finish speaking, his initial comments reveal the needling questions he brought with him. He is concerned that he seems to hear a lot of negative things from the missional church movement. From his perspective, missional church seems to be telling him that what he did in the past was wrong, that he and others just don’t know how to lead in this new world. He is concerned about the criticism of his and his peers’ leadership.

This executive is both right and wrong. He and his peers are exemplary; they lead with excellence and great skill. The skills and capacities that shaped church leadership for much of the twentieth century were the right ones for that context. We are not critiquing these skills and capacities. Our point is that the world has changed. Discontinuous change means that many rules and assumptions about leadership now need to be reexamined and rewritten. This does not make those who have led us in the past wrong; it means we are functioning in a different context. Just as a missionary who moves from North America to another culture must unlearn a lot of habits and skills to learn how to be present and effective in a way that achieves results in the new context, so we pastors and denominational leaders in North America are now in a place where we must all learn new capacities if we are to achieve effective missional results.

The important point to remember is that we are all in this situation together. We are all learners on this journey. This is not a matter
of judging or accusing or dismissing the past efforts of leaders of great skill, passion, and integrity. All of us in leadership, young and old, experienced veterans and raw recruits, must discover together the new shape of leadership.

The classic skills of pastoral leadership in which most pastors were trained were not wrong, but the level of discontinuous change renders many of them insufficient and often unhelpful at this point. It is as if we are prepared to play baseball and suddenly discover that everyone else is playing basketball. The game has changed and the rules are different.

The situation requires cultivation of new leadership capacities. Alongside the standard skills of pastoral ministry, leaders need resources and tools to help them cultivate an environment for missional transformation. In one congregation, a staff of five pastors struggled to deal with complex, multiple expectations they had of themselves and the congregation had for them. They could articulate what was meant by a missional ecclesiology, and they had read several books on missional church, but they struggled with conflicting images of what it means to lead and what the congregation expected. They articulated what was for them a helpful way of describing their situation using a summary chart analyzing what they believed were two different paradigms operating both in them as leaders and in the congregation (see Table 1.1). We’re not suggesting this is the correct description of the divergent expectations and roles, only that it’s illustrative of what we believe is actually happening among leaders in the church today.

The Pastoral Model in Table 1.1 represents, for them, the role expectations placed on or held by congregational leaders. Here the assumption is that people come to the church to receive religious goods and services, and the pastor is, like a priest, present to engage and meet their spiritual or religious needs in every way. This team believed that the image described under this column continues to be the more dominant and powerful model, both for pastors and those who attend church. When they looked at the Pastoral Model, they readily admitted that most of the skills in which they were trained were developed for functioning in this framework. They clearly understood that for a large percentage of the congregation pastoral care is still a central competency for any leader of a congregation. But this team also recognized that it is no longer a sufficient skill set for leaders. Simply
TABLE 1.1. *Operating Models of Leadership.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pastoral</th>
<th>Missional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectation that an ordained pastor must be present at every meeting and event or else it is not validated or important.</td>
<td>Ministry staff operate as coaches and mentors within a system that is not dependent on them to validate the importance and function of every group by being present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordained ministry staff functions to give attention to and take care of people in the church by being present for people as they are needed (if care and attention are given by people other than ordained clergy, it may be more appropriate and effective but is deemed “second-class”).</td>
<td>Ordained clergy equip and release the multiple ministries of the people of God throughout the church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time, energy, and focus shaped by people’s “need” and “pain” agendas.</td>
<td>Pastor asks questions that cultivate an environment that engages the imagination, creativity, and gifts of God’s people in order to discern solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor provides solutions.</td>
<td>Preaching and teaching invite the people of God to engage Scripture as a living word that confronts them with questions and draws them into a distinctive world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preaching and teaching offer answers and tell people what is right and wrong.</td>
<td>• Metaphor and stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Telling</td>
<td>• Asks new questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Didactic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reinforcing assumptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Principles for living</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Professional” Christians</td>
<td>“Pastoring” must be part of the mix, but not the sum total.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity (must be a “home run hitter”)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Peacemaker”</td>
<td>Make tension OK.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict suppressor or “fixer”</td>
<td>Conflict facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep playing the whole game as though we are still the major league team and the major league players. Continue the mythology that “This staff is the New York Yankees of the Church world!”</td>
<td>Indwell the local and contextual; cultivate the capacity for the congregation to ask imaginative questions about its present and its next stages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
being skilled at caring for people once they come to the church is not sufficient for engaging the changing context in which a congregation finds itself.

The Missional Model they developed (Table 1.1) represented, for them, the emerging leadership paradigm they wanted to innovate in the congregation. This model recognizes a context in which people have an ever greater variety of religious options. A congregation must become a place where members learn to function like cross-cultural missionaries rather than be a gathering place where people come to receive religious goods and services. As the team articulated this list, they were aware that they needed a whole new set of leadership skills.

You may choose your own description and categories, but the principle is the same: in a situation of rapid discontinuous change, leaders must understand and develop skills and competencies to lead congregations and denominational systems in a context that is missional rather than pastoral.

**Issue Six: A Congregation Is a Unique Organization**

A congregation is not a business enterprise and cannot be treated as such. But this is precisely what most books and programs for innovating missional life in congregations are doing. They tend to borrow their ideas and strategies from the latest processes in the business world and merely use so-called missional language to describe what is being proposed. The denominational systems that came into their own in
the twentieth century were modeled after and came to look like North American corporate organizations. But a congregation is not a business organization, nor is it meant to be run like a minicorporation through strategic planning and alignment of people and resources around some big plan. The congregation comprises the people of God, called to be formed into a unique social community whose life together is the sign, witness, and foretaste of what God is doing in and for all of creation. Just as early Christian communities chose nonreligious language to express this unique new life (using the overtly political word *ecclesia*), so the church today must understand again its calling as the missional people of God. The calling does not require borrowing language and structures from secular organizations but rather formation of a unique imagination as a social community of the Kingdom.

The habits and activities of many congregations and leaders seem disconnected from the purposes to which God calls the church in North America today. We need to imagine the forms and structures of church life in this situation that are not simply uncritically borrowed from other systems. A leader must be able to help a congregation:

- Understand the extent to which strategic planning and other such models misdirect the church from faithful witness in our culture
- Create an environment wherein God’s people can discern for themselves new forms of life and witness
- Thrive in the midst of ambiguity and discontinuity

Even though the regular operational or administrative functions of a congregation continue to require attention, they must now support other leadership skills: cultivating the missional imagination of the people of God in the midst of massive change. This book introduces those skills and presents a framework for understanding why they are important and how they can be applied.
For a long time, we didn’t recognize what was happening among a lot of church leaders, but one day in a meeting of a group of pastors who had been together for about six months, meeting each month for a full day, we were struck by a realization. Their executive was coaching the team around issues of skills and competencies for leading missional change, and they were working through a reflection process to identify a primary missional leadership challenge they would address in their congregation. The next step would involve a meeting the following day with some eighty lay leaders from their combined congregations.

One of the pastors in the group saw a board member on the street shoveling snow from the sidewalk. He rushed out to see whether this board member would be at the meeting the next day. When the pastor returned a few minutes later, he had a crestfallen look on his face. “See, that’s what it’s like around here!” he exclaimed. “I just went out to check if Jim was coming to the meeting tomorrow, and he said to me, ‘Pastor, I’m not interested in that stuff; I won’t be there.’” The pastor was clearly discouraged, and not by just this one incident. He pointed out how most of his leaders had the same attitude. They would promise to participate but come only if there really wasn’t anything better to do.
There was a murmur of agreement around the room. As the conversation continued about what had just happened, we were struck by the depth and pervasiveness of the malaise the group was feeling. Most of these pastors had come to a place of believing that nothing could change in their congregation. Although they met month by month to look at their leadership skills and talk about missional leadership challenges, they had not been able to recognize or address a much deeper issue that sat with them around the table: they hardly believed God could or would do anything new among their people or under their leadership.

This malaise does not affect just pastoral leadership; it extends to many congregations as well. A good friend once said that the most important currency a congregation has to spend is hope. If it gets spent down, there isn’t much of anything else left. In many congregations the hope account is low and the cupboards of hope are getting bare. People have tried programs and worked through schemes over and over again but have seen little substantive change. This drains their hope. Like their pastor, a congregation can lose hope and cease to believe that the Spirit of God is among them. They mouth the words of belief but in reality it’s a long-lost wish.

Without addressing this malaise among leaders and congregations, there will be little innovation in missional life. The culture of belief and expectation in which these leaders and congregations are operating needs to be changed. What follows are some of the signposts for addressing this change. They are drawn and shaped from a biblical and theological narrative that shapes a Christian understanding of how God is at work in the world. It is important to note that the basis for the proposals in our book is these signposts, not prior assumptions and models of leadership drawn from other disciplines and practices. This is not to deny the importance of role models from other sources in innovating missional leadership, but the basis for all our thinking and acting needs to be a biblical and theological imagination.

Cultivating a Biblical Imagination

The narrative imagination of Scripture challenges our assumptions about what God is up to in the world and reminds us that leaders can do great things when they align their expectations with God’s. An im-
portant role of a missional leader is cultivating an environment within which God’s people discern God’s directions and activities in them and for the communities in which they find themselves. The biblical narratives are full of stories about places and people without hope who become centers of the Spirit’s creative, world-changing activity. This can still be the case. For congregations and leaders who feel they can’t compete, keep up with, or emulate the examples of growth and success held up for them at conference after conference, this is exuberant, life-giving news. These stories demonstrate not some optimistic wishful thinking but a conviction about the God we encounter in Jesus. We, like the people in these biblical stories, are invited to cultivate our imagination to see the possibilities of what the Spirit wants to do in and among the people we are called to lead. The biblical narrative suggests to us some key elements of missional leadership.

The Incarnation

Missional leaders take the Incarnation of Jesus with the utmost seriousness. More than just a doctrine to be confessed, it is the key to understanding all God’s activities with, through, in, and among us. It points toward an answer to the question of where God is to be found. In the Incarnation we discern that God is always found in what appears to be the most godforsaken of places—the most inauspicious of locations, people, and situations. God seems to be present where there is little or no expectation. A group of slaves, gypsies wandering around the edge of civilization, become pathetic brick makers for an empire. These nobodies of the earth, like all the other unnamed, no-name peoples before them, were about to disappear from the face of the earth in yet another Shoah. Their first-born males were being killed off as an expedient form of population control. When the cries of these slaves came to God’s ear, God claimed them as his people and determined to free them from bondage and misery.

The narrative continues as this no-name people receive a new name from the One who came down to wrestle with their forefather Jacob. Centuries later, the offspring of these slaves are defeated by another mighty empire and held in abject captivity in Babylon. Again, in the Godforsaken Babylon (the name itself bespeaks the absence of God), they encounter God and their world is changed. An old man,
past hope, keeps the light of the temple in Jerusalem. His wife is an embarrassment because she is far past the age of childbearing and there is no son. Yet God comes to these two elderly faithful people, and their world is transformed. A young girl, just a teenager, in an obscure village becomes pregnant with the life of God. Over and over again, God meets God’s people with the bright light of the Kingdom in what appears to be the most hopeless and forsaken places.

In these biblical narratives God is constantly present in places where no one would logically expect God’s future to emerge, and yet it does, over and over. There is nothing in these stories about getting the wrong people off the bus and getting the right ones on to accomplish great ends and become the best organization in the world. This God who pursues us is always calling the wrong people onto a bus that isn’t expected to arrive. The reason for all of this is that God chooses, within the mystery of God as the Other who cannot be described and confined within the schemes and imagination we develop, to unfold the future of the kingdom among people and places of this kind. The vision of Ezekiel is a commentary on this whole movement of God.

The Jewish Scriptures end with the books of the Kings, which in many ways is a rather dark and bleak ending. A part of that ending is a haunting question asked by God in a vision: “Can these dry bones live?” In reality the question isn’t answered until Jesus appears as the one who is God’s enfleshed presence among people. God’s answer to the question is God himself: Jesus the Incarnate Lord, who comes among us in the most unexpected and inauspicious times and places.

We encounter many congregations and church leaders functioning out of low expectation and hope. Many leaders are giving up on existing congregations in the misguided belief that there is no hope among the established ones. Younger leaders want to go off and plant in order to start anew, while older leaders yearn for retirement or a move. But the Biblical stories that lead to the Incarnation keep telling us these are the very places where God’s future emerges. This is what God does and how God acts, most clearly in Jesus. When leaders bring this imagination to their congregation, they foster hope. But this is just the beginning of the story. To all who boldly declare that the congregation has no future in an emergent, postmodern world, the biblical imagination has another response.
The Spirit of God Among the People

Many would say that congregations are becoming little more than an idiosyncratic relic shaped by quaint memories of a fading past. We were invited to attend a one-day conference on the future and the church. One of the leaders said in the morning session that we needed to “liquidate” institutions and buildings; he then went on to contrast the “institutional” church with what he called the “organic.” It was clear, despite protestations to the contrary, that there was a strong sense that existing congregations didn’t have much relevance to God’s future. This speaker from elsewhere had clearly not indwelt the Biblical narrative very much. We are not prepared to write congregations off. We realize that some have declined and dwindled to the extent that the greatest gift they can give to the Kingdom is to close and offer their assets to others to journey forward. However, many congregations are not in this situation. We say this not because they are filled with all the right people with all the right stuff. On the contrary, dispirited people populate many congregations. They have no idea what to do in the face of loss, decline, and a radically changed world. Nevertheless, if God’s Spirit is among the people of God, wherever they are (including in congregations), then these are the places where it is possible to incarnate a missional life. As with the struggles of Israel, this kind of missional transformation is costly and requires hard work.

God’s Future Among God’s People

It may sound obvious to say that God’s future is among God’s people, among congregations, but it’s not. What does it mean to say that God’s future is among God’s people? In John chapter 20, a group of disciples is locked away in a room. They are terrified of the authorities, fearing that they too will be arrested and put to death like Jesus. They’ve lost hope and are looking for a way out. They are an assorted group of Galileans, hangers on, and women—the nobodies of the world. They are without hope. Suddenly, Jesus enters the room and stands among them. They are stunned and confused because he did not come through the door. Most of them believe he is dead, despite
rumors and reports from the women. Jesus shows them his hands and sides, the solid physical tokens that prove he is the one put to death on the cross but now standing before them. Then he speaks a word into the room: “Shalom!” At first blush it might sound as if he is trying to calm their fears, almost like a gentle greeting. But the rest of the passage suggests John, in writing this Gospel, believed that Jesus is up to something far more significant than pastoral care designed to create a soothing environment. These are men and women schooled in their Scriptures. They know, in this captive land under Roman occupation, that shalom means far more than simply, “Be at peace and don’t get too upset!” Jesus is speaking the language and longing of all the prophets and poets of the Jewish Scriptures for the day that will come when God’s future, God’s Kingdom, comes among them to end exile and usher in a new era. The language of shalom in this context is answering God’s questions in Ezekiel about the dry bones. In that locked room, among a bunch of nobodies without hope, Jesus announces that this promise has come to be among them. God’s future comes toward us, and it is embodied in this group of frightened people.

The rest of the passage shows that this ushering in of God’s Kingdom is Jesus’ intention. After speaking, he turns to the disciples, breathes on them, and declares, “Receive the Spirit.” This act of breathing coupled with the announcement takes them back into their imagination, shaped by the narrative memory of their Scriptures to another time and another act of God. Jesus’ action and words are a recapitulation of the creation story in which God takes the mud of the earth, breathes into its matter the Spirit (nephesh), and creates humanity. In other words, right in that room—right among this bunch of frightened nobodies who have no hope—Jesus constitutes the new humanity. Here is where the church is born. Look at the ordinary people Jesus begins with; this is consistent with how God has always chosen to act. Then to this new humanity Jesus gives new instruction, to go and announce the Kingdom.

What is present here is literally that in God’s economy the Spirit is among the people of God. Therefore the answer to the question “What does it look like to be God’s people in this strange new place?” is found among the ordinary men and women in congregations across North America. God’s future is among the regular, ordinary people of God. It’s
not primarily in great leaders or experts but among the people, all those people most leaders believe don’t get it. This insight leads to one more characteristic that runs steadily through the Biblical narratives.

**God Turns Up in the Most Godforsaken Places**

As we have pointed out, God is always turning up in the most forsaken of places. Throughout Scripture God’s future comes from the bottom up in the most unlikely people and places. Imagine the people and places with the least potential, and there is where God’s strange future is likely to be found. Turn to Abram, to Israel about to die in Egypt, to a Gentile woman named Ruth, to a remnant in exile, to an old man keeping his turn in the Temple in Jerusalem where he’s told a son named John will be born to his aged wife. Turn to a teenage girl named Mary, to a Cross, and to a band of unlikely men and women who just don’t get what is happening as they hide behind locked doors. Here, in all these unlikely places, is where God’s future bursts forth to change the world.

Today, we give up on congregations that we declare are out of touch with the culture. We run to big, successful places with marquee-name leaders to find out how to be successful. In so doing we are going in exactly the opposite direction from everything we see in the Biblical narratives. We have forgotten that God’s future often emerges in the most inauspicious places. If we let our imagination be informed by this realization, it will be obvious that we need to lead in ways that are different from those of a CEO, an entrepreneur, a super leader with a wonderful plan for the congregation’s life. Instead we need leaders with the capacity to cultivate an environment that releases the missional imagination of the people of God.

**Organizational Culture and Missional Leadership**

Congregations are organizations, and like every other organization that has ever existed they form their own particular kind of culture. The organizational culture of a congregation can either hold it back from cultivating a missional life or give powerful assistance in discovering how to innovate missional life. Organizational structure in itself
will never get us to the place of becoming a missional community, but it can act as a wonderful vehicle for the journey.

Sometimes people resist talk about a congregation’s organizational culture because they believe it focuses on management tactics and omits the work of the Spirit. Michelle, a lay leader we met, was frustrated when she wrote in an e-mail, “But where’s Jesus in all this stuff? If you have no Jesus then it’s just one more piece of worldly information that I’m not interested in!” Like many others, Michelle’s division of the worldly from the spiritual reveals a limited understanding of the Incarnation. In Jesus, all of life is taken seriously and becomes the realm of God’s actions.

In his dispute with the Pharisees over the appropriate way of keeping the Sabbath as well as the rules and expectations they laid on ordinary people in terms of their religious responsibilities, Jesus revealed how good people had become enmeshed in an organizational culture that blinded them to God’s work. Their institutionalized practices and convictions created a culture that kept them from seeing Jesus as they eagerly sought God’s purposes. The same thing happens in congregations. Organizational culture shapes how we think about and see the world. Forming a missional community requires asking hard questions about the organizational culture of our congregation.

“Why Can’t They Learn Like the Rest of Us Had to?”

Over time, organizational culture tends to develop an assumption in its members that the way it operates is the way things ought to be. An organizational culture that begins as a life-giving form can become a barrier to seeing and adapting to the challenges of a changing cultural context. Alan tells a story about his family just after they immigrated to Canada from Liverpool, England. His mom, who was in her fifties when they came, was born, grew up, married, and had her children literally in the same house and on the same street in Liverpool. She seldom left the neighborhood that was her whole world. It had its own forms of belonging and its special language, Scouse, that only those inside it understood. Then the family immigrated to Canada. The shift was so huge that she might as well have gone to the moon.
At that time, Canada was in a periodic cycle of debate about being a nation of two official languages, French and English. The controversy was how much French language education students outside of Quebec should be given and to what degree the civil service across the country should be bilingual. Alan’s mom did not understand the issues because she read the world through her life in Liverpool. As the family sat around the lunch table watching the news, the children tried to explain to her the notion of two founding nations and the requirement of two official languages. She looked at them and said, “Why can’t the *&#!@ French just learn English like the rest of us had to?” She wasn’t aware of what she’d just said. She was talking out of her own experience in a specific, narrow culture in Liverpool, England.

We are all formed in environments or cultures that shape how we interpret the world. The Pharisees wanted to love God, but their environment shaped them such that they missed the story of God’s presence in Jesus. The same is true for congregations. Without understanding how their organizational culture shapes them, members of a congregation will ask their version of why others can’t learn English the way the rest of them had to.

**Changing Culture, Changing Congregations**

The rapid change in the world around us makes a lot of us feel like immigrants in a new land. Our cultural context is now filled with a plethora of new images, needs, demands, expectations, and attitudes that result in many feeling deeply disconnected from the present situation. People are less interested in the traditions and programs shaped by people raised in a church culture. A younger generation views organizations and institutions as an impediment to their creativity. These same young adults are shaped less and less by notions of a family church and more by the associational relationships displayed by the TV program “Friends.” They are more connected with a program like “Lost,” with its group of rootless strangers, than any notion of a long-term community of tradition and loyalty. People are no longer willing to learn the internal language of the congregation. They are not shaped by loyalty to institutions and have little interest in joining groups or programs. No amount of rearranging of programs will
change this. The reality is that the organizational cultures, the environments, created in congregations over several generations are no longer able to engage the changed context and its emerging generations. This is why so many congregation members feel as though they are immigrants in their own culture. Things have changed so much in such a short time. Missional leaders need to do a couple of things to form missional communities.

**Discern God in Change**

Missional leaders must learn how to discern what God is doing in, through, and among all the movements of change in which a congregation finds itself. To do this, leaders will develop the capacity to assist the members in reflecting on what they are experiencing, and listening to each other’s stories in terms of their encounter with a radically changing environment. This involves more than simply talking about what is happening in the church. In fact, quite the opposite: it involves discerning ways of unfolding the narratives that run deep inside people and yet have not been given words for many of them. We discuss this in more detail in a moment.

For too long, congregations have focused on organizational techniques for attracting people into their life and growing their numbers. There is nothing wrong with these desires, but the focus assumes we already know what God is up to among those in the congregation and in our community, so that all we need are techniques to attract others into the congregation. Missional communities are discovering that this is not the case. They are learning they need to listen and discern again what is happening to people in the congregation and in the community, and then ask these questions: What is happening to people? What might God be saying in the stories and narratives of the people in a congregation, if we would listen to them and give them voice? In what ways might God already be ahead of us and present among people in our community? How might we join with God in what is already happening?

One of the church communities we are in conversation with has begun discovering this way of life. Several of the members would drive themselves and their children to a large church some twenty minutes
from their home. Along with this they taxied their children to a multitude of church programs and events without being aware that they hardly ever spent time with the people in the church who lived close to them in their neighborhood. This couple gradually became aware that their church life reflected their larger life, filled with activities and business, shaped by oughts and demands with little sense of connection and belonging.

This awareness came to light during yet another stressful car ride to another meeting and program. They began to meet with other Christians in their neighborhood rather than drive to programs all over the city. They asked each other about what was happening in their lives, the sense of being driven by forces out of their control, their hunger for belonging but having neither the time nor the capacity to develop it. In the midst of these questions, they engaged Scripture and began asking what was happening in their own community and neighborhood.

This was not an easy journey. In fact, it was profoundly difficult and took them many months that moved into several years. But gradually a new sense of being God’s people emerged as they engaged their community, worked with others in town, and began shaping projects for the creation of welcoming connections in the town. The details of what they did are another story. The point here is that they learned to ask profoundly different questions about being God’s people; these questions came out of their willingness to listen to the stories that were really shaping and determining their lives. Their work is about how leaders can create an environment that assists people in discerning what God is up to among them.

Create Culture in a Congregation

Missional leaders understand and develop the capacity to innovate new culture within a congregation. In Leadership Without Easy Answers, Ronald Heifetz makes a helpful distinction between organizational change and cultural change. A simple example illustrates this distinction. Organizational change occurs when leadership seeks to change the structures of the small group ministry in the church. This can be done by adding new insights about group dynamics, or another
formula for putting groups together in terms of people mix, or a new kind of group process based on the latest studies and research. All of these are useful and helpful ways of restructuring and reshaping group life in a congregation. But what they miss is that research on small groups in congregations indicates that the focus of the vast majority of small groups is on the self or the needs of those in the group. Again, that is not a bad thing, but the focus of energy and attention of small group life in congregations is still on care and resourcing of the self and others. What is not the center of focus and energy of a small group is God.

Cultural change looks at how to create a small-group environment in which the focus of group attention shifts from the self and one another to God. This cannot be achieved with new structures or study guides and group dynamics. It requires a completely new set of skills and capacities. This is the kind of direction we discuss in this book because missional church is not about new techniques or programs for the church. At its core, missional church is how we cultivate a congregational environment where God is the center of conversation and God shapes the focus and work of the people. We believe this is a shift in imagination for most congregations; it is a change in the culture of congregational life. Missional leadership is about shaping cultural imagination within a congregation wherein people discern what God might be about among them and in their community.

**Old and New Models of Leadership**

As we discussed in Chapter One, the dominant metaphors of leadership in our time have been either pastoral (caring for the flock of God, counseling, and spiritual care) or entrepreneurial (the leader who knows where the church needs to go and has the vision, passion, and strategy to take it there).

**Leadership as Caretaking or Entrepreneurship**

The pastoral model in its contemporary practice is not actually derived from New Testament models of the pastor. In its current usage, the word has been directly shaped (and redefined) by the fields of psychology and therapy as well as by modernity’s focus on the self...
and the expressive individual. The pastor is thus primarily a caregiver, a spiritual counselor who looks after the private, personal, inner spiritual needs of individuals who choose to contract in and out of relationships as they do or don’t meet their needs. This imaginative framework shapes our understanding of pastoral leadership. Pastoral leadership as an identity that participates in forming an alternative society of God’s kingdom has been largely abandoned in favor of the caregiving identity. In a time when individuals are rapidly disembedded from primary social relationships, where their level of anxiety and insecurity grows, it is natural that people look for those who will care for them and offer a haven in a heartless world. But this should not be mistaken for the calling to form communities of the kingdom.

Even though the caregiving pastoral model of leadership has been dominant, it is being rapidly displaced by an entrepreneurial model. Whole systems of church life are being formed on the basis of the CEO leader who takes charge, sets growth goals, and targets “turn-around” congregations, much like a business CEO who comes in to lead a failing corporation. This narrative is deeply rooted in the North American myth of the heroic, charismatic personality who, like some form of spiritual superman or superwoman, guarantees success through the power of personality or strategic skill. As congregations face decline and recognize that their ways of going about being church are not reaching people, demand for this kind of leader grows and will continue to grow in the face of the anxiety and confusion that many congregations are experiencing.

In this book we offer an alternative model of the missional leader who is a cultivator of an environment that discerns God’s activities among the congregation and in its context. It is leadership that cultivates the practice of indwelling Scripture and discovering places for experiment and risk as people discover that the Spirit of God’s life-giving future in Jesus is among them.

**Leadership as Cultivation**

Cultivation as a metaphor for leadership does not imply that congregations are simply waiting around for someone to put them into groups where they can suddenly solve the challenges of mission and
identity they confront. No one is that naïve. The idea of leadership as cultivating an environment is difficult to grasp because of our ingrained conviction that leadership is about providing solutions and strategies with predefined ends. Rather than the leader having plans and strategies that the congregation will affirm and follow, *cultivation* describes the leader as the one who works the soil of the congregation so as to invite and constitute the environment for the people of God to discern what the Spirit is doing in, with, and among them as a community.

The notion of the leader as a bigger-than-life individual not only fills the movies but is deep in our Western imagination. Such notions have contributed immensely to the malaise of leadership in congregations and to the loss of any functional belief that God has given to congregations all they need in order to thrive as a foretaste and witness of the kingdom.

Plato’s famous cave allegory perhaps explains why we are so captured by this heroic myth of leadership. In this allegory, there is a cave in which people are chained in leg and neck irons so that they can look only directly at the wall in front of them. Behind, out of their sight, is a bonfire. Between the fire and the people is a puppeteer with figures whose images and movements are reflected as shadows on the wall in front of the people. The captives falsely believe that the shadows are reality. A few captives, through great hardship, break free from their chains and arduously climb out of the cave into the light. Initially blinded by the sun, they gradually grasp what reality is about and return to the cave to lead others out of captivity and ignorance.

Applied to leadership, Plato’s allegory is a flawed understanding of the people of God that views them in a disturbing way. It projects profound mistrust of the ordinary and everyday. Its message is that no hope can come from those ordinary men and women bound in the cave; they are captive to blind forces beyond their control.

The biblical narratives tell another story. God encounters us in the ordinary and everyday. What we experience in the ordinariness of life is not a shadow but the reality of God’s world and God’s presence. We may have become blinded to the wonder of the ordinary and what God is doing in its midst, but it is not some liberated in-
Individual climbing to a mountain top who brings new sight. It is the Spirit of God in Jesus who causes all people to see in new ways as they enter the Kingdom. Leadership is not about enlightenment but cultivation of an environment that releases the missional imagination of God’s ordinary people. Enlightenment is about special knowledge that the ordinary world and its people cannot have. But the Incarnation puts an end to this gnostic, Platonic idealism. Jesus’ birth stories tell us that God and God’s future meet us—in the ordinary and everyday.

Another serious consequence of this Platonic myth is its dependency on self-assertion by the heroic, in which an overcoming individual strives to make his or her own world independent of God. It is in the end about Nietzsche, not Christ.

In this heroic myth, ordinary people and ordinary life are reduced to the level of slavery and ignorance. People cannot discover things for themselves but must be led to knowledge or understanding by a heroic leader. Is it any wonder congregations believe the leader must have the answer, solution, and plan? In this view, leaders by definition have seen the truth in ways that ordinary people never can. The only ones who know what is going on are the experts trained in certain ways; all others are “laity,” people bound in the chains of everyday life.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman points out how this view of ordinary people in ordinary life was present in the birth of the modern social sciences. Commenting on the perspectives of sociology’s founding fathers, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, Bauman describes “an underlyng agreement between them on at least one point: individual actors are not good judges of the causes of their own actions, and so their individual judgments are not the stuff of which good sociological accounts of ‘social reality’ can be made, and are better left out of account. What really makes individuals tick, including their genuine, not self-assessed, motives, is located in the world outside and more often than not eludes their grasp.” Therefore only experts and professionals see the light well enough to lead others. This conception has dominated church assessment of leadership in recent times as much as it has informed ideas of secular leadership. This is why it is so immensely difficult to shift to a model of leadership as cultivating environments. Congregations themselves no longer
believe they have among them the God-formed resources to discern and shape the future God calls them to embrace.

As we have emphasized already, the fallible, often compromised, congregation is the unspectacular and insignificant place where God’s Spirit brings forth the unexpected; it is in these social communities that the missional future will emerge. Paul said it wonderfully in 1 Corinthians when he described the meaning of the cross. He confessed that God had not chosen the powerful or the rich to build the kingdom; rather, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised” (1:27–28). God chose those things that are not (the very people and places we have already decided are useless and need to be discarded because they are useless, dead containers of the past) to confound what is and to form the new future of the Kingdom. There is no better description of the congregation today, no better description of what many leaders have concluded about their people. The amazing, counterintuitive reality of the One we meet in Jesus is that God enters the ordinariness of our confused congregation and its organizational system. God enters among people who don’t get it, who are often compromised beyond hope, and there God calls forth new imagination. Christian imagination is about announcing that God does a new thing by entering into the very real places where we are formed, to transform them. This is what the Incarnation is about; this is what greets us on Easter morning in the resurrected Jesus. It is also true of the church (see Ephesians chapter 1). Those who want to discard and give up, throw away and start again with a clean slate, have no understanding of the biblical drama, the meaning of the resurrection or God’s heart. Missional leadership must be about cultivating the capacity and gifts of the people who are already part of the church.

When people understand leadership as cultivation, a new excitement about the possibility of congregational life emerges. A pastor in Los Angeles, trained at a prominent evangelical seminary, said she had at last encountered a way of leadership that filled her with hope and made her want to return to church again. Instead of the burden of leader as superhuman person, leadership as cultivation opens a space to discover ways of forming the missional community.
Three Elements of Leadership as Cultivation

Cultivation takes time and involves the rhythms and cycles of life. It cannot be rushed or made to happen. Cultivation is an art as well as a skill; it requires new habits, skills, beliefs, and attitudes. There are four important elements involved in this process of cultivation.

Cultivating Awareness and Understanding

The missional leader requires skills to cultivate three new kinds of awareness in a congregation. First is the awareness of what God is doing among the people of the congregation. John and his family had been part of the church community for several years. He was viewed as a capable leader who could play an important role. But when asked to serve on boards and committees or lead a small group, he consistently said no. Over coffee one day, Bill, a friend and leader in the church, asked John about his decision not to participate in leadership. It was only then that a picture emerged. John was a highly paid engineer in a successful design company, but the growing level of outsourcing was threatening his job as well as those of the people under his direction. This threat was causing great tension in John as he struggled to figure out how to put his two children through college and work through potential scenarios of job change. His church community afforded no environment for John or others to talk about the real issues confronting their lives. It was only by chance that another leader managed to hear the points of anxiety—the very points at which God’s future is discerned.

Second is awareness of how a congregation can imagine itself as being the center of God’s activities. An associate pastor was giving a teaching series on the values and mission of the congregation. It was a mixed congregation, economically and culturally. One morning the pastor was talking about the mission of the church as a welcoming community in its neighborhood. What she pointed out in particular was that this church community should welcome refugees who were coming into the neighborhood. The pastor happened to live in a project that offered hospitality and residence to refugees, which was a wonderful calling. But that morning she made it clear that the role of the church as a
whole in fulfilling its mission of welcoming should be to do this. She was taking her firm commitment to an expression of welcoming the stranger and making it normative for all. Again, this kind of “ideological ought” for everyone in the congregation misses what is happening among people and therefore misses what God is up to among people. In this particular case, many people in the congregation are struggling to make sense of their lives as young families subjected to economic forces that seem destructive to meaningful community life. Many of these people want to understand and discern how to form alternative ways of living as God’s people in a time when it is unclear how to do so. Here is an amazing opportunity for listening to what is happening among God’s people and creating a context for dialogue, rather than telling people what and where they should be spending their time and energy.

Third is an awareness of what God is already up to in the congregation’s context. This requires a capacity for listening to and engaging the images, narratives, and stories of people with plenty of stress, anxiety, and confusion in their lives and world that keep morphing and leave them struggling to make sense of what was once familiar, comfortable, and manageable. Take voluntarism as an example. Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone in America* shows that the voluntarism that enabled churches to thrive has all but disappeared as members come under increasing economic and work pressures. People are increasingly disconnected from one another as social structures that once connected them break apart.

*Cultivating Colearning Networks*

To create an environment that releases the missional imagination of a congregation, leaders need to cultivate forms that give people space to experiment and test out actions with one another. Such a **colearning network and community** fosters ways for church members to discover together new habits for missional life. A network involves developing loosely connected teams that learn together how to experiment with new ways of engaging their community and neighborhood and with new ways of engaging Scripture as well as having conversation with one another.
For example, in one Midwestern church we encountered the congregation recognized it had entered a long slide into mediocrity. The great days of fifteen to twenty years earlier were over; the church’s neighborhood was in rapid transition. People filled positions with little sense of how to address the congregational challenges they faced. Clergy leaders were confused about what to do. They saw that their people were wrestling with a changing world, job insecurity, and the painful loss of younger generations from church life. The programs and activities that once worked for them failed to address the malaise.

In response, the congregation formed a series of lay-led teams to look at the issues they faced. The leadership of the congregation went through their own learning process, where we assisted them in understanding that if God’s Spirit was genuinely among the people of the congregation then the role of leadership was to create an environment that would call forth God’s imagination for the church at this point in time. The leadership understood; they believed this was right but acknowledged they had no idea how to cultivate such an environment. We worked with the leadership over several months, helping them understand some of the principles for cultivating action and vision from among the people.

The specific method we used was a process designed around what we call missional action teams. Over a number of months, the leadership identified key areas in the congregation’s life where these teams might be formed to address critical challenges to mission. They formed several teams and began to discern new ways of creating a missional environment in the congregation. The teams were made up of people within the congregation, but not leadership; they worked very hard because they were invited to imagine God’s future and came to believe that the Spirit of God was among them. Formation of these teams takes seriously the conviction that a congregation has the spiritual resources to discern what God is up to among them.

_Cultivating Fresh Ways of Engaging Scripture_

A missional culture is cultivated within a congregation as it learns to indwell and engage Scripture in new ways. For too long, congregations have been schooled in viewing Scripture as a tool to be used for
a variety of reasons and to meet innumerable needs. Sometimes it’s a help desk for finding an answer to a pressing problem. At other times it is used as a hammer to drive home a doctrinal position. Scripture has become like a bank safety deposit box holding a depository of information and knowledge that can be collected when needed. But all the uses of the Scripture as a tool fail to engage it as the narrative presence of God, who invites us into a story that reads and shapes us.

The missional leader cultivates an environment for indwelling the Scriptural narrative and inviting the congregation to join in that journey. Chris, the senior pastor of a university-based congregation on the West Coast, searched out the resources of Catholic and Protestant contemplative life to discover how to indwell the Scriptures rather than use the text as a tool to teach some principle or apply to some generic point about living. He then invited his leadership (staff and lay) to join with him in this process of living in and with a single piece of Scripture over an extended period of time. At first restive with this process of living with a text, these leaders discovered a new way of listening to God and one another. The result was a changed leadership environment for discerning their role in the congregation.

Cultivating New Practices, Habits, and Norms

Formation of a missional mind-set is not primarily a matter of technique and program. It is formation of a people in the habits and practices of Christian life. Our work with congregations shows there is a hunger among people to discover the habits and practices of Christian formation—what some, such as Richard Foster, call the celebration of the disciplines. But our work with pastors shows they have never been formed in these disciplines and practices; nor do the majority of them have consistent practices or habits that shape them as leaders (for example, indwelling Scripture as a listening process using Lectio Divina; most leaders use Scripture principally as a tool they master in the process of sermon preparation or teaching Bible studies). Other examples of such practices are regular fasting, silent retreat, and hospitality to strangers. Cultivating missional community requires recovery of such practices. It is not a quick fix; the processes always take longer than anticipated. There will be conflict, and our experience is that it is those
leaders whose lives are formed by such practices who have the capacity to sustain themselves in this long and arduous journey.

**Summary**

The process of cultivating the missional congregation and leader is not linear. It is iterative, looping back and forth in an interplay within which one builds on the other. The next chapter presents a model for understanding the dynamics that have shaped the formation and identity of congregations and leaders for most of the twentieth century in North America. It lays the ground for introducing the change model used in this book to cultivate a missional environment.