

# The Missional Leader

EQUIPPING YOUR CHURCH  
TO REACH A  
CHANGING WORLD

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## The Big Picture: Understanding the Context of the Missional Congregation

**E**NORMOUS CHANGES ACROSS OUR CULTURE REQUIRE fresh thinking about developing innovative experiments, habits, and attitudes among communities of God's people. This chapter explains the sources of the Missional Change Model within the context of these massive shifts in our culture. This material gives leaders the reasons underlying our recommended process of change. In Chapter Five we describe how the model works.

The Mission Change Model is based on (1) assumptions about the nature of change from our practical experience in innovating missional change in congregations and denominational systems, and (2) research conducted for more than forty years by anthropologists and sociologists looking at what happens on the ground when significant adaptive change is demanded.

### *The WHOLE and ITS PARTS*

The Missional Change Model requires some understanding of systems, by which we mean any group of two or more interconnected and interdependent parts that interact and function as a whole. This interconnectedness makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts. In working together, these parts make systems complex and give them

“personalities.” For example, if you visit a local church over a period of time you will see that its personality is different from those of other churches. The church personality is partly the reason we are attracted to, or reactive to, various church communities.

Like organisms, organizations are made up of many interconnected parts, from a small number to tens of millions. They are systems functioning on various scales resulting in complex sets of behavior that need to be interpreted and understood at several levels.

In recent history, the Western imagination has developed ways of understanding reality through the processes of reduction, simplification, and analysis. This is the world of Newtonian mechanics in which reality was conceived as an infinite set of individual elements coming together and moving apart on the basis of invariable laws. We assumed that we could understand reality by (1) determining the specific laws, (2) breaking things down into their constituent parts for analysis, and (3) formulating actions built on these two processes. Although this understanding has value, it is a form of reductionism that ignores the many variables affecting all the interactions in a system.

The human brain is an example of a complex, adaptive system. The laws describing its functionality and behavior are qualitatively different from those that govern individual units, the neurons, synapses, and cells. It is impossible to describe or predict the rich, diverse behavior of the brain simply by extrapolating from the behavior of individual units. The study of a single neuron, or group of neurons, cannot describe the activity produced by the entire brain. The same is true for a congregation.

A congregation is made up of a series of relationships, traditions, and networks ceaselessly interacting and affecting one another. These are never just one-to-one relationships. They are always complex because of the many interactions and engagements happening at the same time. In this sense, a congregation as a system is not amenable to simplistic strategies that assume it is possible to predict and manage predefined outcomes by analyzing or naming its parts or aspects.

#### SYSTEM CHANGE *in* CONGREGATIONS

Leaders must understand several principles of how congregations—as systems—can and do change. These principles frame the Missional Change Model and give it context.

#### *Principle One: Focus on the Culture, Not the Organization*

The culture of a congregation is how it views itself in relationship to the community, the values that shape how it does things, expectations of one another and of its leaders, unspoken codes about why it exists and whom it serves, how it reads Scripture, and how it forms a community. We have observed many attempts to change how congregations work in terms of their organization, programs, and specific ways of conducting core practices such as worship, teaching, and discipleship. Experience has taught us that programmatic and organizational change, though it has some short-term effect, does not result in the innovation of long-term missional change. We have learned that unless the culture of a congregation is changed all the sound programs and organizational changes that have been implemented evaporate. As a result, the congregation eventually reverts back to previous habits.

An example of this process is seen in the North American penchant for diets. We all have heard about the rising percentage of severely overweight North Americans and the obesity crisis that results in multiple diseases and high death rates. In response, people buy a huge number of diet books to help them lose weight. There is nothing wrong with the advice that many of these books offer, and the programs and regimens recommended are sound. Despite all the diet books and programs, obesity is not going away but is instead getting worse. Why? Because the books and their programs don't address the deeper cultural issues that make eating certain foods the norm, that shun exercise, and that encourage a sedentary lifestyle. Something deeper than diet books and programs is required to change the situation. A cultural transformation is needed.

Similarly, innovating missional congregations is not primarily a matter of programs or organizational change. It requires a profound change in congregational culture.

#### *Principle Two: Focusing on Culture Does Not Change Culture*

Searching for happiness cannot bring happiness; it is the result of things other than the search. This is true for culture change, which always derives from other factors and influences. Culture change happens in a congregation when God's people shift their attention to elements such as listening to Scripture; dialoguing with one another;

learning to listen; and becoming aware of and understanding what is happening in their neighborhood, community, and the places of their everyday lives. Instead of seeing these places and relationships as potential for church growth, they come to be seen as the places where God's Spirit is present and calling us to enter with listening love. This shift sees God at work in one's context and seeks to name what God might be up to. It is about seeing the church in, with, and among the people and places where we live, rather than in a specific building with a certain kind of people.

*Principle Three: Change Takes Time and Small Steps*

For many of us, cultivating a missional imagination seems like a lot of talk. We want a fast way to fix problems and develop solutions. But if we get caught up in the rush to resolve anxiety by moving quickly to solutions, we are likely to do more of what we've already been doing with the same outcomes. Missional transformation occurs in a series of small movements, actions, and behaviors among God's people.

*Principle Four: Baby Steps*

Small steps and short-term wins are the best approach, rather than big programs or large-scale planning.

*Principle Five: Starting with "Alignment" Is Not the Answer*

Some strategic planning processes preach about alignment, or lining up all the congregation's strategy, structure, staff, skills, systems, style, people, resources, and shared values around a common goal or vision. This is a classic upper Performative Zone practice. The only way to create alignment, however, is to negate the messy reality that God's future emerges from God's people nonlinearly and unpredictably. Alignment assumes it's possible to define outcomes from the front end. Such certainty is impossible in a context of discontinuous change. Alignment does not take place at the front end of a transformation; it emerges from experiments, dialogue, and engagements together in the work of the Emergent Zone.

*The CULTURAL CONTEXT for CONGREGATIONS*

Cultivation of missional systems does not occur in a vacuum. Because all our questions about the mission of God's people are contextual, we must ask about the current social location of members of North American congregations. Specifically, we must ask what the social location is of those congregations and denominations of the formerly European-based Protestant churches that still form a major part of Christian life on this continent. What are the real experiences of the men and women in these congregations at this moment? The next sections attempt to answer these questions. Later sections address how the Missional Change Model engages the questions.

MASSIVE TRANSITIONS *in* PUBLIC  
*and* PERSONAL LIFE

It is not only the church that has been experiencing discontinuous change; our whole society is in massive transition. Congregations are populated with men and women who feel increasingly adrift in a context filled with both global and local challenges that no longer seem resolvable using the actions, beliefs, and practices that worked for them in the past. Since the end of the Cold War, society has encountered a growing number of fracture lines. Our lived experience is that no one knows how to address these fractures, and our learned ways of working out our place in the world no longer seem adequate. The result is confusion and anxiety.

INSECURITY *and* THREAT

German sociologist Ulrich Beck summarizes the reemergence of insecurity, even before a post-September 11 world, as people's primary experience. He says, "Studies show that more and more people consider their life and well-being under threat. . . ." Even with a decline in violent crime, people feel more insecure; they view their external environment as a zone of danger, filled with threatening strangers. Communities are gated and schools become lock-down zones; once-normal socialization among children becomes bullying; parents see other children as the enemy or a threat. The sense of being together

in a community is replaced by smaller and smaller group alliances that protect against any and all who appear different or threatening.

The disappearing middle-class sensibilities that were once the cornerstone of identity and security can no longer be taken for granted. Unemployment, Beck points out, “no longer threatens only marginal groups, but also the middle sections of society, even groups (such as doctors and executives) which, until a few years ago, were considered the very quintessence of middle-class economic security. Moreover, this is happening on such a massive scale that the difference between unemployment and threatening unemployment is becoming insignificant to the affected parties.”<sup>2</sup>

This experience is not abstract to us. A friend of Alan’s, a chemical engineer in his midforties, found himself without work for the second time in five years. The division he managed in an agricultural chemical firm was abruptly closed. He represents a middle class that, a few years ago, assumed that a professional degree and twenty years’ experience meant security in terms of salary, work, and pension. No more! This man is a devout Catholic who wouldn’t miss a Sunday Mass. It is a significant part of his life. When he attends Mass, his experience is not rooted in discussion about becoming a missional church; he’s not concerned with whether or not his congregation is a chaplain to society or a consumer depot for religious goods and services. He focuses on the fact that he lives every day with an anxiety and confusion that has few places for expression. He seeks God, but not in terms of the theological frameworks of a cultural critique of modernity or the meaning of the kingdom of God for a missional church’s engagement with the Gospel. We are not saying these concerns are unimportant, but they miss the point in terms of engaging the lived reality of most men and women in congregations today.

People are losing their orientation. The political, social, and economic systems that brought prosperity over the past fifty years no longer function and people see no alternatives. They feel caught in a web of change they neither understand nor control. The result is a high level of anxiety, insecurity, and confusion. At the same time, most people have no words to explain these experiences nor names for the forces shaping their lives and creating insecurity. This is because the stories that used to explain their experiences no longer seem relevant or applicable. Faced with unnamed and unseen forces controlling their

lives—as illustrated by the plethora of TV programs and movies dealing with alien and unseen forces that threaten to plunge human life into the abyss of chaos—people feel anxious and paralyzed.

As Beck tells us, we live in a social context “in which everything that was conceived of as belonging together is being drawn apart”<sup>3</sup>; the accepted, normal story of twentieth-century middle-class life has been shattered and nothing but uncertainty appears to be taking its place. We are in a global-risk society where traditional means of forming life (family, church, nation, business, law, and politics) have been drained away, leaving a world that appears without direction.

#### FURTHER RETREAT *into the PRIVATE SPHERE*

For Zygmunt Bauman, who teaches sociology at the Universities of Leeds in England, one result of uncertainty and massive change is that people turn inward to their private selves, and at the same time turn the public world into a means of achieving their own private security or identity. He responds to the question of where we find ourselves by investigating what has happened to public forms of communication in Western culture.

Bauman sees the public world (where we engage one another in questions of common meaning, purpose, and the good) as evaporating. The bridge between private and public has been dismantled to the point that “the sole grievances aired in public are sackfuls of private agonies and anxieties. . . .”<sup>4</sup> Communication has become largely narcissistic—private therapy through public discourse with gurus such as Dr. Phil and Oprah. Examples of this trend are seen in contemporary preaching, a public event that uses biblical narrative to help people make their lives work. The biblical narrative thus becomes a how-to tool to help people in their private, personal lives, a kind of chicken soup for the Christian life. The biblical narrative is colonized by narcissistic, private anxieties in the service of therapy.

Our society offers few opportunities to dialogue with one another about the larger realities we face together. There are increasingly fewer places where we can engage in a discourse that invites us to become aware of and give language to the forces shaping our lives. The type of preaching described here does not allow such an exchange. Instead, it offers people analgesics borrowed from the wider culture that are

baptized with biblical texts. This preaching fails to cultivate an environment in which people can ask questions about the forces shaping their lives and fueling their anxiety and confusion. The image of Jesus calling Lazarus from the grave comes to mind; most preaching is about how to cope with a life wrapped in grave clothing that is never removed.

Bauman's work has serious implications for the challenge of forming missional systems:

Now the definition of the public has been reversed. It has become a territory where private affairs and exclusive possessions are put on display. . . . The "public" has been emptied of its own separate contents; it has been left with no agenda of its own—it is now but an agglomeration of private troubles, worries, cravings and problems. It is patched together of the individual cravings for assistance in making sense of private, as yet inarticulate, emotions and states of mind, for instruction in how to talk about such emotions in a language which others would comprehend, and for advice about how to deal with the flow of experience which individuals find too difficult to cope with. The list of "public issues" is no different from that of "private affairs. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

We can see this phenomenon of making private need paramount in the increasing number of people who make it known that the forms of life in a particular congregation are no longer enough for them. As a result, they seek another congregation that will satisfy their needs. To them, it is vividly clear that the public gathering of the people of God has a single, primary purpose: meeting the private, personal needs of each individual member. Contemporary forms of public worship manifest the same dynamics. The vast majority of new songs sung repeatedly by the assembled crowd on a Sunday morning are about private, emotive experiences the individual wants to have with God in the midst of a crowd.

In such a privately focused world, people lose the capacity to communicate with one another out of a common, coherent language. Public settings become the location for expressing the inarticulate emotions and states of mind that now shape conversation. This is significant for understanding how the innovation of missional life must happen in a congregation. People no longer have the language with which to articulate the meaning of their experience of discontinuity

and anxiety except in terms of the private and personal. This is why, in part, the public world becomes the arena of the private, bartering the promise of a solution to private anxiety. The public becomes a place where people receive private, therapeutic language with which to find common meaning for their lives. Hence, the popularity of television shows such as "Oprah" with their constant stream of self-help advice. These programs daily display people like us who live in the confusion and anxiety of our current context. They appear to find ways of dealing with these stresses, which become the vicarious means of addressing our own private angst.

### *The IMPORTANCE of NARRATIVE for MISSIONAL CONGREGATIONS*

The move to counter this broken social context and form a missional congregation begins with cultivating an environment that invites people to address their experience and to reconnect with the memory of the biblical narrative in a way that grounds their lives in a story bigger than their private needs. Missional leaders cultivate ways of engaging people in dialogue and discussion that brings to voice their experiences and locates them within God's narrative.

Missional change begins with the actual narratives, questions, issues, and anxieties of people at this moment. It connects these experiences to the biblical narrative that offers a language for understanding and making sense of those experiences. Language is not just about words, and narratives are not about a dead story or memory. Language is more than a game groups use to grasp power from others. Narrative shapes and forms reality; it reflects people's deepest convictions. Language and story are the atmosphere we humans need to live in because they shape us and change the reality of our world. For people to become something more than a collection of individuals crowding together for warmth, they must recover a common narrative that gives sense to the present and shapes their future. This is what has been lost, displaced by the conviction that only the present moment and only the individual self amid other selves can bear any meaning.

We are now a culture that lives off fragments of past stories glued together for a moment. We search for ways to buy new experiences and fresh moments that might connect us to something other than

ourselves. This is why leaders need the ability to cultivate an environment where people can communicate with each other about the social context they experience and rediscover the lived memory of their larger narrative in Scripture.<sup>6</sup> The biblical story confronts; it challenges our constructions, deconstructs our world, and presents the possibility of inhabiting another way of life. The innovation of the missional congregation begins by inviting people into the discovery of this narrative.

In *After Virtue*, theologian Alasdair MacIntyre describes human beings as essentially storytelling animals. We cannot understand ourselves in society apart from the repertoire of stories that constitute our lives.<sup>7</sup> For MacIntyre “there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.”<sup>8</sup> According to MacIntyre, we can recover a direction and purpose that are more than arbitrariness or construction of self, by understanding that human life is rooted in narrative and tradition. To be a human is to indwell a narrative.

A narrative has several characteristics. It comprises a story that is moving somewhere; it gives a social group a story that tells where it is going and what the group will look like when it arrives. There is purpose and quest within the narrative calling a group in a specific direction and toward a particular goal.

Narratives do not emerge *de novo* but are formed over time by communities and shaped into and by a tradition. The identity of the Jewish people, for example, is formed out of a series of stories within a tradition of four to five thousand years. Their identity is shaped by a specific story (“a wandering Aramaian was my father”). It is the story of God calling Abraham and forming his descendants into a peculiar people. The continuing story about exile and exodus rises out of the past, forms the Jewish identity, and is embedded in rituals such as Passover and Hanukkah that are repeated every year. Every Jew is born into this tradition and given this story from birth. Who they are and how they experience and read their world are framed and determined by the richness and depth of this narrative tradition.

MacIntyre compares narrative with the stage on which a play takes place. We are all born onto a stage in the sense that we enter a life that’s already going on and a script is being acted out by parents, teachers, ministers, doctors, friends, officials, and others. In this sense we are born into a tradition. We enter a world with a particular nar-

rative that has concrete life and meaning within a social group. As the postmodern scholar Jenny Rankin says, “Narrative is coming to be recognized as the ground in which the relations through which and the vehicle by which humans develop knowledge of themselves and the world they inhabit. [sic] It can now be seen that human agency, intentionality, actions, perceptions, and experiences are conceived, understood and mediated by cultural and personal narratives, and that the struggle for recognition is played out between humans in the narrative field.”<sup>9</sup>

Because narrative creates and sustains social community, it’s the glue, the atmosphere of all social life. The key to innovating missional community is formation of a people within a specific memory and narrative. This begins by engaging the lived stories of people and bringing those stories into dialogue with the biblical narratives. Missional leaders need skills and resources for creating an environment in a congregation that invites people into these dialogues. Our friend Chris Erdman in Fresno, California, has become a gifted leader in these areas. He has listened to the narratives of his people, especially among the leadership of the church. Some of those leaders initially resisted his leadership. They didn’t really want all the talk and pushed for a strategic plan that would achieve results and give clear leadership within the congregation. But Chris persisted. He gathered people together, invited them to share their stories with each other, and asked them to bring those stories into contact with the Scriptures. Chris did not use Scripture to give people answers or a few new tactics based on its “principles.” Rather, he gradually taught his leaders the skills of indwelling the Scripture, of listening to God in the midst of the Word. The process took time, but Chris did not give up. The leaders would attend retreats, which were not so much big planning events as a place to learn how to go more deeply into the processes of listening to Scripture. Out of this, they committed to some simple daily practices around prayer, Scripture, and discernment. What slowly emerged was a growing sense that among the people of this church there were wonderful, God-given dreams waiting to be called forth in the context of their neighborhood and community. There is now a real sense in this congregation that God is at work among them. Some of these dreams are being turned into action across the street from the church in a housing development, as well as among students at the state university.

WHY NARRATIVE MATTERS *in* INNOVATING  
a MISSIONAL CONGREGATION

What are the implications of this perspective on the recovery of narrative for innovating missional congregations? One implication recognizes that we have been schooled in a narrative that believes meaning is already given objectively in the world. Our role is therefore to identify that meaning and then shape our systems around these objectively described realities of church life. Hence the focus on strategic planning. There are alternative narratives, however, that are closer to what God reveals in the biblical narratives. The Missional Church Model we discuss in more detail in Chapter Five is based on these other ways of understanding the nature of the world.

Another implication involves the nature of language itself. In its specificity to people and culture, language is about the unique way in which human beings give meaning to the world through the act of naming. As we name things, events, experiences, and relationships, we place them within a larger framework of meaning. In fact, we are creating and forming the world in which we live. This is what God is doing in speaking Creation into being. Language is the power given to Adam when he is invited to name the animals and birds. Adam (and by extension all human beings) is invited to co-create reality with God in the act of naming. Similarly, through its narrative the church becomes a co-creator with its Lord in an emergent future none can predict or predefine from this end of the story.

We use language all the time to create worlds. Children do it with each other. So much of their play is experimenting with words, with language, to create imaginary worlds populated with exotic creatures and beings. I've just read A. A. Milne's story of Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh to my grandson. These words or stories are not only about a world Milne created but also about a story I am creating with and for my grandson. Language and story form a world. Reading the great confessions and instituting the Eucharist by reading Scripture every week forms us in a way of life; it creates the social reality of the church. Some of the greatest literary artists do the very same thing with language to create a world that forms and communicates meaning. C. S. Lewis wrote such narratives in the twentieth century with his Narnia stories, as did J.R.R. Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings*. In the

Genesis creation stories, God invites Adam to name all the animals of the earth. This is more than an exercise in imagination and creativity. God is asking Adam to participate in creating a narrative that forms the meaning and place of animals in the world. Through language, Adam is invited to become a co-operator with his Creator in the ongoing emergence of creation.

As a narrative or story is formed, a tradition emerges that frames meaning and relationships; it describes how human beings and all creation interact and relate with each other. By this naming, Adam and all his descendants could make sense of their world, communicate common experience, and live in a story that took them somewhere. All this is the function of language and narrative.

We don't create the world anew with every generation, but we do change its reality. In MacIntyre's analogy of the stage, we are born into narratives and traditions that are already in progress. We learn their language and in so doing take on and are formed by the meanings that language creates. Each generation receives and transforms that tradition through interaction with its time and place. Language and narrative are never static; they're dynamic and always changing yet connected to and dependent on their tradition.

Missional congregations are formed out of the interaction between the Christian narrative in which they live and that has been passed down to them, and their listening interaction with the narratives of the people in their community. But if congregations no longer indwell a scriptural narrative memory, if the formative stories are thin and opaque to the point of having little power to inform our experience, then they have limited capacity to engage the situation they confront. If a congregation no longer has the language to name the narrative controlling it, the congregation is held captive by what it cannot name. What cannot be named is unknown; what is unknown controls us. This is the experience of the majority of people in our culture: they have lost the capacity to name the world confronting them.

An example in a local church may illustrate something that is happening at so many other levels in our culture. In one congregation a group of parents sought to protect their children from what they perceived to be the negative influence of books in the wider culture. These parents came together to demand that the local Christian school remove a list of books from its library. When the school librarian resisted, the



parents escalated the struggle by going to the school board and threatened to pull their children from the school. The issue was not about books in the library, though, because this Christian school carefully monitored library acquisitions as well as the books children checked out. They also had a policy where parents could state which books they had concerns about. These books were often placed on a list that was closely monitored by staff. The books in the school library became the focal point for Christian parents who found themselves in an increasingly pluralist community with many competing values and attitudes. They could not name the deeper source of their anxiety. For example, how do we form a cohesive community of identity and belonging that shapes our children within the narrative of Christian life? So the parents reacted to a symbol (the books they primarily wanted out of the library were Lewis's Narnia series and Harry Potter). Responses of this kind come from people who feel their narrative world is under attack but as yet have no alternative language with which to engage what is actually happening to them.

An increasing number of people, including those who populate our congregations, neither live within nor are shaped by any specific narrative. When narratives erode and social context moves into rapid discontinuity, people feel as though they have no way to make sense of their experience. They lose direction, order, and purpose. A congregation becomes a receptacle for anxious individuals seeking solace and security, rather than a community that can participate in forming kingdom witness.

Innovating missional congregations begins by engaging this lived experience to invite the people of the congregation into a journey of reentering and rehearing the biblical narrative and its implications for being God's missionary people in their own situation. A missional community of this kind is formed out of the actual lived experiences of the people in the congregation. The Incarnation of our Lord declares that the place where God meets us in Jesus is not the idealism of dreamed-about ideas and principles. Jesus comes among us; the birth narratives are not intended to idealize Jesus' birth, irrespective of how we turn them into stories for our own emotional and romanticized needs. These narratives take pains to describe the ordinariness of the people and the struggles of their social reality (a census under a Roman governor, the fear of finding a place to stay because of the

immediacy of birth). The narratives of Jesus' presence among us start among the ordinariness of people's lives. Jesus begins with their lived experience; he enters those experiences weaving God's story through their lived stories. He draws people into a new imagination about the nature of the good news he incarnates. Missional leadership is to be incarnate and contextual in this sense. Leaders need processes that create an open space, allowing people to engage each other in the reality of their situation rather than in idealistic, Platonic ideals of missional church or programs based on tactics or strategic plans from above.

The Missional Change Model offers a process designed to assist congregations in entering this critical place of dialogue and discernment. It is based on the assumption that if God's Spirit is among God's people, then a people must be invited into listening conversation and dialogue around their current lived experiences.

One group of congregations on the eastern seaboard enjoyed a long period of success and growth over several generations. They were proud of their identity as a contrast society. For a long time, they were aware of the slow encroachment of the city into their once-rural farm culture. By the turn of the twentieth century, they sensed themselves becoming an island in a sea of change. They sent their leaders to training programs in evangelism, church growth, and church planting, only to see most of the new congregations they planted leave them as soon as they became viable. The people of these congregations were confused and hurt. They didn't know what to do next and felt they had tried every strategy available to reach the new people in their communities. As we began meeting with the congregation we invited them into the processes described in this model. We helped them listen to the deeper, underlying fears and anxieties that were driving their agenda. We invited them into fresh ways of indwelling the Scriptures and, out of that, new ways of initiating experiments in change they discovered among themselves. These congregations gradually became aware that the underlying issues had to do with their identity as an ethnic church. Some are now engaged in experiments helping them rediscover the core of their Christian identity beyond ethnicity and how their part of the Christian tradition could help them engage their rapidly changing communities.

The next section presents the key methodologies that underlie the model. This material gives leaders an understanding of the framework shaping the model.

CONGREGATIONAL LIVED EXPERIENCE  
and PARTICIPATION

Beginning with the lived experience, a congregation cultivates its participation in the emergence of missional imagination. Participation does not mean involvement in something already planned for them by their leaders, but involvement in action emerging from among them. This is why leadership is about cultivating an environment that can call forth this kind of imagination.

Cultivating environments requires processes that create the space for people to develop the ability to listen to one another and ask questions: What are the forces shaping our experience at this moment? How do we give language to what we are experiencing? How are these forces affecting our lives? How do they relate to God's narrative as we encounter it in Scripture? How are these forces shaping our lives as a congregation? As people are invited into a listening conversation that calls forth their own lived experiences and indwells the biblical narratives, out of this listening engagement emerge dreams and experiments about what God might be calling them to be as missionary people in their communities.

One of the most influential thinkers on participation is the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. He saw existing educational systems focused on what the professional educator knew rather than on the educator's ability to create a participatory community of learners where people discovered answers to the challenges they faced. For Freire the shift to this participatory model required educators who could create an environment where dialogue among people could flourish. In his view, participation leads to the emergence of new futures.

The dialogue and participation Freire described involved people helping each other articulate their lived experiences and bringing those experiences into dialogue with Scripture. In the context of Latin America, Freire did so among the poor in urban and rural situations. His method was deceptively simple. He invited them to share the experiences of their everyday lives and then brought these stories into conversation with the Scriptures. From this they began to talk about alternative ways of addressing their challenges. From this way of being together as a people, many poor people found new ways of forming communities of hope.

Freire's pedagogy was based on the conviction that the Spirit of God is among the people of God. What Freire's method did was create an environment within which people themselves might experience the work of the creating Spirit of God and articulate specific local responses. This process empowers people with the means to listen to one another; name their own sense of what is happening to them and where they find themselves; and, through engagement with Scripture, discover how God calls them to action. Missional transformation develops around people participating and engaging with God rather than trying to convince people to get involved in someone else's solutions. \*

SAFE SPACE for DISCOVERING TRUTH TOGETHER

Parker Palmer's *To Know as We Are Known* touches on aspects of participation. In a chapter called "To Teach Is to Create Space," he describes settings where student and teacher are invited into obedience to the truth they are discovering together. For Palmer, this involves three engagements: openness, boundaries, and hospitality.

Creating space with openness requires the ability to remove the impediments and barriers that may keep the truth from seeking us out. The community itself often creates these boundaries, as when church organizations create a tacit cultural commitment not to express the fears and anxieties they feel, for concern that such feelings question core beliefs or values. To the extent these boundaries are present but unaddressed, they become so ingrained and habitual they're no longer recognized as boundaries. People become bound by social realities they cannot name, and at the same time by a church environment's tacit code that keeps them from articulating what people are experiencing. People assume these barriers are communal norms. Missional leadership involves recognizing these barriers and facilitating articulation of habits and practices that block the capacity to name what is actually being experienced. As we will see in the next chapter, the Missional Change Model constitutes a process naming the barriers.

For people to be able to participate, they need to know the boundaries in a situation. Nothing in life is without boundaries. All organisms must function with boundaries that define who they are, within set limits and expectations. There are also such boundaries in the church. They include our commitment to live in, under, and

through the authority of Scripture, the particular ways in which a tradition shapes its organizational and liturgical life, and the specific social context in which a congregation is located. All of these are the givens or boundaries that shape the conversation.

Totally open-ended exploration leads only to confusion and chaos. In the classroom, an effective teacher forms a class around a set of norms, a series of boundaries that, like the membrane of a living cell, are both protection from the outside and the means through which learning and change occurs. Leaders help cultivate participation by articulating the boundaries within which the people of God operate. Once people understand the boundaries that form them as a congregation, their creativity, learning, and participation can be unleashed.

The third important ingredient that Palmer identifies is hospitality, the practice of receiving another person as a gift without the need to make him or her into something after one's own image. When leaders operate from the false assumption that they know what is best for the people, that they have a wonderful plan for the congregation's life, they develop mechanisms to convince people to accept and follow their plan. This is the opposite of the hospitality that is essential to forming a missional congregation.

Hospitality creates a safe place where people can risk expressing their experiences, emotions, and concerns about being the people of God today. In a hospitable environment, we can speak the truth about our anxieties and the confusion of living in a strange world where the meaning of being the church is obscured and the language we use no longer fits our experiences. Hospitality and participation invite us into a space where we begin learning to rediscover the narrative of the One among us calling us to an alternative journey.

This chapter has described the background of the Missional Change Model in terms of adaptive changes moving through our culture. Chapter Five describes the model itself. It is based on our practical experience working with congregations and denominational systems as well as more than forty years of research.

## The Missional Change Model

CHANGE RARELY HAPPENS IN A STRAIGHT LINE. It resembles the path of a sailboat tacking into the wind as it travels toward its destination. The path of change looks like the illustration in Figure 5.1.

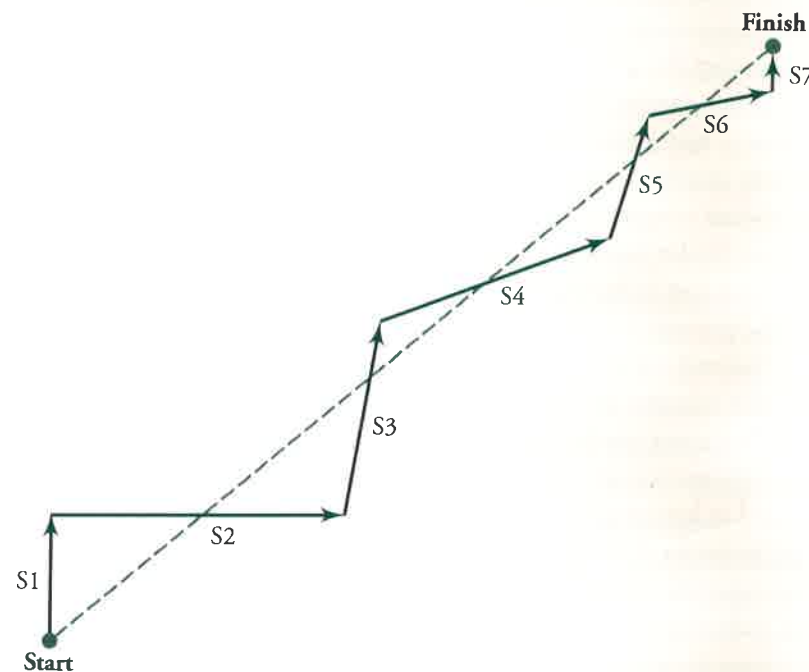


Figure 5.1. The Path of Change.