

CONCLUSION

In the past four decades several things have come together to create a critical mass. Western civilization no longer has one dominant view of reality and truth. The goddess of Reason has fallen. Her academic shrines are losing influence. Her rejection of the supernatural is increasingly ignored. In addition, Christendom has disappeared in the west. Christian churches no longer dominate the life-vision of westerners. The average American is only marginally related to a congregation. Most growing churches function in their culture as missionary teams, not cultural leaders. Furthermore, the flow of immigration, the growth in communication, the advance in knowledge and the rapidity of change, along with a cultural disillusionment with hierarchical institutions, all call for spiritual teams that are flexible, that respond quickly to changing realities. The world seems ripe for a church where members are neither fettered by bureaucracy nor slowed by lengthy decision-making processes but instead are resolute, decisive and empowered as priests of God.

Historically, these times of critical mass or convergence seem to serve as the messy scenes for the birth of something new and wonderful. St. Paul wrote in those tones to the believers in Galatia. He pointed to the sweep of history and then declared, “When the time had fully come, God sent His Son” (Gal. 4:4). God sent Jesus when there was a critical mass for his presence and work to make a world of difference. It seems that we leaders need that same self-awareness. We must realize, “The time has fully come, and God has sent us!” We are the leaders God has chosen for this era of change and birth.

We are chosen for this time. We are chosen to address formidable challenges. Our denominations suffer from self-understanding that resists critique and change. Our vision, faith and ministry suffocate under an archaic and collapsing epistemology. Our churches are saddled with bureaucratic systems that quench God’s entrepreneurial Spirit in us and our people. We leaders are trained and prepared to replicate schools, not churches. In addition, we face a confusing maze of self-limiting rules and counterproductive practices unique to our own denominations.

Bishop Richard Wilkie, noting the downward spiral of The United Methodist Church, wrote that a freight train, traveling sixty miles per hour, applying full brakes, takes one full mile to stop, and in so doing ruins all the braking wheels. In other words, it is exceedingly difficult to stop or even resist denominational trends. Powerful voices have shouted out warnings, but to no avail.¹ Fifteen years since he wrote this, his voice appears to be in that unheeded chorus, and his point is all the more cogent. The underlying belief in this practical discussion is that it is easier to start a trend than to stop one. Rather than stopping a denominational train and trying to reverse its direction, it may be simpler and more effective to lay new track. It is time to lay new track and install some switches.

John Wesley wanted to renew the Church of England. Much of the renewal he desired did not come until a lot of the Methodist renewal had developed outside the denomination. He did not stop the trends within the Church of England so much as he began a new trend independently that eventually impacted his denomination. Similarly, there is great need and great reason to follow his example in pioneering work. The vast majority of Christian believers still worship within bureaucratic denominational churches. They are the greatest resource God has deposited on earth for his redemptive mission. Yet there is little hope that any council of leaders or convention of delegates will make much difference in what they become and how they are mobilized. William Willimon and Robert Wilson wrote regarding United Methodism:

The entire denomination cannot be revitalized by official actions and churchwide programs... Revitalization can come only if enough lay members who have no vested interest in the denominational hierarchy and bureaucracy and enough ministers who are willing to risk their minimal vested interest take the necessary bold actions.²

The two authors rightly observe that the future of denominational churches does not rest with denominational executives or councils. It lies squarely on local church leaders, on local pastors and lay leaders, on Wesleys in waiting.

Wesley's pioneering mission was prompted and fueled by spiritual passion and power. Nothing less could focus the direction, withstand the challenges, solicit the sacrifices and sustain that movement. Similarly, any comparable movement must arise from the rubble of perceptions that marginalize spiritual power and what we call the supernatural. The

¹ Wilkie, *And Are We Yet Alive*, 64.

² Willimon and Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame*, 23.

beginning point is the supernatural. That is where we begin laying track. We begin with faith that connects us with a supernatural God who made us, a supernatural Christ who redeems us and a supernatural Spirit who empowers us. Within that connection all things are possible for when we take the limits off our God, they fall off our faith and lives as well.

When we hear God's voice and see God's power in response to our prayers and even through our own hands, our lives become inflamed with intense passion. Friendships then become strategic. They function as switches that shift others onto new track. Indeed, friendships serve as the womb of life. Our friendships with other gifted Christian leaders, with parishioners and people of the community serve as the reproductive system for the kingdom of God. New things are born in us. New works are born through us, and new life is born among us. That is the power of networking.

As this new life – as opposed to institutional loyalty – captures our imagination, our focus and demeanor are infectious and frightening. They draw some and repel others. That seems characteristic of pioneering movements. However, such focus and demeanor can only be sustained as a clear and compelling vision is embraced and shared. Doing so lays tracks for ourselves and others to follow. As we commit ourselves to the vision and share it with others, leaders are multiplied. Visionary people produce visionary people. Visionary people find themselves passionately encouraging, cultivating and mentoring people in their gifts and calling.

When those leaders see and believe in a church that is not bound by a campus, culture or congregation, they become free to innovate and plant missions as God's Spirit inspires and directs them. The local church multiplies congregations and grows exponentially. In doing so, it lays many new tracks and provides many new switches for others to join them. Indeed, each success increases the likelihood that the denominational train will change course. Yet that is not the goal.

The focus of this paper is not the renewal of denominations. It is merely to set forth some strategies for those of us who lead local churches. The goal is to overcome some of the hindrances we suffer as part of a denominational church. The hope is that in doing this we leaders will more closely approach our potential as partners with God in His redemptive work and that our congregations will be unleashed to flourish as pivotal agents in God's world-wide work of redemption.

An important question is what of all this do we believe? And then, what will we do? This paper was not written to offer tips for a rewarding religious career. The strategies were not outlined as formulas guaranteeing local church success. Instead, they were penned with the conviction that God is calling many local church leaders to this path.

Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul believed they were called to a path. They were called to Jerusalem. Jesus knew it meant death (Matt. 16:21, Luke 9:51). Paul was unsure. He was warned again and again of suffering he would face. He wanted to go to Rome and beyond, but live or die he was going to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-24). Both men were resolute. They committed their lives to the mission and surrendered the outcome to God.

That is not an appropriate response to advice, but it is to a calling. Thus, it is important to differentiate whether there are some useful insights to be applied or whether there is a divine directive being heard. For the author the latter is true.

God's call, however it is revealed and wherever it takes us, is worthy of our lives, and it often requires us to walk resolutely against tremendous odds. What else would we expect from people who live in accord with the Spirit of Christ?