

INTRODUCTION

Christian faith in America is waning. A third of all teenage and adult Americans have no religious training in their background.¹ By the year 2013 the majority of Americans will have no active faith.² Christianity no longer influences substantially the vision and values of the majority of Americans.³ The cultural divide between non-churchgoers and worshipers has widened so quickly and greatly that few are being reached through our existing churches.⁴ This is clearly depicted by the facts that the evangelical segment of Christianity in America plateaued in the 1980s at 32 percent of the population,⁵ the formerly “mainline” denominations in two decades declined from 51 percent of the population to 35 percent,⁶ and finally 80 to 90 percent of America’s churches are not growing, rather most are declining.⁷

Bishop Richard Wilkie, commissioned by The United Methodist Church to spearhead a turnaround in the denomination, after its General Conference in 1984, wrote:

Our sickness is more serious than we at first suspected. We are in trouble... We thought we were just drifting, like a sailboat on a dreamy day. Instead, we are wasting away like a leukemia victim when the blood transfusions no longer work.⁸

¹ George G Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 20.

² Mike Regele with Mark Schulz, *Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 143.

³ Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 20.

⁴ Aubrey Malphurs, *Vision America: A Strategy for Reaching a Nation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 155.

⁵ George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 22.

⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Churchquake! How the New Apostolic Reformation is shaking up the Church as we know it* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1999), 11.

⁷ George Hunter notes that stagnation or decline is true for 8 or 9 out of every 10 traditional congregations (Hunter, 20), and Lyle Schaller declares, “In most denominations the vast majority of congregations founded before 1960 are either on a plateau in size or shrinking in numbers” (Lyle E. Schaller, *Tattered Trust: Is there hope for your denomination?* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996], 65).

⁸ Richard B. Wilkie, *And Are We Yet Alive? The future of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 9.

The bishop did not choose the analogy of a dying leukemia patient lightly. He understood the decline of the denomination not to be merely a matter of focus, programs or priorities, but something deeper—something systemic.⁹

William Willimon and Robert Wilson intentionally employed alarmist language when writing a year later about Bishop Wilkie's denomination. They declared, "The United Methodist Church faces a crisis unequaled to any since the schism preceding the Civil War. The continued membership decline is the major symptom of this crisis, but the issues are deeper and more complex than the loss of members."¹⁰ The passage of more than a dozen years, multiple studies, deafness to shrill voices and continued decline, together suggest that assertion is an understatement. In truth, United Methodism, the Christian denominations of North America and their constituent churches face the greatest peril in their history. They are witnessing their dissolution.

Some may assume that this malaise is rooted in liberal theology and in liberal churches' discomfort with evangelism. While the lack of evangelistic vision and conviction is demonstrably crippling, this does not explain why some segments of liberalism have fared better than their conservative counterparts¹¹ and why the growth of most conservative denominations, despite their evangelistic focus, has been anemic including that of the Southern Baptists. Even the Pentecostals' flagship denomination, the Assemblies of God, who grew explosively in the 1970s at a clip of 65 percent, found themselves in the 1990s falling short of population growth, increasing at a rate of less than 5 percent.¹²

Lyle Schaller notes: "For at least three or four decades a huge earthquake has been shaking the foundations of Christianity all across the North American continent." Among the major changes he observes is that nondenominational churches are replacing

⁹ In *And Are We Yet Alive?*, 26, the Bishop cites a personal letter from Lyle Schaller that suggests the denomination's decline is not a passing phenomenon but systemic in nature.

¹⁰ William H. Willimon and Robert L. Wilson *Rekindling the Flame: Strategies for a Vital United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 9.

¹¹ C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, in their book, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream: Sources of Growth and Opportunities for Change* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN 1995), 106. Hadaway and Roozen note that if growth is inextricably correlated with conservatism, then the Unitarian Universalist Association and The Episcopal Church should not have grown as they have the past several years. They further cite a study by Wayne Thompson, Jackson Carroll and Dean Hoge that liberal churches are more likely to grow than conservative ones in the Presbyterian Church, USA. Hadaway and Roozen assert that a key issue in church growth is not strictness, conservatism or high expectations, but the ability to impart meaning (a redefinition of one's life) that makes higher expectations natural and logical for church members.

¹² Wagner, *Churchquake*, 12. The 1990s figure is an estimate projected in 1996.

denominational.¹³ In his book entitled *Churchquake!*, C. Peter Wagner writes, “For 400 years, denominations have constituted the principal traditional model for Protestant Christianity. The church structures in which most of us were raised assumed the validity of denominations without question.”¹⁴ Questions about that model’s validity are now being raised as Christianity assumes a radically different form across the globe.

In the most comprehensive study of Christianity in two decades, David Barrett notes a mass movement away from denominational churches. In 1970, 70 percent of the world churches belonged to a denomination (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, a Protestant variety, etc.). By the year 2000, 52 percent of all churches existed outside denominations. In 1970, some 92 percent of all Christian adherents belonged to a denomination. Now twenty percent belong to post-denominational churches.¹⁵

The changes in these churches, reported by observers, are monumental. They include nearly every important aspect of church life: local church government, interchurch relationships, financing, evangelism, missions, prayer, leadership selection and training, the role of supernatural power, and worship. Although some of these changes are taking place within denominational churches, most occur outside the denominations within loosely structured networks of churches that Wagner describes as apostolic. He says, “In virtually every region of the world, these new apostolic churches constitute the fastest growing segment of Christianity”.¹⁶

There is a danger in using terms like “radical” and “monumental” to describe the changes in the global church. Readers begin to consider this work as literature of hyperbole. Nothing could be more misleading. We, indeed, are observing “the greatest change in the way of doing church since the Protestant Reformation,”¹⁷ and this change could eventually

¹³ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 15-16.

¹⁴ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 19.

¹⁵ Besides the movement away from denominational churches, a second megatrend has emerged. In 1970, two percent of the adherents in denominational churches and fifty-six percent in post-denominational could be described as Pentecostal or Charismatic. By the year 2000, that changed to sixteen percent in denominations and seventy-four percent post-denominational. An emphasis on the Holy Spirit continues to rise in the global church (David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world*, 2nd Edition, vol. 1 [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 14).

¹⁶ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 5-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

prove to be even more cataclysmic for North Americans than that milestone in human history.

Behind this reformulation of the church is a major cultural shift. Western culture experienced in the past century a fundamental change in its view of reality. Mike Regele of Percept notes that the Protestant Reformation was birthed in a similar epistemological transition.¹⁸ In the period of that reformation, Western intellectuals rejected the organized Christian Church as the repository of truth¹⁹ and considered the faculty of human reason as the sole means of knowing reality.²⁰ In that milieu Roman Catholicism's authority was challenged and alternate theology and Christian communities arose. This move from Pre-modern to Modern perceptions is rightly described as cataclysmic for Western culture and its social, political and religious life. There was a fundamental redefinition of what we saw, what we believed, and how we lived. Although not uniform in its effect, that change affected all Westerners regardless of individual or collective misgivings about elements of Modernism. Now, however, the erosion of confidence in human reason in the past decades has led to a Post-modern consciousness. George Hunter III rightly observes, "The Enlightenment's teachings, which became the intellectual foundations of the modern Western world, have been questioned or abandoned—leaving Western humanity without a consensus worldview."²¹

The current rupture in Western culture, with the change in perception of reality, carries even more enormity because of several mitigating factors. First, we are in the information age.²² With global communication, what took decades to disseminate now takes hours. Consequently, knowledge available to human beings is doubling every five years.²³ Second, this saturation of information has sped the pace of change. More change has occurred in the past two decades than in the two preceding millennia, and the past decade brought more change than the preceding nine.²⁴ Third, ease of communication,

¹⁸ Regele, *Death of the Church*, 195.

¹⁹ Pre-modern thought looked to the Church for understanding of the world.

²⁰ Modernism jettisoned reliance on anything but human reason.

²¹ Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 22.

²² Regele, *Death of the Church*, 182.

²³ Malphurs, *Vision America*, 153, suggests that available human knowledge is doubling every five to eight years; however, his figures are probably too conservative because they precede the explosion of Internet usage.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

transportation and immigration has reshaped the social and religious vision of the North American household.²⁵ Every year almost one-fifth of the United States' population moves, and nearly half of our population growth is attributable to immigration.²⁶ Fourth, North Americans suffer from disillusionment with institutions and authority figures wrought by the exposures of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, Watergate, investigative reporting and other scandals.²⁷ Accordingly, as William Easum notes, a huge crack has developed in our history and many of the things we value and trust are collapsing and disappearing in that crack.²⁸ Once slick, well-run, respected organizations are collapsing because of their inability to respond to the dramatic changes about them. We local church leaders are discovering that while we blinked, the landscape and atmosphere of our mission field has changed. As a result the churches we lead appear to be creeping dinosaurs that cannot possibly survive the crack.²⁹ The terrain and oxygen of this new era is proving incompatible. Although the human heart is the same, the vision carried by human beings is not. The way we see and communicate the gospel, the way we organize our ministry as believers, the way we prepare ourselves to lead, and the way we interrelate with one another to support each other's mission are all strongly shaped by assumptions and perceptions from an era that has disappeared.

The age in which we now find ourselves is so radically different and seismic in impact, that Christendom, which began with Constantine in 313 A.D. and survived the epistemological shift of Modernity, is gone. It now is a memory. We have witnessed the end of a seventeen-hundred-year "mega-trend." We move and breathe in utterly different neighborhoods and communities.³⁰ One need not wait for a demographic shift. It has already happened. Like a white church awaking to find itself in an Asian neighborhood, Christendom's churches are discovering they live in a foreign culture. Over coffee church members curiously discuss the fact that nobody visits from the neighborhood and the old

²⁵ Regele, *The Death of the Church*, 182.

²⁶ George Barna, *Turn-around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1993), 33.

²⁷ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 44-45.

²⁸ William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 13-14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

³⁰ Regele, *The Death of the Church*, 190. Regele notes that at every level of the institutional church in America, the continued demise of the Christendom paradigm creates unbearable pressure.

folks are dying. Talk of “welcoming the stranger,” along with programs that include usher training, visitor packets, visitor parking spots, and visitor contact ministry are not that helpful when nobody is visiting. Many evangelism programs, promoted by historic denominations, are no more than acts of hospitality geared to welcome the stranger rather than reach the lost who feel little impulse to enter a church building in America.³¹

These are the circumstances that we face as local church leaders. We have much in common with a Jewish woman of the 5th century B.C. named Esther. Queen Esther and her people faced unparalleled peril. Her people faced annihilation. Her position as a Persian queen made Esther the people’s best hope. If she did nothing, her people would die at the hands of their enemies. If she risked her life, she might succeed in preserving them. Maybe, they would even prosper. Like Queen Esther, we Christian leaders find our people in imminent danger. Many, however, may not believe it. Denial is such a potent force. It traps millions in addictions and it paralyzes church after church. Denial tops C. Peter Wagner’s list of factors perpetuating denominational decline.³² Denial, according to Lyle Schaller, is an important contributor to the demise of denominational churches as we know them.³³ Mike Regele sees denial as insidious. He writes:

Too many of our efforts to attack our disease are pitiable denial, comparable to the alcoholic who, having destroyed his family and career, suggests that perhaps he ought to cut back some on his drinking.³⁴

He considers many of today’s popular ministry models as only “momentary structural adaptations on the way to the graveyard.” He even suggests that the concepts of the “Mega-church,” the “Seeker” church, and the “Cell” church “are only tactical attempts to breathe new life into old structures.”³⁵ Somewhat disheartened, liberal churchman and sociologist Donald Miller calls for the historic denominational churches to “radically reinvent themselves.”³⁶

³¹ These programs, though helpful, do not equip congregations to minister in a post-Christendom culture.

³² Wagner, *Churchquake*, 23-28.

³³ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 15-16.

³⁴ Regele, *The Death of the Church*, 184.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 187.

Denial undoubtedly tempted Queen Esther as well, but a note from her cousin and surrogate parent, Mordecai, made her reconsider. He asserted:

Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this? (Est. 4:13-14)³⁷

He reminded her that her response was a moral choice with divine repercussions. Her decision carried consequences. "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish" (Est. 4:14). He sowed in her the thought that she was created and divinely prepared for this moment.

In like manner, will we North American church leaders resist the Modernistic thought that life is unwinding like a wound-up clock, that we are helpless victims of a trend, that we are facing an accident of nature? Will we continue accommodating ourselves to decline and retrenchment? Back in 1987 William Willimon and Robert Wilson were deeply concerned about that as they examined United Methodism. They wrote:

The majority of our pastors now serve and the majority of our members now live within congregations that appear to have accepted continuous decline as a way of life. Decline is not a way of life, but of death. To live in circumstances of unrelenting, continual decline may cause pastors and laity to accept decline as inevitable.³⁸

Will we consider the morality of such choices, the personal consequences they engender and the divine mercy and wisdom that has placed us at this pivotal juncture in human history? The witness of Scripture, its stories, its teachings, its commands, reveals a God bent on redeeming people, a God who raises up individuals and places them in pivotal situations, at critical moments, to make decisive choices, and walk radical courses, that bring divine liberation to masses of broken, afflicted people.

That is what happened with Queen Esther and that is exactly what is happening in places across the globe today. In 1986, C. Peter Wagner wrote in his forward to John Wimber's book, entitled *Power Evangelism*: "We who are alive today are participants in the

³⁷ All scriptural quotations are taken from the *New International Version of the Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) unless otherwise noted.

³⁸ Willimon and Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame*, 16.

most massive and dramatic ingathering into the Christian church that has ever taken place.”³⁹ This truth has not changed. Although the rate of growth is very difficult to document because so much of the current global expansion of the church occurs outside denominations and are beyond the ability of any central authority to report,⁴⁰ the church may be growing worldwide as fast as three times the rate of population growth.⁴¹ Whatever the case, there are cities and regions that are experiencing explosive growth of liberated believers and radical transformation of their social fabric.⁴²

George Otis, Jr. has observed communities where rapid growth has led to dramatic sociopolitical change. He writes, “Depressed economies, high crime rates and corrupt political structures are being replaced by institutional integrity, safe streets and financial prosperity.” He further observes, “At least a dozen case studies have been documented in recent years, and it is likely that others have gone unreported.”⁴³ One example is the mountainous territory of northeast India called Mizoram. Only four generations ago this region of India was home to a headhunting tribe. Eighty percent of its 750,000 inhabitants now can be found worshipping in one of its many churches at least once a week. The region’s churches has sent out a thousand missionaries who spread out all over the globe. Moreover, this territory has the unique claim of being the only city or state in India that has no homeless people, no beggars, no starvation and 100 percent literacy.⁴⁴

California traditionally has not been considered a Bible belt. Its cultural life has not been known for producing particularly large percentages of its population attending worship on a given Sunday. Only a decade ago, the churches of Hemet, California found seven percent of the community’s residents in worship on a Sunday morning. The community suffered more than its share of cult activity. It sported a high level of gang-related violence, drug activity and police corruption, and Hemet’s schools struggled with demoralizing

³⁹ John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), ix.

⁴⁰ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 47.

⁴¹ Ted Haggard, *The Life-giving Church: Rebuilding Your Church from the Inside Out* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1998), 45.

⁴² David Barrett reports in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 3-14, the stability of global Christianity as a percentage of world population. In the past 100 years Christianity has stayed at thirty-three percent. This figure, however, masks the rapid reconfiguration of Christianity. Although percentage of Christian adherents in the Western world has declined (and also in some parts of Asia that were controlled by Soviet Communism), Protestant and independent churches have grown explosively in nearly every other part of the globe. In Latin America, the percentage of Christian adherents looks the same on the face of it. However, Protestant Christianity is mushrooming while Catholicism is declining as a percentage of population.

⁴³ George Otis, Jr., *Informed Intercession* (Ventura: Renew Books, 1999), 15.

problems and ineffectiveness. A recent survey revealed that the proportion of Hemet's residents in worship has now doubled. Cult membership has dropped to less than 0.3 percent of the population. Some gang leaders have been converted and violent crime has plummeted. Significant numbers of police officers are now devoted believers, and police corruption is unheard of. A major drug ring was smashed and one of its converted leaders believes that illicit drug activity has been reduced by as much as 75 percent. He declares, "The Christians out here took a multimillion-dollar drug operation and made it run off with its tail between its legs." Many school officials and teachers have newfound faith; and in just four years, the school dropout rate has fallen from 470 students for every 10,000 enrolled to just 7.⁴⁵

Church growth in these communities is not a matter of a local congregation filling its pews at the expense of another. It is not competition between liberals and conservatives or denominational churches and independents. It is not growing a mega-church at the expense of the struggling smaller ones that populate the community. It is not how the churches of a community divide the pie of Christian adherents with the idea of making sure one's local congregation is competitive. Church growth in this context is the liberation of the people of one's community from the forces that blind them and hinder them from experiencing God's love, favor and purpose for their lives. Church growth in this context is a fight for people not between people. It is the fight for liberation.

Liberation was the great—perhaps, even hidden—opportunity that Queen Esther had. She may have seen only peril at first, but as the story unfolds, she soon saw opportunity. In a second audience with her king, she was granted an additional day for the Jewish people to crush their oppressors (Est. 9:13). What had been the darkest moment for Esther's generation proved to be unprecedented opportunity to witness in mass, the deliverance and care of a magnificent and awesome God.

When Queen Esther shed her denial and made her decision to act, she found herself forced to prepare carefully to face her greatest threat. Indeed, this threat existed within her *own* household. Her husband, the king, had unwittingly placed her and her people in danger. The regulations of her society placed any solution beyond the reach of personal safety. She had to risk rejection, banishment and death in order to save her people. Her success hinged

⁴⁴ Ibid., 16-17.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 29-37.

on at least three key factors. She needed a thorough knowledge of what she was facing in the royal court. She needed a purposeful, intelligent plan of action; and finally, she needed the intervention of God both to inform her of timing, missed details and corrective actions she must take to affect the minds and hearts of those she would face.

The parallel for local church leaders is uncanny. First, like Queen Esther, the future for our churches and communities really does rest on our shoulders. Our decision or indecision is momentous. Second, our greatest threat exists within our own household. By that, I mean our churches. Our church people see the decline of spiritual life in their communities and may see the drop in numbers in their local churches; but by in large, they have little perspective on its causes. No one has informed nor convinced them of the bigger picture in which they make their decisions and conduct their lives. Their complicity in perpetuating and deepening this malaise, though entrenched, is unwitting. Denominational leaders, on the other hand, see much of the picture. Their positions and lives, however, are too far removed from both the peril and the payoff to risk their personal destruction in dismantling and changing what they must. (Besides, denominational growth is, in the end, a local church thing. If a denomination's local churches grow and multiply, it grows. If the denomination's local churches decline, it declines.) Even though Esther may have turned about hunting for someone to bring deliverance, she found none. She had to acknowledge, like it or not, and undoubtedly she did not, that it rested on her shoulders. In the same way for us, there is nowhere else to turn, no denominational executive, no church consultant, no saving program. C. Kirk Hadaway and David Roozen have found that consultations and programs are inadequate responses to our situation. They write:

Growth consultations and programmed growth campaigns often produce a flurry of activity in a congregation. This activity may produce growth in the short term, if the level of excitement in the congregation rises and is channeled into activities designed to attract and incorporate visitors. But that kind of growth rarely lasts very long.⁴⁶

Regardless of what program is promoted and what denominational system is in place, it appears that God has placed the future of the North American church on the shoulders of those he has called to lead its local congregations. We local church leaders are writing history. Every study on church health points not to denominational executives or

⁴⁶ Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, 65.

creative programs as pivotal to a church's growth, but to its pastoral leadership.⁴⁷ George Barna considers the presence of strong, visionary leadership extremely important. He writes:

More often than not, the churches that declined found themselves with a pastor who failed to provide effective leadership. Most people are followers and need a leader to point them in a direction, to motivate them to act, to monitor their progress and to react to their efforts... Just like any organization that hopes to make an impact in its environment, a church needs a strong leader to provide direction for the people. The absence of leadership is like a deep-sea diver who makes a dive without air tanks: The diver can survive for a short period of time, but without a key resource needed to successfully accomplish the mission, the diver eventually becomes disoriented and suffocates.⁴⁸

“Disoriented and suffocating” describe well the state of spiritual ministry in most of North America's communities and the vast majority of its local churches. Disorientation can come from the depletion of oxygen as in Barna's illustration. More often, however, it comes from not seeing one's surroundings. One may have a clear objective, but if one is unfamiliar with her or his surroundings, the path to that objective is hidden. The activity of disoriented individuals actually increases for a spell as they strike out in several directions, hoping that something will become familiar or that the objective will somehow be realized by their random actions. In like manner, the amount of activity by leaders and churches may be illusory. It is laudable that they are doing all these good things; however, it is tragic when it is rooted in their disorientation and actually hinders them from moving toward the fulfillment of their objective and calling. Barna observes that declining churches generally are too immersed in busywork and tradition to concentrate resources or energy upon the detailed means of changing their current reality.⁴⁹ This, indeed, is the state of most of the American church.⁵⁰

It was not enough for Esther to know *that* she needed to act. She needed to know *how* to act and *when* to act. That required that she see! She needed a vision of what to do that was grounded in the reality of her situation. Then she had to act on it regardless of the cost to her.

⁴⁷ Tony Campolo, *Can Mainline Denominations Make a Comeback?* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1995), 119.

⁴⁸ Barna, *Turn-around Churches*, 34-35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁰ Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 80, suggests that Christians have little sensitivity as to the importance of vision in ministry and notes that few churches strive to impart a sense of vision for ministry to the people.

Outside the favor and presence of God, vision that is rooted in the reality of our situation is the most critical element in effective leadership. In this day of postmodern skepticism about humanity's ability to comprehend fully that reality, we need the corrective words of British philosopher Karl Popper. He simply says, "I hold it to be morally wrong not to believe in reality."⁵¹ To acquiesce, to the radical relativism that has emerged in this postmodern era, is to abdicate our responsibility as leaders, relinquish our faith as believers, and surrender our privilege to be partners in God's liberating work. The apostolic church never made claim to knowing reality completely. Indeed, New Testament believers prayed for enlightenment (Eph.1:17-23) and for an increasing grasp as they interacted within the believing community on what surpasses human knowledge (Eph. 3:16-21). Indeed, they hungered for truth, prayed for truth and walked with the Spirit of truth, who was promised to them as a guide to all truth (John 16:13). Queen Esther did not know everything. She did, however, know that she was under a moral obligation to act in a limited time frame and that she better get as much grip on reality as she possibly could in that short time. Indeed, the narrative from the book of Esther shows calculated actions on her part, based on her understanding of protocol and the temperament of her husband (Est. 5:1-8).

In the same way, it is not prudent for us as local church leaders to rush into action. Aristotle noted that tendency in enthusiastic, young leaders. He said, "Young men have strong passions. They would rather do noble deeds than useful ones. They think they know everything and are always quite sure about it. This, in fact, is why they overdo everything."⁵² At the same time it is just as unwise to stand still, paralyzed, always waiting for more data to be gathered. If the North American church lacks visionary leadership, it is either because we local church leaders do not see enough of the big picture to act constructively,⁵³ or it is because we see it and will not accept the risk. Although there may be a good number of denominational leaders who see the picture, dislike the risk and continue to wait rather than institute any meaningful change, it is my belief that the vast majority of local church leaders within those denominations grapple for perspective. Simply put, the changes we have

⁵¹ Otis, *Informed Intercession*, 80.

⁵² Frank Damazio, quoting Aristotle in his book, *The Vanguard Leader* (Portland: Bible Temple Publishing, 1994), 298, notes the tendency of enthusiastic, young leaders to rush into activity on the basis of conviction rather than knowledge.

⁵³ Barna in *Marketing the Church*, 80-81, defines vision as "a comprehensive sense of where you are, where you're going, and how you're going to get there." He writes about seeing 'the big picture,' which for him is a portrait of all that exists in one's sphere of potential influence, and also a concept of how one and his or her organization fits within the aggregate environment.

undergone in the past few decades are so dramatic that a large enough picture for constructive action has not been readily accessible to most. Leaders of local churches have received piecemeal renderings of their situation. It is difficult for them to know how they in their specific context are affected and should respond to the massive change in their mission field.

It is then the goal of this study to both identify what factors most hinder the effectiveness of denominational churches in this new cultural landscape and develop a strategy for local church leaders to overcome them. The method for accomplishing this is threefold. First, Scripture is surveyed and examined for clarity of the church's mission, for models of organization and ministry and for comparison and critique of contemporary church practices. Second, literature by sociologists, church leaders and church consultants are examined in order to discern and isolate hindrances local church leaders commonly encounter as well as some constructive strategies. Finally, literature generated by leaders spearheading the expansion of Christianity both in North America and globally is consulted both for further critique of denominational hindrances and development of a strategy to overcome them. Therefore, in Part One, we consult the Scriptures to better understand the mandate of the contemporary church and its relationship to the church depicted in the Bible. In Part Two, we look at five key factors that diverge from the practices employed by the segments of Christianity that are rapidly growing and that hinder the work of leaders in denominational churches. (Although Chapter 7 exclusively focuses on hindering policies in United Methodism, it is a sample of what may hinder leaders of churches from other denominations.) Part Three commends four basic strategies that help local church leaders overcome those hindrances. These four strategies are producing enormous growth and transformation worldwide. A fifth strategy, again drafted specifically for United Methodists, suggests what may be the most constructive actions in view of the specific hindrances outlined in that denomination.

Together these chapters construct a picture from which a vision can rise and through which plans can be drafted. George Barna writes:

Vision is... the driving force behind the activity of a motivated leader or group of people. Vision is the internal force that guides an individual through unforeseen difficulties or stimulates a person to act when he is too tired or ambivalent to take the next step toward reaching the goal. Vision is

the characteristic that is the responsibility of a leader and sets the leader apart from his followers.⁵⁴

Vision is not the big picture. It is not information. It is the truth of how we fit in that big picture and a conviction about what we are to do.

When Queen Esther saw what she faced and realized her role, she acted. It was a moment of destiny. It was a “God moment,” a moment when she asked for her people to fast on her behalf, a moment when she surrendered her life to the will of God. It was a moment when she had to draw from all her knowledge, all her judgment and all her skill, and then act. It was her defining moment. Today we face ours.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 81.