

TRANSFORMATION: GOING TO THE ROOTS

by Inagrace and Paul Dietterich

In the midst of a rapidly and radically changing cultural context, the church is being challenged to transform its basic identity and its vocation -- to go to its very roots. The familiar understandings and the comfortable postures of the past are experiencing profound challenge today. The old paradigms and models are insufficient for the faithful and effective realization of the church's divine purpose.

Being faithful to a living and dynamic God who is actively present in changing historical situations -- "Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19) -- requires that the church itself must be adventurous and open to radical change. For the community of God's people to "sing to the Lord a new song" (Isa. 42:10), it must learn new ways to put the questions, develop new frameworks for dealing with them, and craft new proposals for shaping the church's ministry and mission.

Unprecedented Demands

The pace and complexity of new technology, new cultural forms, new ways of living, are of an order of magnitude never before experienced. The political, economic, social, and religious landscape is being redefined. World-wide changes in social values, the loss of traditional family structures, increased religious pluralism, and outbreaks of ethnic hatred, all define the environment in which the church engages in ministry and mission. Add to this the unrelenting pattern of diminishing numbers of members and dollars, plus the church's loss of status and influence, and the challenge becomes even more urgent. It is in this context that the church must discern anew the central vision of divine purpose that is its sole legitimate source of identity and vocation.

How Will Church Leaders Respond?

Church leaders, clergy and lay alike, must respond. They have the task and responsibility of shaping both the functioning and the future of their church bodies: local, regional, national. How will they give leadership in this extraordinary moment in history?

The most insightful church leaders will recognize the need to get to the roots, to examine the presuppositions that inform the church's vision, mission, goals, structures, leadership, member involvement, and engagement with an increasingly secularized world. They will lead the church through this fundamental theological and ecclesial task.

They will heed theologians like Douglas John Hall in Canada, Gerhard Lohfink and Jurgen Moltmann in Germany, Lesslie Newbigin in England, Gustavo Gutierrez in Latin America, Rebecca Chopp, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder in the United States. Utilizing biblical scholarship, cultural analysis, sociological inquiry, political philosophy, and ethical reflection, these theologians are challenging the entire orientation of contemporary churches.

The prevailing "paradigm" -- the whole set of assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and behavior related to and expressed through organizational practices, symbols, goals, programs, and structures -- is being called into question. In order for the church to be faithful to its divine calling in today's and tomorrow's world, these theologians are summoning the church to move from the existing "establishment church" paradigm to a new -- yet very old -- "missional church" paradigm.

The "Establishment Church" Paradigm

The *establishment church paradigm* came into being with the settlement of North America and dominated church thought and practice into the 1960s. During this period, mainstream churches were a dominant force in society, both formally and informally. They functioned as an integral part of the dominant political-military-economic-industrial-social establishment. They defined "success" using society's values of "bigger," "better," "more." The "establishment church" paradigm is still held by most church leaders and members (and most church consultants). It makes at least these basic assumptions which, while familiar and comfortable, need to be challenged and transformed:

1. The church is a *personal sanctuary*, a haven from the world, dedicated to the pursuit of a deeply inward and solitary religious experience for its members. A distinction is made between sacred and secular, between the private and public realms of life, between church and world. Withdrawing from the turmoil and struggle of daily life, members are refreshed and renewed by their private inter-action with God. The church functions as a place for individual religious experience and growth.

2. Accepting its place within the private sphere of human life, the church functions as society's "*chaplain*," fulfilling the religious needs of society. It therefore *legitimizes*: blessing the existing cultural virtues, values, and structures; serves as *conscience*: articulating and teaching moral standards; and provides *social assistance*: filling the gap in human services. As the church

engages the larger culture, it preaches and teaches a kind of ethics which will speak to and therefore be appropriate for non-Christians as well as Christians.

3. The resources and practices of the church -- scripture, tradition, doctrine, worship, sacraments, preaching, program ministries, ecclesiastical structure, and communal life -- are useful to the extent that they serve as *functional guides* for the development and expression of individual belief, piety, devotion, morality, and service.

4. Clergy are *professionals* trained to facilitate the development and delivery of religious goods and services: preaching, teaching, liturgical leadership, pastoral care, administration. Lay people are *consumers* of clerical services and functions, who sometimes help the clergy as volunteers (usually untrained) in ministry.

5. The church is the *agent of mission* which provides the resources and training to enable lay people to witness within the "real" world and reach out to the unchurched. Formed and informed by the services and programs of the church, lay people are to exhibit Christian commitments and standards within the various interactions of their daily lives, thus witnessing to their faith, changing the values and structures of society, and encouraging others to join the church.

6. The church can *control* its own destiny. It operates in a relatively stable and predictable environment. It can therefore take its time making minor changes in the ways it structures and orders its life and ministry, and these changes can be introduced *incrementally*.

All six of these basic assumptions need to be challenged. They reflect the North American privatization of Christianity. They trivialize the Gospel, reflect an inadequate ecclesiology, make the church a tool of the cultural establishment, distort biblical understandings of the church's mission, deny that the church has been "disestablished", and fail to recognize the unprecedented challenge and opportunity confronting the church today.

The "Missional Church" Paradigm

In sharp contrast to this perspective is a new -- yet very old -- *missional church paradigm*. Presenting a genuinely different understanding of the church and its calling, this paradigm seeks to recover theological roots that have been lost and to awaken hope in divine promises that have been forgotten. For the church to function on the basis of this paradigm, all aspects of church life and work will need to be re-thought and re-conceived. The *missional church paradigm* asserts that a creative and dynamic God is calling the church to ministry and mission in a world that is extremely different from the world of even ten years ago and vastly different from the world prior to the 1960s when the "establishment church" paradigm held sway.

1. The church is *ecclesia* -- a public assembly -- to which God is calling all peoples to be transformed into the people of God. As *sign, foretaste, and instrument* of the reign of God, inaugurated in Jesus Christ, the church is to proclaim and embody the ultimate destiny of all humanity in God's perfect society of joy and generosity, hope and vision, love and compassion, peace and justice.

2. Rather than fulfilling self-defined religious needs, the church offers the world a new paradigm: *a contrast society*. Transformed by God's love and forgiveness, the church manifests a different way of being human: a particular and peculiar people who learn and practice a unique and powerful "togetherness" as they seek to be faithful to their promises, love their enemies, welcome the stranger, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness.

3. The church's resources, practices, and services *cultivate a new people*, a people learning and practicing the virtues, habits, and behaviors of the reconciling way of life disclosed in the words and deeds, ministry and mission, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a public, visible, and social reality of transformed relationships, this people manifests the relational fruits of the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentle-ness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22).

4. *Laos* (lay people and clergy together) are called to be a community of disciples who through faith in Jesus Christ participate in the new life of the Spirit. As "stewards of the mysteries of God," corporately they discern, nurture, and manifest their diverse gifts in a common life and shared ministry of obedience and faithfulness to God's creative and redemptive purposes for all of humanity.

5. The *locus of mission* is the life and practice of the church. As a witnessing community of God's people, the church embodies and announces the transforming power of God in a dynamic and open communal life of celebration, commitment, love, service, meaning, and purpose. The church's mission is graciously and hospitably to invite the world to participate in God's re-creation of humanity: to experience the freedom, joy, and wholeness of life in communion with God and in fellowship with each other.

6. The church cannot control its own destiny in today's world. Called and empowered by the living God for mission in a *turbulent and unpredictable environment*, it does not have the luxury of time to make the required changes incrementally. *Systemic changes* are essential if the church is to be faithful and effective now and in the future. These changes must be designed and introduced *strategically*.

The current crisis facing North American churches is also an *opportunity* rich with potential. Embracing change as an opportunity for greater faithfulness, church leaders can view the current crisis as an opportunity to re-vision, to transform the church, to participate in God's ongoing creative and redemptive mission for all humanity.

How to Treat the Change

In considering the forces for change, the decisions to be made, and their consequences, church leaders must choose between treating the change in an operational way, introducing minor tune-ups and adaptations incrementally, or in a fundamental, system-wide and strategic way.

If an incremental change strategy is chosen, church leaders will be assuming that the fundamental presuppositions on which the church currently operates are true, faithful, and desirable -- and will merely try to find better ways to do what the church has been doing for past generations. If a fundamental change strategy is chosen, the leaders will be assuming that the old presuppositions on which the church body has operated are no longer appropriate and that a new paradigm is needed.

To make only incremental improvements in church bodies that are founded on an outmoded and unfaithful understanding of the church's calling and mission is to waste money, time, energy -- and ultimately to fail. Change on a much more profound scale is required.

A Theological Challenge

Church transformation is fundamentally a theological challenge -- to discern afresh what God is calling the church to be and do. As the people called to announce and participate in God's creative and redemptive activity, the church must make major and profound changes in the ways it perceives its identity, thinks about its mission, and behaves as a worshipping and witnessing community.

Thus the church is continually to engage in the complex task of rooting itself in its heritage as it interacts in a critical but responsive manner with the challenges and opportunities of its contemporary context. This requires changing the very character and agenda of the church, converting it from one mode of being to a new mode of being, from one self-understanding to another self-understanding. It means making a paradigm shift -- a major and profound conceptual, behavioral, and organizational change -- that transforms the very underpinnings on which the church currently operates.

For such profound change to occur, an intentional transformation process is crucial, "a process of both annulling and preserving, of both passing-over and taking-up. In this process what was evil, false, destructive, and oppressive in the past needs to be 'refined away,' to be allowed to die or to be put to death, while what was good, true, salvific, and liberating needs to be preserved and raised to new life in new forms."¹

In order to build upon and manifest renewed theological commitments within the life and practice of the church, other resources are necessary: a solid theory of planned transformation, tested conceptual tools, effective consulting practices, carefully planned strategic management, in-depth education of key leaders and members.

Strategic Leadership is Essential

Such major and profound change in the church requires visionary leaders who are both theological and strategic. As they accept the theological challenge and retrieve and reinterpret the biblical and historical witness to God's transforming presence, they must be willing to innovate, learn, respond quickly, and design the appropriate infrastructure to meet the demands of ministry in the post-modern world.

The Center for Parish Development is a resource for such visionary leaders. It has, since 1968, committed itself to developing transformational resources and processes. Center staff members, when guiding churches through transformation processes, help them make the transition from the "establishment church" paradigm to the "missional church" paradigm in ways that utilize and interpret their unique heritage.

The process of church transformation enables major and profound change to occur through renewed insight, focus, training, and commitment. Congregations as well as regional and denominational bodies are helped to discern God's call afresh, to re-vision the church, to develop new skills and new relationships, in order to become more faithful and effective manifestations of life in the reign of God.

1. Peter C. Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, p. 17.

CONTRASTING THEOLOGICAL PARADIGMS

<h3 style="text-align: center;">The "Establishment Church" Paradigm</h3> <p>The <i>"establishment church" paradigm</i> is grounded in inherited understandings of the church which still dominate the ways most people think about the church. This paradigm is inadequate for the present circumstances. It makes at least the following assumptions, all of which need to be challenged and transformed.</p>	<h3 style="text-align: center;">The "Missional" Paradigm</h3> <p>The <i>"missional" paradigm</i> presents a genuinely different understanding of the church and its calling. It seeks to recover theological roots that have been lost and to awaken hope in divine promises that have been forgotten. To function on the basis of this paradigm, all aspects of church life and work will need to be re-thought and re-conceived.</p>
<p>1. The church is a <i>personal sanctuary</i>, a haven from the world, dedicated to the pursuit of a deeply inward and solitary religious experience for its members. Withdrawing from the turmoil and struggle of daily life, members are refreshed and renewed by their private interaction with God. The church functions as a place for individual religious experience and growth.</p>	<p>1. The church is <i>ecclesia</i> -- a public assembly -- to which God is calling all peoples to be transformed into the people of God. As <i>sign, foretaste, and instrument</i> of the promised reign of God, the church is to proclaim and embody the ultimate destiny of all humanity in God's perfect society of joy and generosity, hope and vision, love and compassion, peace and justice.</p>
<p>2. Fitting into the private sphere of human life, the church functions as society's <i>"chaplain,"</i> fulfilling the religious needs of society. It therefore <i>legitimizes</i>: blessing the existing cultural virtues, values, and structures; serves as <i>conscience</i>: articulating and teaching moral standards; provides <i>social assistance</i>: filling the gap in human services. As the church engages the larger culture, it preaches and teaches an ethics which will work for non-Christians as well as Christians.</p>	<p>2. Rather than fulfilling self-defined religious needs, the church offers the world a new paradigm: <i>a contrast society</i>. Transformed by God's love and forgiveness, the church manifests a different way of being human: a particular and peculiar people who learn and practice a unique and powerful "togetherness" as they seek to be faithful to their promises, to love their enemies, to tell the truth, to welcome the stranger, to honor the poor, to suffer for righteousness.</p>
<p>3. The resources, practices, and services of the church -- scripture, tradition, doctrine, worship, sacraments, preaching, program ministries, ecclesiastical structure, and communal life -- are deemed useful to the extent that they serve as <i>functional guides</i> for the development and expression of individual belief, piety, devotion, morality, service.</p>	<p>3. The church's resources, practices, and services <i>cultivate a new people</i>, a people learning and practicing the virtues, habits, and behaviors of the reconciling way of life disclosed in the words and deeds, ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. As a public, visible, and social reality of transformed relationships, this people exhibits the relational fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."</p>
<p>4. Clergy are <i>professionals</i> trained to facilitate the development and delivery of religious goods and services (preaching, teaching, liturgical, pastoral care, administration). Lay people are <i>consumers</i> of clerical services and functions, who sometimes help the clergy as volunteers (usually untrained) in ministry.</p>	<p>4. <i>Laos</i> (lay persons and clergy together) are called to be a community of disciples who through faith in Jesus Christ participate in the transformed life of the Holy Spirit. As "stewards of the mysteries of God," corporately they discern, nurture, and manifest their diverse gifts in a common life and shared ministry of obedience and faithfulness to God's creative and redemptive purposes for all of humanity.</p>
<p>5. The church is the <i>agent of mission</i> which provides the resources, training, and support to enable lay people to be involved in the economic, social, and political spheres of the "real" world. Formed and informed by the services and programs of the church, lay people are to exhibit Christian commitments and standards within the various interactions of their daily lives. They thus witness to their faith, contribute to the moral values and structures of society, and encourage others to come to church.</p>	<p>5. The <i>locus of mission</i> is the worshiping and witnessing community. The church celebrates, embodies, and announces the advent of God's new world -- a new social order -- in a vibrant and open communal life of commitment, love, learning, purpose, meaning, service. The evangelical mission of the church is graciously and hospitably to invite the world to participate in the <i>re-creation of humanity</i>: to experience the freedom, joy, and wholeness of life in communion with God and fellowship with each other.</p>
<p>6. The church can <i>control</i> its own destiny. It operates in a relatively stable and predictable environment. It can therefore take its time making minor changes in the ways it structures and orders its life and ministry, and these changes can be introduced <i>incrementally</i>.</p>	<p>6. The church cannot control its own destiny in today's world. Called and empowered by the living God for mission in a <i>turbulent and unpredictable environment</i>, it does not have the luxury of time to make the required changes incrementally. <i>Systemic changes</i> are essential if the church is to be faithful and effective now and in the future. These changes must be designed and introduced <i>strategically</i>.</p>