

*A Field Guide of the Missional Congregation:
Embarking on a Journey of Transformation*

by Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder

This is not a how-to book where we can look up the answers and then feel good as we go merrily along our way. It is a how and why book...how we should prepare for the future of our congregation and why it must be done. And what questions we should be asking ourselves as we go through this process. The Rev. Martin Marty, Lutheran theologian and well-known author, puts it this way: "Congregations never had it so good., Congregations never had it so bad. "Good because they represent the main form of Christian expression; bad because many people want to be spiritual without being religious or to be religious without being churchied.

Rouse and Van Gelder offer seven transformational keys to be used as guidelines as a congregation seeks to become a missional congregation. The word missional was introduced in the late 1990s. The key premise of a missional church is that what a congregation does needs to be deeply informed by what a congregation is---what God has made and is making it to be. A missional church is not about maintenance or survival as an institution, but rather about participating more fully in God's mission.

But first the authors ask us to examine what they label the new realities of the church in today's world:

New Reality One: *The collapse of the church. It cannot be assumed that most members of a community have an understanding of the church. Surveys indicate that a majority of people are biblically illiterate.*

New Reality Two: *The shift from church growth to kingdom growth. Congregations have failed in one of the most important tasks prescribed by Jesus---- faithfully bearing witness to the kingdom of God.*

New Reality Three: *A new reformation---releasing God's people for ministry. What has suffered is the broader participation of many congregations in God's mission in the world, especially outreach to those of no faith, little faith or other faiths within a congregation's own context. Remember Luther's idea of the priesthood of believers.*

New Reality Four: *The return to spiritual formation. Congregations must attend carefully and intentionally to the work of helping Christians experience spiritual transformation so that they can live out their faith in courage, confidence and hope.*

New Reality Five:: *The shift from planning to preparation. Give people the permission to try new things as they actively discern the Spirit's leading in their midst. Empowering and supporting the ministry of all God's people in the church and in the world.*

New Reality Six:: *The rise of apostolic leadership. Congregations need visionary leaders who are committed to bearing witness to God's kingdom. A journey of transformation requires us to revision the way we are the church in order to more faithfully do church. A journey from maintenance to mission, membership to discipleship, pastor-centered to lay-empowered, chaplaincy to hospitality, a focus on ourselves to a focus on the world, settled to sent.*

Which leads us to their seven keys of transformation:

FIRST KEY: *Congregations that have a clear vision for ministry are more likely to move forward together than those seen to lack a common purpose.*

Two common characteristics in vital and growing congregation: They are clear about purpose and vision for ministry and show an openness to change in order to carry out God's mission.

Second Key: *Congregations that focus on becoming a discipling community as they deeply engage their context are more likely to develop a healthy life that moves beyond institutional survival or just serving the needs of its members.*

Congregations focused on discipleship are not as concerned about numbers and are more concerned about how people are living their faith and sharing the gospel; more concerned about how we serve the needs of the world around us; more concerned about empowering people for ministry; more concerned with offering the facilities as a gift to the community.

Third Key: *Developing healthy. Spirit-led leadership can help cultivate a positive climate change within the faith community.*

Conflicts may arise within competing groups seeking power. The conflicts should not be left unaddressed. It is natural that people bring their personal problems and unhealthy habits with them into the church.

A missional church always is reforming (reclaiming essential biblical and theological truths) and forming. (responding to new and changing contexts).

Fourth Key: *It is imperative that care and intentionality be taken to build a supportive, missional leadership team that is composed of both staff and lay leaders.*

Don't depend on one particular leader, build a team supportive of one another, lay leaders and staff. If people feel listened to and cared for, they are better able to set aside personal issues and get to the business at hand.

Sometimes a faith community makes the mistake of tolerating for too long the inappropriate and disrespectful actions of a trouble-making parishioner or group. When people are given free rein to destroy a climate of trust and make a pastor or other leader the scapegoat, members of the church council need to have the courage to say, "This must stop. This is not helpful and is distracting us from our participation in God's mission.

Fifth Key: *It is important for healthy, Spirit-led leadership to stay the course when facing conflict by practicing truth telling as an opportunity for learning and growing together. Conflict is often generated by change. Conflict can be diffused by confronting it head-on. De-escalate conflict by creating a healthy communication system within the congregation. Acknowledge unhealthy communication habits.*

Change is inevitable, as is opposition to change. Conflict is predictable. As a wise person once said, "Life is change. Growth is optional. Choose wisely." The recipe for healthy and redemptive growth is intentional commitment to change.

Confront rumors head on and use them as a teaching tools. Challenge when told, “many people have expressed a concern about...” Members need to be held accountable and take ownership for their own thoughts, feelings and concerns.

Sixth Key: *A congregation that wants to move forward in mission will find it necessary to practice stewardship as it builds financial viability.*

This is the key that is often missing.

God’s mission and the means to sustain it belong to God.

Congregations are corporate communities that steward God’s mission in a particular place and time. To join a congregation is to respond to God’s call to join in God’s mission as a steward. Stewards are expected to be trustworthy as well as accountable. Stewardship stands at the very center of Christian identity, both for congregations as communities and for individual Christians as disciples of Jesus.

Sixteen of Jesus’ 38 parables are concerned with money and possessions; one out of ten verses in the Gospels (288 in all) deal directly with money; the Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, fewer than 500 on faith, more than 2,000 on money and possessions. Jesus realized one’s attitude toward possessions was indeed a spiritual matter and needed to be taken seriously.

Seventh Key: *It is important to celebrate our successes along the way and, especially, the accomplishments of others.*

Change is normal and contexts are always changing. Discontinuous change happens, change that interrupts the status quo. Change can be helpful and harmful. There is a need to develop the internal capacity to respond to all kinds of change without becoming internally conflicted or paralyzed.

Professor Lose, of Luther Seminary, predicts that “if things do not change, most of us will live to see the end of mainline denominations as we know them. Unfortunately the reaction to this new is to become self-absorbed with survival and is antithetical to the Gospel message which promises resurrection from the dead. We must look not inward but outward, not to what we need but what the world needs. We must be willing to spend ourselves for the sake of the world that God loves so very much.”

After reading this book I was left with many questions, some of which Rouse and Van Gelder expressed, others that are mine.

What three words describe your congregation?

How do you view the present health of your congregation ?

What are some of the strengths of your congregation? Weaknesses?

What would we like to see happen in the next one to five years?

What are the primary changes and challenges in your larger community that God is leading your congregation to address?

What, if anything, is your congregation doing that may be hindering your participation in God's mission within your larger community?

What will your congregation look like if you live out our common purpose and are successful in doing so?

How can your congregation contribute to the ministry of reconciliation within the larger community it seeks to serve?

If you dream big enough, what could your congregation accomplish in a ministry of serving the larger community or fulfilling your purpose?

Are you more comfortable serving your own members rather than actively engaging the community around you?

What ways would it be important to change (as a congregation) to be more responsive to the larger community? How prepared is your congregation to manage this kind of change?

Has your congregation responded to the new and changing populations in your community?

What are the assets and resources available within your congregation for making your dreams and hopes realities?

Lots of good questions to ponder.

As each congregation embarks or continues on a journey as a healthy and Spirit-led congregation, let's not forget another lesson from Rouse and Van Gelder: "Change is inevitable, as is opposition to change. Conflict is predictable. The recipe for healthy and redemptive growth is intentional commitment to change.

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