

## **Reinventing Your Church**

By Brian D. McLaren

### **Strategy 1: Maximize Discontinuity**

- Distinguish between renewed, restored, and reconceived churches, and focus on the last.
- The renewed church is an old church that, after having lost touch with its own people, goes through a process of change in order to relate to them and better meet their needs again.
- The restored church looks at problems in the churches today and says, “Aha! We’ve lost our way! We must go back to the New Testament to rediscover our original vibrancy.”
- The reinvented church sees problems of struggling older churches and, instead of becoming judgmental, becomes sympathetic. It advocates a flexible, adaptable, evolving structure that is developed to meet the current needs. The key word is adaptability. The reinvented church is “reengineered” and it discovers “new paradigms.”

### **Strategy 2: Redefine Your Mission**

- Clarify and simplify to “more Christians, better Christians,” and take both parts seriously.
- The reinvented church must increasingly begin with “rawer” raw material.
- The challenge will be to turn a secular atheist into an enthusiastic student of the wisdom and ways of Jesus Christ.
- In the new church we must start with people in all their rawness – MTV addicts, New Agers, divorcees, substance abusers, intellectual skeptics, semi-literate street people, radio talk show callers, even radio talk-show hosts – and offer them the hope of becoming, as new Christians, agents of the new church in the new world on the other side.
- In the new church, attitude toward non-Christians will change. “The world” will be viewed more and more as the needy neighbors who haven’t yet found the grace that has found us. Christians in the new church must really love non-Christians.

### **Strategy 3: Practice Systems Thinking**

- See the church program in terms of interrelated systems rather quick fixes.
- In the new church, guided by our mission, we will have two simple questions by which to evaluate our program:

1. Does this help uncommitted people (including uncommitted people disguised as nominal Christians) become followers of Jesus?
  2. Does this help followers of Jesus become *better* followers of Jesus?
- The new church will be relativistic about its program. It will expect change.
  - Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static “snapshots.” It is a set of general principles – distilled over the course of the twentieth century, spanning fields as diverse as the physical and social sciences, engineering, and management.... And systems thinking is a sensibility – for the subtle interconnectedness that gives living systems their unique character. Today, systems thinking is needed more than ever because we are becoming overwhelmed by complexity.... Systems thinking is the cornerstone of how learning organizations think about their world.
  - Some basic observations on systems thinking that seems to have relevance to church life are:
    - Systems are interactive in an organism.
    - Systems experience limits to growth.
    - Vigorous systems reproduce in various ways.
    - Systems must eliminate waste and fight disease.
    - Systems require infusions of energy.
    - Systems are often under external attack.
    - Systems often perform recycling and multiple functions.
    - Systems often benefit from diversity.
    - Systems tend either toward achieving a sustainable balance toward disorder.
    - Systems often react to both external and internal changes.
    - Leaders require some degree of differentiation from the system itself.
    - Systems can become sick.
    - Fractiles are often characteristic of large systems.
    - Systems must be seen as part of the larger wholes in which they function.

#### **Strategy 4: Trade Up Your Traditions for Tradition**

- Distinguish between church traditions and the Christian Tradition, and move emphasis from the former to the latter.
- Sally Morgenthaler says this of traditions (plural):
  - Traditions are a dangerous but persistent fact of life. Just when we think we have rid ourselves of them, we have already formed new

- ones. The problem is, which ones do we discard, which ones are "keepers," and what do we do with the "keepers" to preserve their significance?
- In the reinvented church we will all have to do a lot of this kind of sorting and handling of traditions.

### **Strategy 5: Resurrect Theology as Art and Science**

- Stop thinking of theology as a matter of technical training, in which answers are already known, and rejuvenate theology through a quest for truth and beauty.
- In the new church we must realize how medium and message are intertwined. When we change the medium, the message that's received is changed.
- In the new church we will be aware that our message is not perfect. God's message is perfect; but all of our versions of it are always to some degree out of sync with his version.
- Postmodernism is the intellectual boundary between the old world and the other side.

### **Strategy 6: Design a New Apologetic**

- Find fresh ways to communicate the gospel to the postmodern mind.
- Instead of being told what to believe, we should be told how to believe.

There are several reasons for losing energy: first, the old apologetic too often resorts to circular reasoning; second, it is too often defensive, not offensive; third, it often mistakes potential friends for enemies; fourth, it is strangely "worldly"; fifth, it tends to get distracted; sixth, it becomes dishonest when it gets desperate.

- Circular Reasoning:
  - When everyone *de facto* believes the Bible, we can afford to prove our points with proof-texts.
  - In tomorrow's world, the Bible must be supported as authoritative by a reasoned apologetic (and even more by the visible apologetic of communities that live by it winsomely) before it can become an assumed foundation for other apologetics.
- Defensiveness:
  - Our apologetics have been too reactive.
- Combativeness:
  - We saw our audience not as students or clients but as enemies.
- Worldliness:
  - Right about the time our culture had tired of the rationalistic textbook approach to learning, we ourselves and forgotten that the Bible might be seen as anything else. What a pity!

- Distraction:
  - Instead of focusing on the eternal needs for God, meaning, values, morals, and moorings, our apologetics focused on fossils, archeology, politics, legislation, and personal problems, especially those of teenagers.
- Dishonesty:
  - In desperation we started exaggerating our claims: “Believe in Jesus, and all your diseases will be healed!” “Believe now, because the world is going to end next month!” “The Bible has *all* the answers to *all* life’s problems!”

#### Five New Themes:

1. We don’t just offer “answers”; we offer mysteries.
2. We don’t debate minutiae; we focus on essentials.
  - Is there a God? Can God be known or experienced? Can there be any certainty about God? What is God like?
3. We don’t push credibility alone; we also stress plausibility.
  - Credibility has to do with the intellectual coherence and verifiable evidence for our faith. Plausibility has to do with its beauty and satisfaction – balanced realistically with its costs and struggles – as it is lived out in real life.
4. We don’t condemn our competitors; we see them as colleagues of sorts and reason with them with winsome gentleness and respect.
  - A relativist begins by saying, “It doesn’t really matter *what* you believe,” and too often comes to say eventually, “It doesn’t really matter *if* you believe.”
  - Counter Strategies to Relativism – The new church must avoid both of these failures of relativism.
    - First, the church must present the Christian faith not as one religious army at war against all other religious armies but as one of many religious armies fighting against evil, falsehood, destruction, darkness, and injustice.
    - The second thing, then, is that the church must call people to join an army, to sign up in the fight against evil.
    - Third, the church must help people decide which army to join. Why join the Christian cause? If people decide to “suit up” in the Christian cause, the church will have to help them get through spiritual boot camp.
5. We don’t rush people; we help them at a healthy pace.

- The new church, more in keeping with Christians throughout history, will emphasize the process of conversion, not only the event.

### **Strategy 7: Learn a New Rhetoric**

- Realize that old communication patterns are less and less effective in the new world, and discover new, appropriate modes of discourse.

Five Hunches About A New Rhetoric:

1. In the reinvented church, our words will not stand alone. Our message will be a life: words plus deeds.
2. Words of truth will not be less important, but they will be fewer and simpler and softer if they are to have power.
3. Our words will seek to be servants of mystery, not removers of it as they were in the old world.
4. Our words will be less religious, more common, more earthy.
5. Our rhetoric will depend more on the power of story.

### **Strategy 8: They Are Outgrown**

- Adopt a new paradigm for church structure that allows for routine reengineering based on changes in size, constituency, resources, and strategy.

The general principles of this new ecclesiology will lead to several conclusions:

- Whenever good people start fighting and acting badly, it is probably a sign that the structure is no longer adequate.
- A structure that works tends to promote growth, which will eventually make the structure obsolete.
- Every trade up in structure requires someone to give up power or freedom, which in turn entails pain and requires grace and humility.
- Rather than making organization obsolete or superfluous, the Holy Spirit is our resource and guide in how to use, discard, replace, and reengineer structures.
- The Bible, rather than imposing one perfect structure, presents a variety of structures.
- The Bible further calls us to seek wisdom.
- Smaller churches, instead of feeling superior to large churches, because they don't have the same organizational struggles, should

- instead pay attention and humbly learn from their larger siblings' mistakes, struggles, and successes.
- Every newly forming church should probably plan on restructuring every time it doubles in size.
  - It will often be the case that structures are like cocoons or wombs: They must be left behind before the next stage of development can begin.
  - A healthy church must balance the need to conserve expertise (by valuing seniority, tenure, and past contribution) with the need for fresh blood and new ideas.
  - Structural roles in the reinvented church will be designed with personality theory.
  - Size is only one of many internal conditions that can produce change. Other factors are changes in constituency, commitment, vision, goals, degree of unity, or level of spiritual maturity.
  - Writing things down can really help. How many church roles and structures come with written guidelines, training, instructions, and documentation?
  - Control is less important than catalyzing positive action. “The top-down oppressive approach of bureaucracy is on its way out. In its place are emerging permission-giving networks.
  - We need an ecclesiology that acknowledges latent periods without guilt. Down times are important.
  - We need an ecclesiology that is streamlined, simple, and less exhausting and time consuming. We need to admit that we are making the Christian life harder, not easier, through the complex and demanding structures we have created.

### **Strategy 9: Save the Leaders**

- Recognize the terrible toll that the transition time is taking on leaders; recognize their immense value to the church at this time; help them be “saved” for their needed work.

#### Why Imitating Success Can Guarantee Failure:

- Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and John Maxwell, for example became successful through bold innovation and creative synthesis, not through unthinking imitation.
- The successful models became successful by trying new ideas that were too radical to be popular.
- The truly successful models earned their success the old-fashioned way – through pain, tears, endurance, mistakes, and prayer.
- These “successful models” should be seen as real people who have stuck to their dreams and integrity through sweat and tears, have grown up, and have surprised themselves as much as anyone else by their success.

### A New Breed of Leaders:

- Personal authenticity will be characteristic of this new breed of leaders.
- Team development will be required of these leaders.
- This new breed of leaders will be seen as one of the church's most critical resources.
- New approaches to training will be needed to produce this new kind of leader. Because change will be continuous, learning will also be continuous, not concentrated in a few years at the beginning of one's career.
- Leadership will have to become less damaging personally. The pastorate can be one of the cruelest places on earth.
- We can't pretend that leadership is an easy career, free of suffering.
- Leadership must once again become a matter of love and spirituality, a place for spiritual sages, not just organizational technicians.

### **Strategy 10: Subsume Missions in Mission**

- Understand the crisis in world missions, and help launch a new missionary movement.

There are many reasons why missions is so hard:

- It seems as if we're almost done.
  - The last few inches don't inspire us as much.
- Denominationalism is dying.
  - The dying of denominationalism thus seems to be knocking some of the wind out of our missionary sails.
- Urbanization has stolen the jungle mystique.
- The home church is struggling.
- The home church is selfish.
- The world is becoming more educated.
- Christianity seems to have failed.
- Postmodernism and pluralism make this a different world.
- The spiritual-material polarization has been difficult to overcome.
  - Where the church has focused on deeds, too often the message has seemed to lose its urgency; where we have focused on words, too often the deeds have been forgone; and where we have sincerely tried to keep the balance, we have tended toward one or the other extreme over time.
- The proliferation of parachurch groups and workers has caused donor fatigue.
- A lack of dramatic results can cause cynicism.
- There are too many unsatisfied missionary customers.

- They realized that the world wasn't really going to change, at least not as much as they had anticipated.
- There has been a reaction against the “ugly American” stereotype.
- The indigenous missionary movement has grown at the expense of the traditional missionary movement.
  - You can barely support one Western missionary in Nepal for \$48,000 per year, but that same amount can support twelve Indian missionaries.
- Mission agencies are unsure of their constituencies.
  - At first, mission agencies probably regard the spiritually lost as their primary constituency – that is, those whom they most want to communicate with and serve. Then they often gradually come to view their donors as their constituency. Eventually, their missionaries, both on the field and in retirement, may crowd out even the donors.
- Missionaries continue to struggle with enculturation.
  - Before long, cultural differences (for example, many Korean Christians pray loud and in unison; British Christians usually don't) will become the basis for sectarianism and division among Central Asian Christians (for example, praying loud is viewed as more spiritual – or more fanatical).
- Diversification is a blessing and a curse.
  - After a while, when the word “missions” seems to mean almost anything, we have to wonder if it means anything in particular. The loss of focus can result in many other losses too – a loss of commitment, accountability, interest, funding, and purpose.
- Many missions face structural chaos.
  - Choosing between organizational bureaucracy and chaos is a tough choice. Neither promotes missionary effectiveness.
  - The focus on short-term reportable results has caused long-term damage at home and abroad.
    - Urgency has been a hallmark of evangelistic fervor.
    - When we come back to the so-called miracle site a year later, what do we find? Too often we find nothing. Back home, donors eventually catch on and become jaded.
- Nominal Christianity has turned up on nearly every mission field.
  - Our first missionary movement specialized in evangelism; maybe the next will have to specialize in re-evangelism.
- Women and ethnic minorities are still largely excluded from mission leadership.

There are solutions, though:

- Emphasize project design.
- Raise new money in new ways.
- Think outside the box.

- Think *bringing*, not just *sending*.
- Think *fewer*, not *more*.
- Think *term*, not *short* or *long*.
- Think younger and younger, and older and older.
  - We need to try to create exciting youth churches within stagnant adult churches. Since the majority of people in many parts of the world are under eighteen, perhaps that's where we should invest the most energy.
  - Bob Buford argues in *Halftime* that more and more middle-aged people will decide to switch their attentions from success to significance.

### **Strategy 11: Look Ahead, Farther Ahead**

- Anchor your hope in the future rather than the past, and explore a new eschatology.
- Effectiveness:
  - Traditional linear planning (first this, then that – the kind we're comfortable with) is becoming increasingly insufficient.
- Love:
  - Loving our neighbors also requires us to think longer term.
- The Incarnation:
  - We need to be truly in the present world.
- An Eschatology of Hope:
  - “The kingdom of God is ahead in the road.” It isn't behind us, back in “Bible times” as I thought in Sunday school.
- An Eschatology of Mystery
- An Eschatology of Urgent Patience, or Patient Urgency:
  - The new eschatology will aim to balance urgency and patience.
- An Eschatology of Affirmation:
  - The new eschatology will infuse time with value through its connection to eternity.
- An Eschatology of Ultimatum:
  - Because the kingdom of God is just ahead in the road, we must choose to repent now and live as part of the kingdom, or face the consequences.

### **Strategy 12A: Enter the Postmodern World – Part A: Understand It**

- Understand postmodernism, and learn to see it from the inside.

#### Five Core Values:

- Postmodernism is skeptical of certainty.

- Postmodernism is sensitive to context.
  - The groups we were born into or join will have a strong influence on what we know, or what we think we know.
- Postmodernism leans toward the humorous.
  - We shouldn't take ourselves or anybody else too seriously.
- Postmodernism highly values subjective experience.
  - For postmoderns, it's better simply to experience than to turn it into another theory or universalize it and proclaim it as Truth.
- For postmoderns, togetherness is a rare, precious, and elusive experience.

Myth 1: Postmoderns don't believe in absolute truth.

- When they answer no to the question, Do you believe in absolute truth? this is what I think they really mean: "Well of course there is absolute truth out there. I don't doubt that. I just doubt your ability, or my own for that matter, to apprehend that truth and comprehend it and remember it and encode it in language and communicate it to others and have them understand it in any absolutely accurate way."

Myth 2: Postmoderns don't care about truth.

- They care about truth so much that they question the ability of language to convey it sufficiently.

### **Strategy 12B: Enter the Postmodern World – Part B: Engage It**

- Engage postmodernism, and maximize the opportunities it presents.

We have to distinguish between genuine Christianity and our (individual and various culture-encoded) versions of it.

- I believe Christianity is true, but I do not believe that my version (or yours, for that matter) of the Faith is completely true. (In other words, I believe that all versions are incomplete in some ways.)
- I believe Jesus is true, but I don't believe Christianity in any of our versions is true. (In other words, we know in part and prophesy in part; we have not yet reached that unity and maturity of faith and knowledge that will come when we know as we are known.)
- I believe there is no completely true version of Christianity anywhere except, of course, in the mind of God.

We need to see truth and goodness where they exist in postmodernism.

- As Christians we should be quick to affirm the following postmodern insights and qualities wherever they appear.
- An appropriate Humility: The know-it-all arrogance of the modern world feels chastened in postmodernism.
- A Healthy Skepticism: Jesus himself said to "consider carefully what you hear."

- A thirst for Spirituality: Gone with the passing of the modern world is its spiritless empiricism.
- An Openness to Faith: Because knowledge is a luxury beyond our means, faith is the best we can hope for.
- A Congenial Tolerance: Such tolerance became too rare in the contentious modern world, but it is probably the prime directive of the postmodern.

We need to magnify the importance of faith.

- In the postmodern world, it seems, everyone lives by faith.
- The kind of experience we need more of is honest, unforced, and unhyped experience.

We need to address the postmoderns' existential predicament.

- It's tough living without certainty. It's a burden having to relativize nearly everything including one's own beliefs.
- Postmoderns need an integrated "way-truth-life" that is relational, not just conceptual; experiential, not theoretical; addressed to the will ("follow me") not just the mind ("assent to this formulation as absolutely true")

We need to listen to the postmoderns' stories.

We need to tell stories.

- We need to tell our own stories: unedited, unsanitized, rough and lumpy, not squeezed into a formula.

We need to address issues we have never even thought about before.

We need to avoid coercion and pressure.

- Coercion and pressure were the hallmarks of nineteenth-century revivalism.

We need to see the postmoderns in here, out there, and everywhere.

- They are not just the younger generation; many older people have also become postmodern.
- Postmoderns are not just Americans or even Westerners; they are also Chinese, Africans, Eastern Europeans, and Latinos.
- How can postmodernism be as ubiquitous as Coca-Cola and McDonald's? Because all over the world we are sharing the same formative experiences: pluralization, higher education, hypocrisy, revolutions and counter-revolutions, and the breakdown of families.

We must rely more than ever on art, music, literature, and drama to communicate our message.

We must believe that the Holy Spirit is out there at work already.

We must become seekers again.

We must reassert the value of community and rekindle the experience of it.

**Strategy 13: Add to This List**

- Help your church become a learning organization that discovers and implements its own new strategies.
- Celebrate more.
- Be gentle.
- Simplify, simplify.
- Emphasize and de-emphasize peace.
  - Could a small group meet meaningfully in an on-line chat room for real-time fellowship and accountability?
- Enrich your gene pool.
  - Get outside help from trusted consultants.