

WHERE CONGREGATIONALISM
IN
GROWING THE FAMILY OF CHRIST?

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Congregationalism possesses a long and proud heritage which has well served its churches, their congregations, our nation and, most importantly, our God. Yet, recent years have witnessed an emerging concern as to the role and future of the Congregational Way as the 21st Century begins to unfold. Will Congregationalism be a vigorous and potent force in advancing the Kingdom of God. Or, will it gradually fade into its memories of what it has been? Opportunity confronts us if we chart our path carefully and follow it with vigor and intentionality. In doing so, it is important to recognize (I) where we are at, (II) focus on doing things God's way, (III) understand our environment, and (IV) come to grips with the "E" word – evangelism.

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¹ Although this article was requested by and subjected to review by members of CCDD, this is not intended to suggest that all members concur with all that is said.

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I. WHERE ARE WE: MAINTENANCE, MISSION OR WHAT?

Continuing the current path of Congregationalism would seem to hold little promise for a vigorous long term future of our Congregational Way. For a considerable period of time, mainline churches (including Congregational churches) commonly placed little emphasis on actively reaching out to others and proclaiming the Gospel (sharing the “good news”) – i.e., evangelism. Mainline churches have long been well established and somewhat complacent. Typically, they tended to look inward and are organized for maintenance. They are preoccupied with internal church based activities rather than witness. While perhaps effective (albeit not necessarily) in worship, care and nurture, there has been a lack of a *dynamic emphasis on proclamation and perhaps even service* (other than some active sponsoring of abroad missionary activities).

First generation churches tend to emphasize mission and evangelism with only rudimentary structures for maintenance. In the second or third generation churches, internal developments tend to predominate. Of course, maintenance is necessary. Unless a church develops effective structures for worship, discipling and pastoring, it will become progressively less able to reach out to others. Furthermore, unless the church becomes a fellowship of loving relationships and meaningful interaction, there is little to which to call others to join. Thus, a “church wholly given to ‘mission work’ is not a sustainable model.”² But, when maintenance becomes central or all-consuming, sharing the Gospel and bringing the unbelievers and doubters to Christ is marginalized. The church has forgotten its *raison d’être*.³ Unless evangelism is renewed as a major component of a church’s mission, the church declines and ultimately dies.

² Robert Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations*, (London Church House, 1995) as quoted by Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* 106 (2001) (hereinafter referred to as Murray).
Murray at 106.

³ Murray at 106.

Steven C. Compton, a speaker at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, notes the key element in the decline of a church.

In terms of the church, entropy is the unavailability of the church's original spiritual energy for conversion into a gospel-proclaiming mission. So the life cycle of a congregation is measured not so much in time (though there is often a correlation with time) as in terms of the distance it stands at any given time from its core spiritual purposes.⁴

Thus, vitality of a church, whether new or established, is founded on its purposeful efforts to achieve core spiritual purposes. In this context, for those of us in the Congregational Way, the question is where are we in our efforts to engage the 21st Century? Will our focus be maintenance, mission or a combination of both?

II. REVITALIZATION OF EXISTING AND THE PLANTING OF NEW CHURCHES: DOING IT GOD'S WAY

A. A Beginning

In recent years, there has emerged a growing interest and concern as to the future of role of Congregationalism in general and the roles of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NA) and its member churches in particular. The NA has recently responded positively by, among other things, launching a capital funding campaign to support two major initiatives. Initiative #1 seeks to better meet Congregationalist churches' needs for spiritual leadership through the creation of a model national Center for Congregational Leadership. This will focus on nurturing and equipping churches and individuals to answer God's call to ministry leadership in both its traditional and emerging forms (\$3.5 million). Initiative #2 seeks to increase the knowledge, influence and growth of the Congregational Way by creating a \$1.5 million Fund for Congregational Growth and Renewal to provide member churches with resources for new and renewed ministries.

The Congregational Church Development Division (CCDD) is charged by the NA with the responsibilities of "encouraging and supporting the organization and development of new and the revitalization of existing Congregational Christian Churches by such methods and in such locations as the Division may determine appropriate...."⁵ CCDD's mission has been to "help the local church, church planters, and new church core groups in the establishment of new

⁴ *Rekindling the Mainline: New Life Through New Churches* 24 (2003) (hereafter referred to as Compton).

⁵ Bylaws of Corporation for the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches of the United States, Art. IV, Sec. 3.

Congregational Christian churches.”⁶ In addition, the NA has adopted goal of planting 50 new Congregational churches during a 10 year period.

CCDD carries out its role by (a) assisting those seeking to plant new churches through grants and loans to new churches, church planter assessments and coaching, support by CCDD members and NA staff, written resources and CFTS interns and by (b) assisting both new and existing churches through audiotapes and seminars on church growth, resources on revitalization of churches,⁷ financial support for first building, etc.⁸ CCDD has reacted positively in providing support to new and existing churches. With the aforementioned capital campaign, the role of CCDD is assuming great significance as it moves onto the front stage of NA efforts.

Adding to this mix of activity are the appearances of several articles in Congregationalist literature addressing the issue of revitalization of Congregational churches. A re-development series is featured by CCDD in its section on the NA website (NACCC.org). The June 2007 issue of the *Congregationalist* focuses upon “The Healthy Church.”

Even though not exhaustive, this summary of activity reflects significant interest and activity in renewal of existing and growth in number of new Congregational churches. The NA pot is simmering with activity. But, two nagging questions yet to be resolved are (1) whether these substantial beginning efforts will translate into an on-going widespread movement and (2) whether the results are worth the effort.

B. Problem One: Garnering Support

Compton characterized church goals as one of two types. *Formal* goals are those founding goals of the church (theologically defined) which are typically expressed as the church’s mission. *Survival* goals are the goals seeking to maintain the church’s organizational integrity. These include goals for recruiting and maintaining members, establishing physical facilities and building financial support. Although the latter are needed to enable the church to carry out its mission (formal goals), all too commonly the survival or maintenance goals become primary. Manner of doing ministry, traditions, programs, etc. are set. Too rarely will an established church refocus on the vision upon which it was originally founded. Members of the congregation, and often the pastor himself, are happy with the way things are. The focus is on pastoral care of the membership and the maintenance of the church as an on-going institution.⁹

To the extent Compton’s description accurately characterizes the situation for Congregationalist churches in general, maintaining and enhancing the momentum generated to date for revitalizing existing and planting new Congregationalist churches should not be complacently assumed. Planting a church just to plant a church is not a cause likely to evoke substantial on-going and widespread financial and other support. A goal of propping up a

⁶ CCDD Mission, NACCC.org.

⁷ In response to local churches seeking assistance in revitalization, CCDD sponsors a workshop entitled “Catching a New Vision.”

⁸ CCDD Mission, NACCC.org.

⁹ Compton at 25-27.

declining or dying church, simply to keep the doors open, is not likely to create great excitement outside the local church involved. Thus, the question should be asked, will these objectives, standing by themselves, motivate Congregational churches and individual members of those churches to contribute substantial time, talent and treasure, when their prime focus is maintaining their own ministries? Will focusing on local church survival and/or planting new churches create a widespread on-going movement that will dramatically impact the world we live in? Will the stated purposes of simply growing the number of Congregational churches and/or renewing established Congregational churches capture on-going and widespread enthusiasm and active support of the NA membership? Is the mission purpose, as expressed, vital enough, commanding enough and captivating enough to overcome the inward and maintenance focus of our local congregations? If not, revisiting the basic purpose or mission as to what we are about is needed. As discussed below, this is a fundamental and nagging question which CCDD considered when it met at the June 2007 NA Annual meeting.

C. Problem Two: Type of Church

The avowed NA objectives call for planting and renewing churches. However, new church plants or established churches renewed can assume a wide variety of characteristics. Not all such churches may be desirable.

Consider the following illustrative hypothetical examples. (i) The NA and/or individual churches plant a new Congregational church about a mile from another Congregational church. With its energetic church planter, a vigorous core group and an infusion of NA resources, it manages to successfully raid the existing church so as to attract away 95% of its members thereby leading to that church's collapse. (ii) With similar backing of NA resources, a new church plant becomes viable by raiding churches of other denominations. (iii) Again, with similar NA resources, a new church plant attracts numerous non-church goers through styles of music and other entertainment mechanisms attuned to the culture in which it is located. However, to keep growing and to avoid losing persons once they come in, the church does little to communicate the Gospel message or to develop its members as followers of Christ. (iv) The NA provides resources to revitalize an existing church which assumes the characteristics of the new plant in (iii) above.

Under the stated NA objectives, each of these examples would meet the NA stated goals in planting and/or revitalizing new churches. These goals set no limits or criteria as to the types of churches revitalized or planted. Are the types of results suggested in the above illustrations results which the NA wants to achieve?

One would be justified in believing that such church plants would not be viewed favorably by Christ. They do little to enhance the growth of his family or advance the Kingdom of God. Thus, such efforts would reflect poor stewardship of time, talents and treasure with which God has blessed us. Furthermore,

simply planting churches of the kind we already have is not the answer. Churches have been leaking hundreds of members each week for many

years. Planting more of these churches is not a mission strategy worth pursuing.¹⁰

In short, planting new churches should not be primarily about establishing more churches. But rather, it should be viewed as an opportunity for theological reflection and renewal; about asking radical questions concerning the nature of the church and its task in contemporary society, and about how we should go about developing new kinds of churches. New churches are needed not only to bring the Christian community to where people are located geographically, but also closer to where they are culturally, socially and spiritually. Planting more churches of the same kind as those in the past will not reverse the decline of churches; it will not go far in advancing the Kingdom of God; and it will not revitalize Congregationalism as a growing movement. The challenge for church planters is to create new forms of church rather than replicate the failed structures of the past.¹¹ Thus, it is critical that individual Congregational churches in particular and the NA in general, when they embark upon planting new churches and revitalizing existing churches, primarily focus on the nature of the churches being planted or renewed rather than focusing simply upon the number.

Stuart Murray, in an exceptional in depth analysis of the church planting movement entitled *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* 25 (2001), states that “the planting of a new church is not an end in itself but a means to an end...”¹² *When a church planting itself becomes the goal, the church has ceased to point to God; instead it points to itself.*¹³

Church planting operates well when the focus is not on planting new churches per se but on fulfilling the mission of the church or, better still, participating in the mission of God.¹⁴

Church plantings hold significant promise as way to advance the mission of God. However, when church plantings are viewed as an end in itself, they may fall short of their potential and distort our understanding of God’s mission.¹⁵

D. Need for a Foundational Mission Statement

The growth of existing churches, the number new churches planted and/or the number of existing churches renewed should not be our ultimate goals. Nor is the expansion of Congregationalism the ultimate goal. Instead, all objectives are, or should be, subordinate to the mission purpose of advancing God’s Kingdom.

¹⁰ Murray at 25. .

¹¹ Murray at 129.

¹² Murray at 31.

¹³ Murray at 32.

¹⁴ Murray at 33.

¹⁵ Murray at 35.

When Christians incarnate the values and the lifestyle to which Christ calls, they function as the salt and light in society. On the other hand, church plantings and church renewals divorced from the values and goals of Christ may actually hinder the coming of God's Kingdom by exhibiting and implementing negative traits to the world. Planting new and renewing existing churches are valuable only to the extent the purposes of God are served by such a strategy. They are not ends in themselves, nor are they self-authenticating.¹⁶

During its deliberations of Compton's book on planting churches, for reasons such as those considered above, CCDD began to have nagging concerns as to the lack of a fundamental mission statement underlying its mission charge to "help the local church, church planters, and new church core groups in the establishment of new Congregational Christian churches" and the goal of planting 50 new Congregational churches during a 10 year period. To be successful, church plantings and church renewals must rest upon a sound foundation. What is that foundation? What is it that we really should be about? In short, what is Christ calling us to do? What is our mission?

E. Back to the Basics

1. Foundational New Testament Purposes

To better define the mission of CCDD, we needed to get back to the basics. God has determined what he wants his church to do. We simply need to discern it, express it and then implement it. Christ summarized the essence of the mission of his church in the *Great Commandment* and the *Great Commission*.

When asked to identify the most important commandment, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37, see Mark 12:30) and (2) "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31) "There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:31) Later, in his last words to his disciples before he ascended, Christ commands his disciples (including each of us),

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20).

In these statements, Christ sets forth five fundamental elements of the mission for his church.

a. Worship.

Central in Christ's church is loving worship of God. Worship can be defined as the loving attitude and acts of reverence for God. "In worship we continually attempt to open

¹⁶ Murray at 51- 52.

ourselves to God so that we might be obedient to God's will and walk in God's way."¹⁷ In worship we exalt God with lofty, praise, honor, thanksgiving, prayer and expressions of love and joy. How do we love God with all our heart? By worshipping Him! "Worship...must be at the heart of the church's life."¹⁸

b. Service

Christ also calls upon us to "love your neighbor." We demonstrate our love for others by reaching out to and serving their emotional, physical, relational and/or spiritual needs. The church is "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...." (Ephesians 4:12) Active service in Christ's name constitutes an integral part of our worship of God. What we do in serving others defines whether or not we are indeed God's people or merely serving our own interest under the guise of being religious. "Scripture and history make clear that both our Congregational identity and our integrity as Christians are rooted not in what we say but in what we *do* for Christ and his kingdom."¹⁹

c. Evangelism

The task of evangelism is so important that Christ's Great Commission is reported not only in each of the gospels (Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47-49, John 20:21), but also in the book of Acts (Acts 1:8) in which Christ says "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." We are ambassadors for Christ. We are called to witness, to reach out to others, to proclaim the Gospel and to contribute to leading people to accept Christ as Lord and Savior.

d. Discipleship

After a person accepts Christ, the Great Commission commands us teach him or her to observe what Christ has taught.

Discipleship is the process of helping people become more like Christ in their thoughts, feelings and actions. This process begins when a person is converted and continues throughout the rest of his life.²⁰

This embraces teaching and mentoring people in the foundations of the Christian faith, encouraging them, and praying for them so that they may follow Christ more fully.²¹ It is the church's responsibility to educate God's people.²² The objective is for people to become *Fully Devoted Followers of Christ*.

¹⁷ John H. Westerhoff, III, *Living the Faith Community, The Church That Makes a Difference* 51 (1985).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 53.

¹⁹ Michael P. Halcomb, "Missions: The Task That Unites Us," *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium* 112 (Steven A. Peay, ed., 1998).

²⁰ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Vision* 106 (1995)(hereinafter referred as Warren).

²¹ *The New Apostolic Churches* 144 (C. Peter Wagner, ed., 1998).

²² Warren at 106.

e. *Fellowship*

In the Great Commission, Christ not only calls for reaching out to people, and discipling them, he also calls for their baptism. Baptism not only symbolizes acceptance of Christ, but also fellowship in his church. A Christian is not only called to believe, he or she is called to belong. Baptism says to the world, "This person is now one of us!"²³ A baptized new believer is welcomed into the fellowship of the family of God. We are not alone. We support one another. Christian fellowship is more than just socializing, fun and food. It is more than simply showing up for worship service. Christian fellowship creates an environment of friendships, belonging and personal relationships where members learn, share, nurture, laugh, love, celebrate joys, grow and pray with one another. Christian fellowship creates an environment where the hurting, the depressed, the frustrated, and the confused can find love, trust, acceptance, support, hope, forgiveness, guidance, encouragement and healing. Authentic fellowship is experiencing life together.²⁴

2. Balance

The stronger more vibrant churches tend to be those who purposefully follow God's lead in multiple areas of church life rather than just one or two.²⁵ Too many churches have become "niche" churches specializing in one particular, not necessarily basic, purpose (such as good fellowship, or good Bible study or good counseling). In doing so, they have missed Christ's call as a whole. Churches need to be called back to what Christ has commanded them to do²⁶ – *worship, service, evangelism, discipleship and fellowship*.

There is no single key to church health and church growth; there are many keys. The church is not called to do one thing; it is called to do many things. That is why balance is so important. [B]alancing the five New Testament purposes brings health to the body of Christ, the church.²⁷

F. Revised Mission Statement for CCDD

The expression of the NA's vision for church development has been couched in terms of planting new and revitalizing existing churches. While perhaps implicit, there has lacked explicit expression that such efforts are in response to what Christ calls upon us to do. Instead, whether correctly or incorrectly, some have sensed that the motivation underlying this effort is simply the survival or enhancement of Congregationalism as a vital force. As devoted as we are to the Congregational Way, nowhere in the New Testament do we find reference to the Pilgrims and the Mayflower. If God is to bless our efforts, our focus had best be on his purposes not ours. We need to be inspired by and guided by his commands.

²³ Warren at 105

²⁴ Fox River Congregational Church, "Vision for the Future of Our Church" (Vision Statement).

²⁵ *An Inside Look at Willow Creek Community Church* 25 (Paul Braoudakis, ed. 2000).

²⁶ Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders* 157 (1999).

²⁷ Warren at 128-29.

For this reason, at the June 2007 NA Annual meeting, the CCDD adopted a new mission statement to guide all that it does or does not do and to provide the standards by which its efforts should be evaluated.

**Mission Statement
of
Congregational Church Development Division**

The mission of the Congregational Development Division is to foster the development of FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST. We strive to do this through encouragement, advice, support and fellowship with existing and new Congregational churches who seek to discern and do God's will

by deeply loving and worshipping God,

by loving and serving others,

by reaching out to and sharing God's word with the unchurched and unbelievers,

*by growing in the knowledge and expression of our faith,
and*

by engaging in Christian fellowship

As the NA seeks to accumulate and apply resources in the form of time, talent and treasure for purposes of planting of new and/or renewing existing churches, it assumes the responsibility of being a good steward of those resources. If the underlying vision or mission is simply to grow the number of new churches or renew existing churches, regardless of their nature, little may be accomplished in advancing the Kingdom of God. One may question our stewardship of the resources available. However, with our vision or mission being firmly planted on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, the number of planted new churches and renewal of existing churches no longer dictates what we are about, but rather provides a strategy to achieve what we are called by God to do. In this, we can be confident of God's blessing and an opportunity with unlimited promise.

This is what Congregational Church Development Division (CCDD) is about. Efforts to renew existing churches and plant new churches, in accordance with the core values in the adopted CCDD Mission Statement, offer the exciting possibility of recalling local churches to their essential tasks of evangelism and service as well as invigorated worship, discipleship and fellowship.

III. CONGREGATIONALISM: MEET THE 21ST CENTURY

To use shorthand phraseology, the mission of CCDD is to foster the development of FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST through encouraging, advising, supporting and fellowshiping with churches who seek to discern and do God's will through loving *worship, service, evangelism, discipleship* and *fellowship*. It seeks to grow the number of persons becoming followers of Christ and to encourage, assist and support followers in growing in their walk with Christ. The role of CCDD is to strive to accomplish this mission through revitalization of existing and the planting of new churches who this embrace these mission purposes. This is what CCDD is about. Efforts to renew existing churches and plant new churches, in accordance with the core values in the adopted CCDD Mission Statement, offer the exciting possibility of recalling local churches to their essential tasks of evangelism and service as well as invigorated worship, discipleship and fellowship. However, to maximize our effectiveness, we need to think more clearly about the environment in which we are functioning.

A. The 21st Century Environment: Who Are We Trying to Reach?

As we encourage and support our churches in bringing people to Christ, it is important that each church not to approach this fundamental task with a casual attitude. When asked "who is your church trying to reach?" the response is likely to be "everyone." However, no church can do it all. It takes all kinds of churches. For an individual church to be effective in evangelism it needs to determine who it is trying to reach.²⁸

As a general principle our churches should welcome virtually anyone who comes. However, outreach efforts should not be aimed at raiding other churches for their members. Our mission is not to grow our churches. But rather, it is to grow Christ's family. Simply reshuffling people from one church to another not only fails to do so, it utilizes and wastes resources which have been entrusted to us by God as his stewards. If we focus on our self centered growth purposes rather than on God's purposes, it is unlikely that God will bless our efforts with success.

Despite this limiting parameter, however, we are confronted with a broad universe of opportunity for outreach: (1) *unbelievers*, (2) *doubters*, (3) *non church goers* sometimes referred to as the *unchurched* (i.e., those who may have been involved in church at some point but no longer participate in a church community on a regular bases), and (4) *church-goers* who are looking for a new church affiliation either because of a change in personal circumstance (e.g., a relocation) or dissatisfaction with their current church affiliations.²⁹

²⁸ Warren at 155-57.

²⁹ Reaching out to *church-goers* seeking a new church affiliation does not constitute efforts to raid other churches. These are people who, on their own initiative, are looking elsewhere. Either they will find what they are seeking or

This universe of people embraces a wide range of attitudes, mindsets and personal circumstances. Each church will need to determine to whom and how it can most effectively outreach. This, in turn, requires an understanding of the contemporary cultural environment within which we are functioning as the 21st Century gets well underway.

1. **Today's Evangelism Environment: Distinct but Overlapping Cultural Eras**³⁰

The cultural context has changed over the years. It is now commonly perceived that there are three distinct, but not mutually exclusive, eras as to different views on perceiving and communicating truth: (1) the Pre Modern Era, (2) the Modern Era and (3) the Post Modern Era.

a. Pre Modernism

In Pre Modernism (sometimes referred to Christendom), discerning the truth is somewhat mysterious. Truth is revealed by God primarily through scripture. This view came to dominate with the expansion of the Christian church and with Christianity assuming a favored position in the Roman Empire following the conversion of Emperor Constantine. Since its founding in the early 1600s, until relatively recently, the United States has lived under the paradigm of Christendom. For a long time, our culture accepted a whole series of Christian assumptions. The U.S. has been a Christian country. Americans knew about Christ. Pre Modernism reflected the mindset of processing the perception of truth through the filter of the concept of God. Well into the 1900s, people generally expressed belief in God and, at least occasionally, went to church. There was a sympathetic and influential relationship between the Christian community and this nation's government. Christianity was accepted as the norm.

b. Modernism

The seeds of Modernism were sown in the early 1500s with scientists such as Copernicus who asserted that the earth revolves around the sun. Since the Catholic Church had long maintained that everything revolved around the earth, seeds of doubt were planted. If the church erred here, in what other ways might it be wrong? Darwin further cast doubt upon the teachings of the church. In the view of many, science and reason came to rule. In the 1800s, the German philosopher Nietzsche (sometimes referred to as the prophet of Modernism) asserted that God is dead. There is no absolute objective truth. Instead, the foundations of truth are rationalism, empiricism, things discerned in the material world, etc. The Bible is suspect. There

they will cease their church participation. In either case, if one of our churches can fulfill their needs, while not growing Christ's family, we are contributing against a decline of active participants in his family.

³⁰ This section is drawn from notes prepared by Jon S. Hanson which summarize and integrate three presentations at National Outreach Conference, November 8-11, 2006: Bobby Brewer, "What is Post Modernism a.k.a. Emergent Culture;" Todd Hunter, "The Alpha Course: Small Group Evangelism;" and Kim Swithinanck and Phil Jeansonne, "The Heart of Alpha, Small Group Evangelism" (hereinafter referred to as Hanson Notes).

is little acceptance of the supernatural. Even in churches, there were few sermons on the Holy Spirit.

By the 1900s the modernism era emerged as a major cultural mindset. More recent generations, such as the baby boomers, have tended to fall away from both the church and the Christian view. Instead, the trend has been to hold a more Modernism perspective in which science and reason rules. Truth is no longer perceived as absolute. God receded from the center of perceptions.

c. *Post Modernism*

The 1970s ushered in dramatic times. The United States Supreme Court, in the *Roe v. Wade* decision upholding the right to abortion, rendered an earthquake event. In the same period, the divorce rate took off. Women's rights became the rage. Families fell apart. Single mothers, working to make ends meet, no longer felt they had time to go to church. Fathers often failed in their parental responsibilities. Materialism became a prime focus. This confluence of events resulted in numerous children not being raised in a church. Adult participation in church related activities dramatically declined. Substantial segments of the population became disconnected with the church. The concepts of family, marriage and our cultural moral compass changed. Community has broken down. Generation X grew up as a *non* Christian generation. The church no longer was seen as a source for answers and support.

Paralleling these developments, questions were raised as to where has science, reason and so called progress gotten us. We have had two world wars, the Korean, Viet Nam and Middle East wars. Totalitarianism abounds. The world is replete with problems and misery. The Age of Reason has not provided meaning or answers.

Lacking having been schooled in the basics of Christianity (or other faith traditions) by their baby boomer parents and being skeptical of Modernism, much of the younger generation today feels something is missing. Material gains and successes, achieved in what is often seen as the rat race, have raised doubts as to the assumptions of Modernism. Post Moderns seek to connect with something, but don't know what. Consequently, they have emerged with a Post Modernism seeking and curious mindset. Although not anti-Modernism, the Post Moderns are willing to critique the assumptions of Modernism.

2. Factors in Defining Targets³¹

As noted above, in general, we seek to reach out to the unbelievers, doubters and unchurched. This encompasses a rather broad group of people. How can we further define our targets so as to implement a more intentional and effective approach in outreach efforts. There are at least three basic factors influencing the determination of upon whom a given church should focus its outreach efforts: (a) nature of persons who are most receptive to being successfully reached, (b) relative impact of successfully reaching alternative groups, and (c) demographics in the geographical area of the outreaching church. In addition, as will be

³¹ This section draws significantly from Report of the Outreach Events Task Force, "Strategic Framework for Outreach Events," May 17, 2007 (Fox River Congregational Church, Pewaukee, Wisconsin).

discussed in Section B. below, an important element in determining the most effective focus for outreach for a Congregational church is the nature of Congregational Way in relation to the alternative target groups under consideration.

a. Nature of Persons Most Receptive to Being Successfully Reached

To maximize the success of outreach efforts, a church in particular and the NA in general should attempt to discern what group or groups of people are likely to be most receptive to outreach efforts. This requires consideration of the various cultural mindsets. Although we have been moving into the Post Modern Era, it is important to recognize that all transitions from one era to another take place over a period of time and that transitions are not complete with respect to all segments of people. Thus, while we are currently living in an essentially transition period between the Modern and Post Modern Eras, there will continue to be significant segments of the population which embrace the central perceptions and beliefs of one (or perhaps even a combination) of the three eras. This should be kept in mind in defining target groups.

(1) Pre-Modern Mindset – As noted above, the Pre Modernism mindset embraces the perception of truth primarily through the filter of the concept of God, especially as that truth is revealed through the Bible. Pre Moderns generally express belief in God, at least on occasion go to church, and tend to accept the concept (if not the practice) of God's truth being the normative standard for living. For Christians, God's Word is revealed through the Bible; for Jews it is through the Old Testament; and for Muslims it is through the Koran.

With respect to that portion of the population with at least some Christian orientation, presumably a substantial segment of these people are currently members of a church or have leanings towards a particular church or denomination. Since our churches are not called to reshuffle Christian oriented persons from one church to another, this removes a significant percentage of persons possessing a Christian Pre-Modern mindset from being appropriate targets for our outreach efforts.

This is not to say that there are not some opportunities. There are people, although they have fallen away from regular church involvement, who possess some religious/church background and continue to harbor some sense of God and notions of Christian beliefs. Even though they are church opt outs, they might possess a significant Christian memory. These people might be susceptible to Billy Graham's approach of urging his listeners to come home to what they know to be true – i.e., the Christian message. He sought to tap into an existing Christian conscience.³² In particular, this approach might be effective for young non-churchgoing parents who went to church as children. They may now come to sense that when their children reach Sunday school age, perhaps they should return to church.

³² Hanson Notes.

Another small, but not to be ignored, group of Pre Moderns are churchgoers seeking affiliation with a new church either because of changed personal circumstances or dissatisfaction with their current church.

While the opportunities for outreach to persons with at least a somewhat Christian oriented Pre Modern mindset are declining as we move further and further into the Post Modern Era, opportunities do exist and should not be ignored. Here, however, the emphasis is less reaching out to the unbelievers and doubters and leading them to an acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior, but rather the focus is more on recalling people to resume their Walk with Christ and/or offering people more fulfilling opportunities in their Walk than that which they are experiencing elsewhere.

(2) Modern Mindset – As noted above, by the latter half of the 20th Century modernism emerged as a major cultural mindset. The baby boomer generation has drifted or run away from the Christian perspective in general and the church in particular. Absolute truth is rejected. Science and so called reason rule. Success, money and materialism are glorified. One-self and one's self indulgence assume the center of one's life. God has receded, if not disappeared altogether, from view.

Those possessing the Modern mindset promise to be the most difficult to reach. They strongly reject the existence and/or importance of God. Other factors, such as science and reason, control the world in which they live. Since they perceive themselves as the worthy center of their attention and indulgence and since Christianity poses a perceived threat to doing what they want to do, they have little motive to respond to the Christian message. Thus, the Moderns tend to possess little curiosity about the Christian perspective. While no group is totally immune to change (especially to one on one personal evangelism which is discussed in Section IV. below), the Moderns appear to be the group most impervious to outreach efforts.

(3) Post Modern Mindset – While the characteristics which exemplify Post Moderns are most often observed in the younger generation (teen years into the early 30s), these characteristics can also be found among the baby boomers and even older persons. One era tends to influence those of another era. Thus, focus here is on the Post Modern mindset rather than simply the younger generation. This mindset is characterized by several elements including the following.³³

(a) *Ignorance of Christian Beliefs* – The younger generation, as well as some others, has not generally been exposed to the basics of Christianity or other religious beliefs. Their parents, having fallen away from the church, did not raise their children in a Christian context. While they may accept the notion of God, they have little sense of who God is.

³³ The following discussion is primarily drawn from Hanson Notes.; Murray at 147 and Jeff Trubey and Ben Christy, "Meet the Millennials: Who They Are and Why Your Church Should Care," *Outreach* 108 (Jan.-Feb. 2007)(magazine).

(b) *Relativism* – Lacking a grounding in any of the three faith traditions (Christianity, Judaism or Islam), the persons of the Post Modern mindset perceive truth as being relative rather than absolute. Meaning is understood to be subjective rather than objective. Truth is processed differently in different cultures and eras. Who is to say that one person’s perception of truth is better than that of someone else? There is a readiness to hold contradictory beliefs, a wanting of choice at every level, and skepticism.

(c) *Pluralism* – Lacking a sense of absolute truth derived from a religious foundation, the culture of Post Modernism preaches tolerance with a capital T. There is little critical thinking. Everything is O: K. “I’m OK, you’re OK.” Many Post Moderns believe that all ways lead to God assuming that there is a God. There are many diverse paths to God. Gods of all religions are the same or equal. Maintaining that Jesus is the only way is like spiritual racism. Religious pluralism is politically correct. Spiritual values are significant without allowing claims to exclusivity

(d) *Meaningful Life and Spiritual Curiosity* – Post Moderns tend to believe that there should be more to life than getting up every day, going to work, coming home, doing chores, eating out once in a while, and then repeating the same pattern day after day. Isn’t there more meaning to life than chasing after money and material things? Some young adults turn to religion as a backlash against a culture obsessed with sex and money or against parents who gave them little or no direction. Materialism has become a lesser factor compared to the viewpoint of their parents’ generation.

Thus, Post Moderns embrace a different approach than those holding the Modernism view. They are looking for the real thing, for real meaning, for truth. They tend to be sold on the supernatural (remember they don’t accept that science and reason have all the answers), but they don’t know who or what to believe. Might just possibly the church be the real thing? Consequently, Post Moderns are spiritually hungry. They are more spiritually curious than their predecessors. Generations X and Y overwhelmingly *believe in God* (e.g., 80% of college students) and possess *a strong interest in how all things spiritual relate to their lives and the world around them*. Although rejecting dogma, they are reaching out for personal and convenient ways to find answers. Spiritual matters are thought to be important. Questions of faith are more on the agenda.

(e) *Non Favor of Traditional Church* – In trying to find meaning in their lives, some Post Moderns return to the religion of their parents. More often, in conformity with a refusal to respect established traditions, Post Moderns generally don’t like attending traditional worship services. They shy away from labels and increasingly identify with no specific religion. Or, if they do call themselves Christian, they think in terms of being non-denominational. Furthermore, in the process of trying to discover themselves, religion is more likely to strike a responsive chord if it does so on a personal level e.g., college minister clubs, smaller and less formal worship which is individualized and on demand, etc.

(f) *Making a Difference* – Simply achieving career success and making a lot of money has not proven sufficiently satisfying for many Post Moderns. While not forsaking money, this group is more attuned to the problems around the world. A high

percentage seeks meaning by serving as volunteers for what they perceive are worthy projects. They are socially conscious. Feeling that they are special and privileged, they exhibit a responsibility to give back. They want to make a difference.

(g) *Challenge and Commitment* – Post Moderns seek challenge, both intellectually and spiritually. Too many churches create church services, programs and/or other activities that are merely observed. These church programs, which require little sacrifice or effort, give rise to little or no commitment. And, they fail to provide a sense of meaning on a personal level.

(h) *Dislike Authority: Dialogue rather Than Pronouncements* – In general, Post Moderns distrust institutions, hierarchies, and structures. They prefer networks and grass-roots activities. In particular, they don't trust persons in authority and don't readily accept authority. Don't tell people what to do or what to believe. They don't like being told to believe in this or that dogma. Instead, they want to dialogue and process information themselves to reach their own conclusions.

(i) *Seeking Fellowship* – With the breakdown of family and community, the impersonal nature of an increasingly automated and technological society and the impermanence of today's personal relationships, for many people there is a great sense of loneliness. People want to connect with other people. They long for human relationships. They seek community, a sense of belonging. They seek others who listen and care.

Too often, Post-Moderns either fail to find community in a church or simply do not think of a church as a place where one can foster relationships. When they do try a church worship service, program or activity, they often don't get the sense that people care about them or whether or not they are even there. They want a sense of being welcomed and accepted.

Despite the obstacles of *ignorance of Christian beliefs* (something which can be taught if there is a curiosity to learn), a sense of *relativism* (stemming from a lack of a foundation of Christian beliefs) and *pluralism*, those with a Post Modern mindset seek a more *meaningful life*, *express belief in some God* (however limited the understanding), exhibit a greater acceptance of and *curiosity about spiritual matters*, *seek to make a difference*, relish *challenge and commitment*, and long for meaningful connectedness or *fellowship* with others. These attributes, offer a tremendous opportunity for successful outreach if we create a safe, comfortable, warm, caring, and non threatening place and manner to engage them.

b. Relative Impact of Successfully Reaching Alternative Groups

(1) Those Not Yet Having Accepted Christ: Impact on an Individual – Despite one's good works, good intentions, participation in church and other religious activities, etc, it is beyond our ability to meet God's perfect standards so as to be able to cross the chasm which separates us from God. However, God so loved the world that he gave us his only son to die on the cross to atone for our sins. By his grace, God offers us the gift of salvation. He assures us of eternal life in personal relationship with him. This is the Good News. However, to be effective, the gift must be accepted. We must accept Christ as Lord and Savior. Those who do

not accept will not have eternal life with God. Although we don't know precisely what the alternative will be, we can be quite confident it is not a preferable alternative.

This essence of the Gospel is highly relevant in the determining upon whom we should focus primary attention in our outreach efforts. Those who have accepted Christ in the past are assured of salvation and eternal life even if they have since fallen away from the church. Although other adverse consequences are likely, God does not withdraw his promise of eternal life. Thus, the consequences of not reaching these people pose substantially less adverse import than failing to reach those who have not yet accepted Christ. If we are to focus on those for whom the impact of successful outreach is the greatest, major efforts should be directed toward the unbelievers and doubters.

(2) The Powerhouse Generation³⁴ – Research suggests that the age range embracing teens, those in their 20s and perhaps even those in their early 30s will be one the largest and most impacting age groups ever to emerge in America. This generation is working within the fabric of society rather rebelling against it – a sharp contrast to the 1960s counter culture. The college graduates of this generation are said to be on the track to becoming a “powerhouse generation” full of technology planers, community shapers, institution builders and world leaders. Set apart by its mastery of technology, this generation will be characterized by more of a world citizen mentality. It will be a generation at ease harnessing technology and the building of a diverse community – both locally and globally. The beliefs and value systems which these people embrace presumably will substantially carry through to their children and those who view them as leaders. This reemphasizes the importance of reaching out to and bringing in today's younger generation. If we can reach these future leaders of technology, community shapers, institution builders and world leaders, we will greatly magnify the opportunity for spreading Christianity and growing the family of Christ.

(3) A Large Segment – The Post Modern mindset is especially reflected by those in their teens to their thirties. Typically, this is the largest group missing from our churches. Thus, if we are to look to the future of our churches, this is an age group upon which we need to focus.³⁵

c. Demographics in Our Geographical Area and Our Target Group

Selecting a target group based upon the receptivity of the group to outreach and the relative potential impact of successful outreach as between groups does little good if the group or groups under consideration are not physically present, at least not in significant numbers, in the geographical area in which a church functions. Personal familiarity with the area, surveys, demographic information all assist in determining the sufficiency of a presence of those persons a church seeks to reach.

d. Summary

³⁴ Drawn significantly from Jeff Trubey and Ben Christy, “Meet the Millenials: Who They Are and Why Your Church Should Care,” *Outreach* 108 at 110 (Jan.-Feb. 2007).

³⁵ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* 12 (2007).

Today, it is crucial to recognize that there is no pure Christian world view. Each of the sweeps of history poses opportunities and challenges as to the view of truth. God raises and works through good and faithful people in each era. However, in doing so, we need to be mindful of the different mindsets present in our culture. As we undertake our outreach efforts, go where the people are and adapt our approaches to ways which make sense to them.³⁶

Assuming that the relevant demographics of an existing or new church plant are favorable, the segment or segments of the population possessing a Post Modern mindset offer a prime group (albeit not the only group) of people for church outreach. Although the attributes of this mindset are most commonly reflected among the younger generation, such attributes can also be found in older age groups as well. So the primary focus should be on those persons possessing the Post Modern mindset, not necessarily on specific age groups per se.

These are people who offer a high degree of promise of being receptive to the Christian message when the message is communicated in an acceptable and comfortable manner in a non intimidating environment. Furthermore, effective outreach to these people offer the possibility of maximum impact in bringing people to Christ and nurturing them along the path to becoming fully devoted followers of Christ. Here, there is a tremendous opportunity for successful outreach.

However, these conclusions are of little import for those of us in the Congregational Way, if Congregational churches do not possess the characteristics attractive to persons holding a Post Modern mindset. So, a critical question for Congregationalists is the nature of our church in relation to this segment of the population.

B. The Congregational Way: Our Time Is Now³⁷

The above discussion, describing the current cultural environment and the factors relevant in defining to whom outreach efforts should be especially directed, has general applicability across the denominational spectrum with respect to those churches possessing an outreach orientation. There is great evangelism opportunity for a wide range of churches across the spectrum of Christian churches. The Christian faith has answers for what the Post Moderns are seeking so long as they are approached in a manner acceptable to them. However, importantly from our perspective, examination of the characteristics of the Post Modern mindset and the basic principles of Congregationalism reveals that churches in the Congregational Way are particularly well positioned to reach out to people in today's 21st Century environment.

1. Meaning and Spiritual Curiosity

³⁶ Hanson Notes.

³⁷ Drawn significantly from Report of the Outreach Events Task Force, "Strategic Framework for Outreach Events," May 17, 2007 (Fox River Congregational Church, Pewaukee, Wisconsin).

The Christian faith offers the basis for a meaningful life which is one of the prime quests of the Post-Moderns. When this is coupled with significant spiritual curiosity, often with acceptance that there is at least some type of God, the door is wide open for outreach.³⁸

2. Relevancy

Post Moderns tend to possess a strong interest in how all things spiritual relate to their lives and the world around them. Here is one of the strengths of our churches. Sermons and discipleship programs are, and presumably will continue to be, strongly oriented to bringing understanding as to how God's Word is relevant in people's everyday lives. This is a message to which Post Moderns are likely to respond.

3. Freedom of Exploration and Thought

Post Moderns reject dogma. They dislike authority of other people telling them what to think and what to do. Instead, they like to gather information, dialogue with others, raise questions and doubts, process information and reach their own conclusions. Effective postmodern churches are likely to be those where doubts can be expressed and dialogue can occur without censure. Uncertainties can be explored. Doubt is seen as a spur to growth in faith and worship. Such churches will be accepting and affirming. They will offer space for members to think and question. They will listen to other perspectives and will not be threatened if they can't answer every question. This is not because such churches don't believe in anything, but rather because they are not afraid to subject their beliefs to scrutiny. Their core convictions are the basis for a free exchange.³⁹

Exploring the faith in the context of a Congregational church is a natural for this type of mindset. Congregational churches are organized around a Covenant rather than required adherence to set dogma, faith statement or creed. Instead, we embrace liberty of private conscience in interpreting the gospel and developing our own faith convictions as led by the Holy Spirit, scripture, prayer and reason. Sincerity of conviction requires full opportunity for intellectual freedom and personal experience. We are not told that we have to think this or that. We raise questions, we dialogue and we reach our own conclusions. (Of course, freedom of the Congregational Way is freedom from the authority of other persons so that we can be more completely obedient to the authority of Christ). Our freedom of private conscience obligates each of us to carefully and honestly think through and reach our own conclusions (giving appropriate regard to the opinions of others) as to the meaning of God's Word and His will for us. For God to be truly meaningful to us, we must discover our faith first hand.

³⁸ It has been suggested that effective churches in the Postmodern Era will enthusiastically embrace the interest in spirituality which is evident in contemporary culture. Post Moderns are more likely to come to faith in Christ through spiritual experience which, in turn, leads to understanding of doctrine rather than coming to faith through prior intellectual assent. Most newcomers to Christ primarily perceive their faith in terms of a relationship with God rather than in terms of theological beliefs. This doesn't mean that doctrine has become unimportant, but rather that intellectual acceptance is not necessarily the starting point for faith. Spirituality may prove to be the bridge over which doctrinal truth can be successfully carried. Murray at 168-69.

³⁹ Murray at 167.

Since Post Moderns reject being told that they have to think this or that, since they like to apply their intellect in reaching their beliefs and values, since they like to raise questions and doubts, and since they like to dialogue and challenge, they should feel very comfortable with the methodology which is part of the very fabric of our Congregational Way. There is wide latitude to explore the faith in an open and non threatening environment without being subject to pronouncement or judgments.

4. Absence of Hierarchy

The perception of the institutional traditional church is anathema to the Post Moderns. They don't understand its forms and rituals. And, most importantly, they reject hierarchical institutions which attempt to exert authority over what they believe and do.

Here again, Congregationalism should be particularly appealing. Other than the headship of Christ, we lack layers of authority. A Congregational church is autonomous. It is not subject to outside denominational or other types of clerical or lay authority. The congregation is self governing. It can serve as the active and real (as distinguished from a perfunctory) governing body of a church. It is the arbiter of policy. Although the minister has special duties, he or she is one of the members of the church, not set over the members. The minister offers expertise, guidance and support which an individual may accept, reject or modify. This minimal structure should appeal to the Post Moderns.

5. Making a Difference

Post Moderns want to make a difference. They want to be challenged. They don't want to sit back and simply observe what others are doing. Service is an important value.

Congregationalism speaks to this value as well. All of us, where we live and work as well as in church, are called to the ministry of servanthood. As a matter of practice, as we grow our congregations, we seek involved people who are difference makers. Service is a cardinal principle of the Christian faith in general as well as of Congregationalism in particular – a principle akin to that of the Post Modern mindset.

6. Challenge and Commitment

Post Moderns seek challenge (both intellectually and spiritually) and commitment. They don't want to be simply observers or be involved in things which require little or no sacrifice. They want to be involved in a meaningful way. They seek meaning.

At the foundation of Christian faith in general and our Congregational churches in particular are challenges and commitments. Christ challenges his followers and asks for commitment. In addition, Congregational churches are organized around a Covenant which calls for commitment. The appeal to the Post Modern mindset seems quite evident.

7. Fellowship

As noted above, because of the breakdown of family and community, the impersonal nature of an increasingly automated and technological society and the impermanence of today's personal relationships, many persons of the Post Modern Era lack the connectedness or fellowship of a caring, loving and supportive group or community of people. They long for personal human relationships and a sense of belonging. A loving, supportive and caring fellowship is a fundamental principle of Congregationalism. This should prove to be a great attraction to the Post Moderns seeking to connect with others.

8. Summary

The nature of the Christian faith in general and the elements of Congregationalism in particular embrace many of the predispositions of those possessing a Post Modern mindset. Those churches of our fellowship, which vigorously practice the principles of Congregationalism in their way of "doing church," are ideally equipped to reach out to the contemporary culture of the 21st Century. As we progress in renewing existing and planting new churches in the Congregational Way, we are confronted with glorious opportunity to grow Christ's family and invigorate our churches in the process.

IV. CONGREGATIONALISM: EMBRACE THAT "E" WORD

A vigorous and vital church, whether established or new, is one which "takes its identity, priorities and agenda from participation in God's mission in the world."⁴⁰ Such a church embraces that which Christ calls upon each of us to do including the fundamentals of loving God through *worship*, loving others through *service*, sharing the gospel with others and leading them towards the acceptance of Christ (*evangelism*), teaching others what Christ taught (*discipleship*), and engaging in mutual, loving and supportive *fellowship*. Through purposively pursuing the achievement of these mission purposes, a church positively responds to call for developing *FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST*. Pastoral care of the congregation (worship, discipleship and fellowship) is vital. But, also essential is equipping people for witness in the world (evangelism and service). Witness should not be viewed as an extra activity. It is essential that efforts to plant new churches or revitalize established churches be missionary rather than simply maintenance churches. Such churches should be shaped with a view toward God's purposes rather than simply fashioning churches with a maintenance or inward focus attitude to serve current members needs and personal preferences.⁴¹

As considered above, "doing church" in the Congregational way is particularly well suited to reach out to today's emerging culture to encourage and assist unbelievers, doubters and the unchurched to come or return to Christ; to grow and nurture Christ's family; and, in the

⁴⁰ Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church, and Building Missionary Congregations* (1995) as quoted in Murray at 123.

⁴¹ See Murray at 124.

process, to grow the Congregational Way as an authentic and joyful way of following Christ. But, to do so, Congregationalists must fully embrace the value of reaching out to others. Congregationalist churches must add a more dynamic emphasis on outreach in addition to care and nurture. In other words, church leaders and church members must get over our reluctance to and aversion of embracing the “E” word, i.e., *evangelism*. To use the terminology made prominent by Willow Creek Community Church, we should all strive to become “contagious Christians.”

By its nature and purpose, the church should be a contagious place which infects more and more outsiders with the Christian faith. Some churches rationalize their lack efforts in the area of evangelism pointing to other areas of strength. It is not wrong for a church to develop various areas of strength. However, focusing on being a *teaching* church or a *worshipping* church to the neglect of the biblical command to reach out to the spiritually lost is like a man saying, “Sure I neglect my kids, but hey, I am a great husband to my wife.” Any church neglecting to reach out to those who have yet to accept Christ disregards Christ’s command. It is essential that a church’s mission be aligned with the Great Commission and that the church actively attempts to fulfill that to which the Commission calls us.⁴²

In contrast, failure to take evangelism seriously has been a major reason that yesterday’s church are no longer here today or are in a stage of decline. Lyle Schaller examined the common characteristics of congregations that appeared to be dying. He found that

[t]he most highly visible of these characteristics is the lack of outreach and an almost total concentration of resources on member-oriented activities. This lack of balance in the concept or purpose is an overemphasis on the care of the congregation. Evangelism and outreach, mission and witness in the world are almost completely ignored....⁴³

For the Congregational Way to become a dynamic movement, rather than a body of declining churches, Congregationalists must embrace evangelism as a fundamental and primary focus of their enthusiasm, attention and effort.

A. “Why Is It Important for Me To Reach Out to Others for Christ?”⁴⁴

Have we and/or members of our congregations ever found ourselves thinking like this? “I come to worship services regularly. I volunteer for various teams and projects. I try to lead a good a moral life. Let others evangelize. It’s not for me. I am doing my share already.” This is a thought process akin to that which prevails in many, if not most, congregations. But, does it do

⁴² Mark Mittleberg, *Building a Contagious Christian Church: Revolutionizing the Way We view and Do Evangelism* 25-26 (2001).

⁴³ Lyle Schaller, *The Local Church Looks to the Future*.

⁴⁴ This section is drawn primarily from Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* 25-38 (1994) (hereafter referred to as Hybels and Mittleberg).

justice to what is involved? How important is it that each of us engage in reaching out to others for Christ? To whom does it matter?

1. It Matters to *God*

The Bible is clear. People matter to and are deeply loved by God. However, many have not yet found God's love and grace. Nevertheless, God so loves and treasures all his people that he sent his son Jesus Christ to seek and save those who have not yet made a decision for Christ. Since they are of prime importance to God, if we are truly followers of Christ, they should be of prime importance to each of us.

2. It Matters to *Those Not Yet Reached*

Because of his love, God offers the gift of salvation and eternal life in a loving personal relationship with him. However to be effective, like any gift, God's gift must be received. This can only be achieved by accepting Christ as Lord and Savior. Christ entered this world to communicate God's love and the offer of God's gift. Christ then calls each of us, to be his on-going instruments to communicate that love and the offer of salvation and eternal life. Failure to come to know Christ and accept him as Lord and Savior lead to a Christless eternity. One of us may be the only Christian some people know. If we don't share Christ with them, perhaps no one will. What we chose to do, or not to do, can impact others positively or negatively for eternity. Thus, our reaching out (or failing to do so) is of crucial importance to members of our families, friends, neighbors, work or recreational associates and others.

3. It Matters to *Each of Us*

Reaching out to others is not only important to God and to those who have not yet found Christ, it is important to each of us. Yes, there are costs in time, energy, preparation, risk of rejection and life complications. But, evangelism also offers substantial personal rewards including adventure, purpose, challenge, fulfillment, spiritual growth in Our Walk with Christ, spiritual confidence, enduring investments in that which lasts, and the honor of being God's agent. The rewards are high the costs are relatively low. In fact, they are not costs at all. They are investments that pay permanent dividends.

4. It Matters to *Our Church and the Congregational Way*

Churches experience life cycles commencing with birth and proceeding to vitality, equilibrium, unrealized decline, realized decline and death.⁴⁵ To sustain their vitality as viable instruments in growing and nurturing God's family, churches need to continue to grow. Otherwise, as their membership ages, decline sets in. Not only do such churches fail to reach out to others, they become increasingly incapable of providing nurture to its own members. Paralleling such failures is the failure to bring the Congregational Way to a culture that is ready

⁴⁵ For a discussion of a church's life cycle, see Compton at 14 *et. seq.*

to embrace it as an authentic way of following Christ. If Congregational churches ebb from the scene, so does the opportunity for the Congregational Way to become a vital force in today's world.

In short, is it vitally important for each of us, for each member of our congregations and for planters of new Congregational churches to reach out to others for Christ? The answer is unambiguous. It is important to God, to those we reach out to (or fail to reach to), to each of us as individuals, and to the vitality of our individual churches in particular and Congregationalism in general.

B. “Me an Evangelist (Ugh!)? That’s Not Me!”

Even recognizing the importance of Christ's Great Commission to reach out to others and knowing that Christ calls upon each of us to do so, yet we hold back. Why?

1. The Misperception

For many, the term “evangelist” evokes a negative image. Do you picture those infamous TV evangelists who bilk their trusting viewers out of hard earned dollars for personal gain? Or, do you conjure street preachers, megaphone in hand, blaring out the coming of the end of the world, God's impending judgment, and hell and damnation for those who won't repent. Perhaps a more common experience are those polite Bible thumping evangelists who come to your door and pound you over the head with scripture passage after scripture passage. Since these approaches turnoff most believers, one can readily imagine the negative impact on those who do not yet believe. If this is what evangelism is about, when asked “me be an evangelist?” most of us would reasonably respond “ugh, that's not me.”

However, Christ does not call for us assume the role of these negative stereotypes. But rather, he calls upon us to be enthusiastic persons lovingly and quietly reaching out to our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, recreational colleagues, etc. and to contribute to their journey toward accepting God's gift of forgiveness, salvation and an eternal life. We are not called to be ranters and ravers nor Bible thumpers. Instead, the term evangelism should invoke positive images. Simply, it is about loving, caring and reaching out to others who have not yet received Christ in their lives.

2. “Evangelism Still Does Not Seem To Be Me”⁴⁶

Despite this positive and compelling image of evangelism, many still might question whether we have the personality traits needed to reach out to others. Isn't evangelism for people with a certain type of personality and temperament? Isn't there a particular mold to which we must conform in order to be effective? Don't we need to know the Bible inside and out and be well versed in the various deep questions of theology? The answer is an emphatic *no!*

⁴⁶ Drawn primarily from Hybels and Mittleberg at 122-131.

It takes different types of people to reach the vast diversity of unbelievers with God's message. God knew what he was doing when he made us. He custom designed each of us with a unique combination of personality, temperament, talents and background to reach out to people who are receptive to such character traits. God wants harness the character of each of us to reach those who have yet to accept Christ. The key is to recognize that were are to be ourselves in reaching out to others – whether our natural approach is direct, intellectual, testimonial, interpersonal, invitational, service and/or a combination thereof. Scripture provides models for each of these styles in witnessing to others. In being evangelists, we are to be ourselves, not somebody we are not. Thus, the rationale for saying that “being an evangelist is not me” no longer holds. Instead, becoming a contagious Christian is the natural me.

Nor are we expected to reach out in a way that is unnatural for us. But, rather God has created each of us with different characteristics and he calls upon us to use our natural attributes to reach those receptive to our natural approaches.

C. *“Evangelism: I Can Do That!”*

In addition to the negative stereotype misperceptions of what one must be to be an evangelist and the erroneous sense that one must be someone other than his or her natural self, there are two other deterrents to our reaching out to others: lack of understanding as to the nature of personal relational evangelism and the lack of knowing some practical tools – hence a lack of confidence.

1. Understanding Personal Relational Evangelism

Recent years have demonstrated that a highly effective approach to evangelism is personal relationship evangelism.⁴⁷ When it comes to an important facet of a person's life, one does not usually rely on a complete stranger. This is especially true when it comes to the ultimate issue of one's spiritual destiny. If we want our Christianity to become contagious it will not happen through clever slogans, brochures or other forms of "hit-and-run" evangelism. Most often, lives will be changed when Christians develop significant relationships with people where they live, work, play, relate, and do business with each other. Thus, personal evangelism is not going door to door. It's not about thumping people over the head with the Bible. Nor is it being an “erupter” who tries to shoehorn God into every conversation. But rather, effective personal evangelism calls for each of us to be ourselves and to simply respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit when he opens the door to developing relationships with people.⁴⁸ We engage in

⁴⁷ There are other valid approaches to evangelism. For example, there is the Alpha program which rests on three foundational legs: (1) presentations of the basics of Christianity, (2) followed by small group dialogue, and (3) radical reliance on the Holy Spirit. Over 11 million people have participated in the Alpha experience. Alpha has also been used as the means to start up new churches.

⁴⁸ Notes prepared by Jon S. Hanson on Bill Hybels, “Just Walk Across the Room” presentation at The 2004 Robert Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership as modified by Bill Hybels presentation “How to Build a Contagious Church,” October 15-16, 2004 (Willow Creek Association Conference).

personal relationships in all walks of life – in our families, with our friends, in the context of work, recreation and social activities, etc. It is natural for us to do so. It is no different in the context of evangelism.

2. Getting to Know How: Training

A final deterrent to embarking upon evangelism is the sense of inadequacy as to possessing particular skills needed for engaging in personal evangelism. This sense can be overcome through training. The recently revised version of the *Becoming a Contagious Christian: Building Your Faith in a Style that Fits You* experience provides one example of a program which fills this need by clarifying what is involved and providing practical tools to carrying out effective personal relationship evangelism.⁴⁹ This includes guidance and practice on building relationships, starting spiritual conversations, how to tell your own story, how to share the basic gospel message and how to help friends cross the bridge of faith when the occasion presents itself. Other “know how” training programs are also available. Thus, practical tools for effective evangelism exist and the means to learn them are readily available. The sense of inadequacy can readily be converted to the sense that “I can do that.”

D. Deterrents Overcome

Reaching out to those who have not yet decided for Christ is fundamentally important to God, decisively impacts for eternity the persons we reach and fail to reach, vitally effects and benefits each of us in our Walk with Christ towards being *Fully Devoted Followers of Christ*, and critically affects our church and the vitality of the Congregational Way. The rationales deterring us from outreach (negative stereotypes of evangelists, the sense that I need to be something I’m not in order to evangelize, and the lack of know how) are fatally flawed. We are suited for and we can engage in effective outreach efforts.

Personal relationship evangelism is not only our responsibility; it is our great privilege, honor and joy to partner with God. Christ commands us to be a part of bringing people into God's eternal family. If any of us knew the cure for cancer, he or she would do everything to get the news out. It would save millions of lives. However, we already know something better. We've been given the gospel of salvation and eternal life to share with others.⁵⁰

V. CONGREGATIONALISM AND GROWING THE FAMILY OF CHRIST

Those of us “doing church” in the Congregational Way are confronted with a unique and glorious opportunity. The Congregational Way is particularly well suited to reach large segments of contemporary culture with the Gospel message. By being obedient to Christ’s commands,

⁴⁹ Mark Mittleberg, Lee Strobel and Bill Hybels (2007, Willow Creek Community Church).

⁵⁰ Warren at 104-105.

individual Congregationalists and Congregational churches have the opportunity to play a major role in growing the family of Christ. However, to do so, we must avoid the “tyranny of the urgent” and must integrate evangelism into the very fabric of all that we do. Church leaders must *make the mission purpose of evangelism clear, communicate it and live by it.*⁵¹

The same holds true for the Church and Development Division of the National Association of Christian Congregational Churches as it proceeds to implement its newly adopted mission statement based upon the Christ’s Great Commandment and Great Commission. Reinvigorated established churches and newly planted churches, instilled with these mission purposes (*worship, service, evangelism, discipleship and fellowship*) and equipped to carry them out – especially evangelism, will serve the advancement of God’s Kingdom through the growth of Christ’s family. The role of the CCDD is to encourage, advise, support, fellowship with, and equip existing and new Congregational churches to do so. If done, instead of being a small and declining segment of the Christian community, the Congregational Way can be re-transformed into a once again vital movement that will significantly impact the world within which we live by expanding Christ’s family and developing people into becoming FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST.

⁵¹ Mittleberg at 26.