

Excerpts

Excerpt from the Introduction

(pre-publication version)

“I don’t know how to minister anymore,” the senior pastor of a flagging mainline church lamented. “There was a time when faithfully preaching and teaching God’s word was enough. But no matter how much time I spend preparing and working to communicate the gospel, it just doesn’t seem to make any difference. And I know that I’m not alone, either. Most of my colleagues are just biding their time until they can retire.”

He looked down for a moment and then wearily continued, “It’s not that we don’t believe anymore, not even that we don’t care. It’s that we simply don’t know what to do and we’re tired—I’m tired—of beating my head against a brick wall.”

There is no denying it: ministry in the Protestant church at the beginning of the twenty-first century is difficult. A spirit of frustration and despair afflicts many of the church’s finest leaders. What once worked no longer appears effective, and many who are charged with the leadership of God’s people are at a loss as to what to do. Like a ship without a rudder, the church flounders in dangerous waters.

There is a vacuum of vision, of ideas and strategies with which to respond to the growing disparity between the life and ministry of the congregation and the real lives of people in our society. The connection between the faith of the church and the life of the people is strained to the breaking point, and harried pastors and lay leaders burn out at an alarming rate as they struggle to keep the church from losing all relevance in our postmodern world.

Christian leaders are looking for new, dynamic, and effective ways of being the church, ways that are faithful to the call of God and that will energize them and their ministries. Pastors and lay leaders are longing for a spiritual spark to ignite the passions of God’s people once again. This deep longing on the part

of Christian leaders is accompanied by a growing sense of urgency, a growing sense that the time may be running out on American Protestantism.

Pastor and sociologist Bill Easum, noted lecturer and student of the Protestant church internationally, has said, “Most mainline and established churches are dying because they only try to take care of their members. Three out of four will close over the next 25–30 years. . . . Most mainline churches are already irrelevant to the needs of postmodern people.”

Others have suggested that one-third of the more than 325,000 Protestant congregations in the United States will close their doors within the next decade. And that is a conservative estimate!

Excerpt from Chapter One

(pre-publication version)

It was one of those moments I’ll never forget. It happened on a Sunday in spring, and like the season, it too had to do with newness.

My associate pastor and I found we worked well together as a team, and our congregation’s membership was nearing one thousand people. We felt both grateful and confident. On this particular Sunday, however, I was in for a shock. As I looked out with pride on that growing, vibrant, worshipful congregation, I suddenly realized that there were individuals and families who were joining the church whose names I did not know, in whose homes I had not visited. I was stunned. I felt as if the world had changed overnight and I was just discovering it. I was shaken to the core, because my guiding model of ministry—that of being a personal pastor for each parishioner—was no longer viable.

My model for ministry also included focusing on church growth through increasing membership. Evangelism was a matter of bringing people into the church and then tending to their spiritual needs. But how could I do that if I didn’t even know them? My associate was very capable. He’d been in many of their homes and knew many of their names. But, as he later confessed, many he didn’t know well at all.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, my paradigm for ministry was being significantly challenged. That Sunday, with its sudden insight, was the beginning of my move from a focus on membership to a focus on discipleship.

My training had taught me only one way to do ministry and to judge its effectiveness—call it the membership model of ministry. If the membership was growing and happy—and they seemed to be—then my ministry was successful. The model with which I had been working wasn't all about numbers, though. I also assumed that the pastoral staff's effective pastoral care was a necessary element to our spiritual health and vitality. I assumed that personally knowing the names and families and, as much as possible, the histories of those who attended and joined our church was an essential element in my ministry. I taught confirmation, attended the women's lunches, played golf and racquetball with the men, led a number of Bible studies—all in an attempt to be a personal pastor to as many as possible.

In a growing church with more and more members to be served, this is a certain prescription for clergy burnout. The reason many churches don't grow—or stop growing—is that the pastoral staff reaches its limit for personal care and then, consciously or unconsciously, creates a climate and systems that discourage growth.

Roots of the Membership Model

For decades, the membership model of the church has dominated American Protestantism. That model lingers as an adaptation of the village church system that existed in premodern western Europe. In the village, the pastor or priest served as the holy man for the whole community. He was responsible for serving the spiritual and often material needs of parish families at important life passages, such as birth, confirmation, marriage, critical illness or injury, and death.

The relationships of individuals and families to God were mediated through the rites of the church as administered by the village pastor. The pastor received a certain amount of prestige and the power that goes with it—often a great deal, depending upon his abilities—and the people received the assurance of connectedness to God as the pastor shared the sacraments, led

worship, provided personal pastoral care, and in general tended to the spiritual life of the community.

To be a pastor or priest also was to be in the center of village life. A pastor's relationship to the village served as a cohesive force in the identity of the community, and the pastor often played an important role in affirming and upholding the identity of individuals and families as members of the church and citizens of the village itself. Beliefs, values, and behaviors were articulated by the clergy in ways that shaped the larger community as well as the church. As such, the ministry of the church and the role of the clergy functioned like social glue as well as a source of spiritual solace.

For many modern Christians, particularly in the post–World War II era, the membership model of the church functioned in an analogous way. The congregation provided social as well as spiritual connections. Church was a place to meet others with whom one could confidently do business, share friendship, and uphold similar values. There were clear understandings of what membership in such a community of faith required. It meant giving some of one's time and finances to keep the organization going and to pay the pastor's salary. It meant not only accepting that ministry belonged to the minister but also expecting to be ministered to. It meant acting in a manner consistent with conventional morality and appropriate behavior. Church membership was akin to good citizenship. It created a significant sense of personal identity, and with that came the confidence that the church was both preserving values that were necessary for the health of the larger community and nation as well as playing an important role in efforts to improve society.

No wonder the post–World War II years saw an explosion in the number of congregations in the United States. The successful completion of the war itself was understood to have been accomplished through a sturdy faith in God and the concerted effort of Americans working together for a common goal. The individual, it was understood, could make his or her best contribution by being a contributing member of a group, and the membership of the mainline churches grew exponentially.

Consider the following sobering statistics:

- 91 percent of all households in the United States own at least one Bible
- 80 percent of adults name the Bible as the most influential book in human

history

- Yet only 38 percent of adults read the Bible in any given week
- Only 25 percent of adults volunteer to help a church during a typical week
- 96 percent of adults believe in God
- 93 percent believe in the virgin birth
- Yet 39 percent say Jesus did not have a physical resurrection
- 61 percent say that the Holy Spirit is not real
- 56 percent say a good person can earn his or her way into heaven
- And still 72 percent of those polled say that they are church members

What is going on here? How has it happened? And what can we do about it? Why is biblical illiteracy rampant among those who call themselves Christian? Why does the Christian message, the good news of the gospel, not seem to get through? Why are all the mainline Protestant churches losing more and more of their members? Is Christian faith no longer relevant? Is the church no longer effective in meeting the real needs of real people? These are questions that trouble the hearts and minds of all who love and serve the Lord of the church. They are questions I shall address in this book.

Models of Church Affiliation

The world has changed faster than the church, and now it is time for the church to catch up and learn to speak and act in ways that the world can understand. The Christian message remains as true and relevant today as it has ever been. The gospel of Jesus Christ still answers to the deep hopes and fears, the realities and dreams of men, women, and children in each and every walk of life. In a pick-and-choose, mix-and-match spiritual marketplace, staggering in its diversity and complexity, Christian faith, Christian spirituality is not reducible to just one among many religious commodities. Christian faith is not an accessory to life. Rather it is a coherent way of life, a way of being in the world. It is the task of the church to teach and support this way of life, this life of the spirit, for the sake of individuals and communities.

The methods and strategies that effectively served to teach and support the life of faith in the past now seem outworn and unable to address the critical issues of our time. The church seems increasingly powerless, and we who serve the church in this challenging time wrestle like Jacob with the angel,

seeking a blessing, trying desperately to be and remain relevant, wondering where the needed power surge will come from.