The Ministry of the Missional Church

A Community Led by the Spirit

Craig Van Gelder
race in the Spirit's ministry (Rom. 8:10-17). In the midst of this God is for us (Rom. 8:32). The love of Christ, and there is neither “hardship, or distress, s, or peril, or sword” (8:35). Church living out a lifestyle of faith will not be exempt from this also includes the deeper “powers” themselves, that Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39). stry in the world to engage in and exercising justice, all the understood and mistreated, but s sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9).

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First Church recently celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary in serving as the only congregation of its denomination in the small, farming community of Russellville. The established white population of the community was continuing to decline, but interestingly, new growth was occurring in the area both from recreational development taking place at the nearby lake and from Asian immigrants who were taking jobs at the local turkey processing plant. Active members at First Church now numbered about eighty-five in worship, but the average age was sixty-five. It was becoming clear to the leadership that the congregation would likely experience significant decline in the next decade due to deaths, unless new persons could be reached. What strategy should they pursue?

St. Luke’s was a first-ring suburban congregation facing significant ethnic changes in its immediate neighborhood where many of its original members once lived. Most of the new residents were recent immigrants from Central and Latin America. This made the challenge of relating to the newcomers even more difficult for the members of St. Luke’s due to language as well as ethnic and cultural differences. For an extended period of time, there was mostly denial at St. Luke’s that things had really changed. But with a significant loss of membership over the past five years, the leadership was beginning to recognize that something needed to be done. They had few clues, however, regarding how to proceed. What strategy should they pursue?
New Life Community was a twenty-year-old congregation built around a seeker-friendly strategy that sought to attract primarily persons from among the late baby boomers (born in the mid-1950s into the 1960s). It grew to over 3,200 active worshipers during its short history, with this substantial growth requiring what seemed like constant change in leadership practices and organizational design. But now it was facing a different kind of change. The leadership recently began to track more carefully its growth patterns and realized that they were not reaching the next generation. It appeared that their basic model for ministry was largely generation-based around the late boomers. What strategy should they pursue?

The experiences of these congregations are typical of what thousands of congregations are encountering today. Contexts go through fundamental change, which require congregations to consider how they might respond. The tendency is to approach the challenge of contextual change primarily from the perspective of developing strategies. But unfortunately, the strategies employed by many congregations often tend to be either too late in response or too limited in scope. Congregations that successfully adapt to such fundamental change are few. Even those that are successful usually end up having their core identity substantially challenged and eventually changed. This often occurs largely by default rather than by design. It is the premise of this book that in the midst of this process of constant change taking place within congregational contexts a congregation needs to understand the ministry of the Spirit. God's intent often is to use such change either directly or indirectly to move a congregation in new directions of meaningful ministry under the leading of the Spirit.

Contexts Are Always Changing

It is critical for congregations to realize that contexts are always changing. This is the very nature of life. Congregations would be well served by staying on the front side of the curve in anticipating contextual changes so they could intentionally continue to recontextualize their ministries to address new conditions as they emerge. Unfortunately, this is all too often not the case.

The process of change taking place in congregational contexts can vary in both scope and speed. Some contexts tend to change slowly over a long period of time, such as through the natural aging cycle of a community. Other contexts go through rapid change where everything seems to be impacted, such as experiencing a turnover in the ethnic composition of the population. Congregations need to be prepared to address either type of change.

Some contexts change incrementally over time. Change in the context of most congregations until recent decades was usually incremental, being experienced over extended periods of time. This allowed for substantial continuity in ministry patterns and organizational forms over a period of several decades or in some cases over several centuries. But for many of these congregations, even though they were able to function for long periods of time with relative stability, the cumulative effects of incremental changes finally catches up with them.

The image is familiar to most of us of the small town church with its over a hundred-year-old building located just off of Main Street, as illustrated by the example of First Church in the opener. The average age of the majority of such congregations today is sixty years and up, usually due to children continuing to leave the community over the years. What is not so readily evident is that many of these seemingly dying congregations are located in communities where significant numbers of new persons are moving in. This is occurring in many rural areas due to retirement and recreation opportunities. It is also occurring in many rural areas where persons of color have moved in who are willing to take low-wage jobs in area agriculture and livestock processing plants. On the surface such congregations appear to be in inevitable decline and a slow death. In reality, new opportunities for mission and ministry await their engagement. The challenge is to act early enough while resources are still available to engage in such ministry. The failure to recontextualize ministry while incremental changes are taking place ultimately takes its toll with most of these congregations. They eventually either close or merge with other dying congregations.

Some contexts change dramatically. There are times in the life of the church when change is quite interruptive, where it occurs in a tumultuous manner. This is referred to as discontinuous change.
This type of change always brings substantive disruption into the life of a congregation, although there may be a delayed response to such a change by the congregation. There may be some early indicators that such changes are going to take place. But few congregations are prepared to read these signs in time to implement effective strategies to recontextualize their ministries. They usually end up reacting to the change, making inadequate adjustments long after the opportunity to connect with new people moving in has been lost.

Changes made in immigration policy by the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s allowed for a significant inflow of persons from Africa, Central and Latin America, and the Pacific rim. Many of the persons immigrating from these regions settled in urban areas during the past few decades, as illustrated in the example of St. Luke's in the opener. Substantial changes in the composition of the population of many neighborhoods and communities along ethnic-racial lines are continuing to take place all across the country. Many of the congregations that were developed to serve a predominately Anglo population now face the challenge of serving multicultural communities. Most of these congregations are struggling to respond. While congregations have the biblical mandate to recontextualize their ministries in such rapid times of change, few are able to do so. Of those that do, there are usually significant levels of disruption and pain.

Another way of experiencing rapid, discontinuous change is illustrated in the example of New Life Community. This is a church that is not tied to any particular neighborhood. It built its life around ministering to a specific population segment: late baby boomers. Changing cultural patterns between generations, however, are now making their ministry model obsolete for reaching the next generation. It will be difficult for them to make significant shifts in their ministry model without challenging their core identity, which has been built around the cultural preferences of a particular population segment.

Change as both helpful and harmful. Change is a mixed reality. In many cases where contextual changes, although initially disruptive, can actually benefit congregations and their ministries. The migration of persons from other ethnicities into the broader community that a congregation serves can actually invite a congregation to develop a missional imagination for serving and reaching the other.
same church of Jesus Christ? It is interesting to examine some of the strategies that congregations use in responding to changes taking place in their context. There are several approaches.

Relevance. Typical of many congregations is a strategy of seeking to incorporate new elements of the emerging cultural patterns into their ministries. This is a helpful instinct to pursue in terms of working at recontextualizing a congregation’s ministry as changes take place. However, this strategy can become problematic when it leads to a kind of faddishness. This is evident today among many congregations that are always seeking after what might be called the “new and the next”—e.g., adding a contemporary worship service, creating projection capability in the auditorium, moving to a spiritual gift-based deployment process, and so on.

Congregations pursuing such strategies are seeking new ways of doing church as they adapt yet one more time to the changing culture. This pattern is especially typical of many of the generation-targeted church planting strategies that have become popular in recent decades. Such efforts to be relevant are shaped largely by a congregation’s pragmatic desire to become effective and successful. Congregations often pursue this desire by drawing on the experiences of successful models, even though these exemplary congregations usually warn others against trying to do so. The most popular and influential current examples of this approach are provided through the various conferences sponsored by Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Church.

The tendency is to look for methods that work or to find models of ministry that can be applied in different locations. Most of these efforts are filled with good intent and usually are informed by biblical perspectives. But they often fall short of becoming adequately grounded in solid biblical and theological foundations. Also, they often fail to take into consideration insights from the historical Christian faith that could help guide them in responding to their changing context. For example, we now find generational, multicongregational congregations that segment the population around particular age groups. Lost in this strategy is something about the intergenerational nature of Christian community and insights into the faith that come from diversity being part of the makeup of God’s people.

Resistance. Many congregations, in the face of significant change in their contexts, try to stave off the change through strategies of resistance. While this impulse can be helpful up to a point, depending on the changes that are taking place this approach often takes on a reactive character. Typically, efforts are made to maintain the status quo or even, at times, to recover a former approach to ministry from another historical time. For example, some congregations continue to stress strict adherence to particular confessional standards as being the true interpretation of the faith. A quick read of church ads in the yellow pages in most cities illustrates that this is often the primary way such congregations convey (market) their image to those located in the context they seek to serve. For example, Trinity Lutheran—A Biblical, Traditional, and Liturgical Lutheran Church, or Fourth Reformed—A Congregation that Stands True to the Historic Confessions.

Such congregations seek to maintain their ministries by defining themselves over against other congregations that are perceived as having departed from the purity of the faith. Their stand in contrast to those congregations seeking to be contextual is what defines them over against the world in terms of what it means to be Christian in their particular context. The manifest logic used to justify resistance is that maintaining things the way they are is being faithful and obedient to the call and purpose of God. The embedded logic of this approach is that familiarity with our way of doing things is preferred and will be protected at all costs. Congregations taking this approach usually end up either becoming ingrown or fighting an endless battle of retrenchment.

Adaptation. A third pattern among some congregations is to seek a strategy of adaptation. The primary approach is to carefully consider cultural and contextual changes in light of the history and traditions of the congregation and the denominational tradition. This framework is then used to make selective adaptive changes in the congregation’s ministry that are in line with the heritage while seeking to be responsive to the changing context. This adaptation strategy, unfortunately, tends to be overly internal in focus and usually ends up making too few changes too late to be able to adequately address the changing realities of the context.

The bias of this approach tends to be toward privileging the tradition. While the tradition carries insights into how God’s truth was understood and applied in other contexts, the church that is being led by the Spirit recognizes that any tradition must be a living and dynamic reality and that it must take account of new contextual conditions. It
is a complex matter to sort out the dynamics of a living tradition in such a way that it can continue to adapt to new circumstances while also being faithful to the values embedded in the tradition. When we approach the church, however, there is a need to go deeper than any of these responses to changing contexts goes. It is the work of the Spirit that orchestrates the interaction between a congregation and the context in which it is located. The focus of the Spirit's ministry is always to lead the church into redemptive ministry that seeks to transform both human behavior and organizational life as the church participates in God's mission in the world.

**The Church as Always Forming and Reforming**

It is necessary to get beyond the limits embedded in the strategies of relevance, resistance, and adaptation. In those strategies, the church either tends to overcontextualize (relevance or adaptation) or undercontextualize (resistance) its identity within a particular context. A fundamentally different approach is required, one that represents the direction of ministry that is inherent to the Spirit-created and Spirit-led missional church. The alternative approach being proposed here is that the church is always both forming and reforming. This reinforces the logic that the church always needs to be both confessional (claiming and reclaiming its identity in relation to the historic Christian faith) and missional (engaging its context and continuously recontextualizing its ministry). The former inherent impulse was emphasized during the Protestant Reformation around the concept that the church is always reforming (ecclesia semper reformanda). This needs to be complemented by the other inherent impulse which has been developed around the concept of contextualization that the church is always forming (ecclesia semper formanda). When we place these two inherent impulses alongside one another, we have the following:

The church is always forming (missional)—ecclesia semper formanda.

The church is always reforming (confessional)—ecclesia semper reformanda.

This balancing couplet of ideas is the deeper truth about the church and the ministry of the Spirit that needs to be cultivated. It is a twopronged truth that draws together the better impulses of the other strategies and places them within a polarity. This polarity creates a dynamic and healthy tension between change and continuity as well as between mission and confession. The leading of the Spirit maintains the tension line between the challenge of recontextualizing a congregation's ministry in the midst of changes taking place in its location and in relation to the challenge of continuing to maintain the truths of the historic Christian faith as these are interpreted and understood by the congregation. The issue is really one of finding the right balance between the two logics of outside in and inside out. The first one deals with forming, while the latter one deals with reforming.

On the one hand, congregations are always forming, even as they are seeking to engage in reforming. This means that congregations seek to become contextual even while they seek to maintain the historic Christian faith—an outside-in logic. In doing so, they invite change even while they seek to maintain continuity. The ministry of the Spirit helps congregations engage in both processes simultaneously. This is a polarity, with the actions of one informing the actions of the other. In fact, a congregation's ability to effectively reform will usually be in direct relation to its ability to form a renewed identity in relation to a changing context.

On the other hand, congregations are always reforming, even as they are continuously forming. As noted above, this was one of the great insights of the Protestant Reformation. This insight represents an effort to make congregations more responsive to their heritage by focusing on the inside out. By recovering something from its past through reform, it is hoped that the church will become more responsive to its present. While this can be profoundly true, as demonstrated in the Protestant Reformation, the value of this insight can become misdirected if the focus becomes too inward on what has been and not enough on what now is. There needs to be a balance between the two.

An emerging emphasis today, as noted in chapter 1, is the conversation about the missional church. This represents a change of kind in approaching the issues of change and continuity. The missional church engages in several strategies simultaneously. This reflects its nature as being created by the Spirit. On the one hand, it is always
forming in relation to new contexts where it seeks to be relevant. It pursues this by reading this context through the lens of the gospel. This opens up new insights of how God is at work and seeking to be at work in that context. On the other hand, the missional church is always reforming in relation to the historical Christian faith. It pursues this by rereading the tradition through the lens of the gospel, especially in relation to new insights coming from the interaction of the gospel with a new context.

Understanding the ministry of the Spirit is foundational to understanding the missional church. It is the Spirit who creates the church and gives it a holy nature in the midst of its humanness. This duality is critical to understand, and it is helpful to reflect on it from a number of angles:

Church as seen from above: holy-divine-theological
Church as seen from below: human-historical-sociological

It is this same Spirit who leads the church into ministry in the world as the church lives out of its new nature. While always being shaped within the realities of its humanness, the missional church nevertheless lives by a different set of values and lives out of a different source of empowerment.

The reason the Spirit-led, missional church pursues both of these strategies—always forming and reforming—is because this is part of its very nature. As a community created by the Spirit, the church is missionary by nature. It carries within its DNA both the passion to engage the new while stewarding a proper understanding of the old. This understanding of the church also leads to a different understanding of how the church responds to change. The missional church is always both forming and reforming.

The Spirit-Led, Missional Church in Relationship to Gospel and Culture

The continuous forming and reforming of congregations introduces the dynamics of gospel and culture. This is the territory of the work of the Spirit in the life of congregations. One needs to begin with the Triune God as the creating God to understand fully the ministry of the Spirit in the relationship between gospel and culture. This God, who created all things, is the same God who seeks to redeem all things (2 Cor. 5:16-21). In fact, God is so passionate about this redemption that God chose to send God’s Son into the world to take on human flesh in order to bring about the world’s release from its bondage to sin. The gospel is good news for the sake of the world. This means that every context is a location where God seeks to be at work redemptively.

This commitment of God is addressed in one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith, which is that the Word became flesh (John 1:14). God chose to enter the created world in order to bring about the world’s release from its bondage to sin. The gospel is the good news of God’s redemptive intent in the world. We understand the functioning of this intent in light of God’s creation design even as we look forward to the final consummation of all things. As the church lives between the times, it understands its existence from three perspectives.

1. Creation and the missio Dei. God is a creating God who made all that is. God’s creation was designed for all of life to flourish. The creation is now fallen in the midst of the presence of sin. But God continues to work within all of creation through the ministry of the Spirit so that all of life may continue to flourish. This is often talked about in theology as the first use of God’s law. The law was given so that sin might be restrained, but it was also given so that all of life might flourish. God is passionate about wanting to bring back all things into right relationship. This brings our understanding of the missio Dei into relationship with the redemptive reign of God in Christ—what Jesus referred to as the kingdom of God. It is in this relationship that the cross meets the creation. This occurs first at the point of the complete falleness of the world and the gracious offer of the forgiveness of sins, and second at the point of bringing the possibilities of redemptive reconciliation to bear on every dimension of life within the world, so that we might have life abundant.

2. Re-creation and the kingdom of God. All things were created through Christ in relation to the work of the Spirit; so also, all things can be re-created through Christ in relation to the work of the Spirit. In redemption, the horizon of God’s passion is still the world. It is critical that the horizon of the cross be no less. When Jesus announced the
presence of the kingdom of God in his person and ministry, he had the whole world in view. The redemptive reign of God in Christ has as its horizon the possibility of bringing back every dimension of life into reconciled relationship with the living God. A proper understanding of the redemptive reign of God in Christ keeps a clear Christology at the center of God's redemptive work within all of creation.

Consummation and the already/not yet: The Spirit of God is moving all things toward God's final consummation and the new heavens and a new earth. The eschatological future of the redemptive power of God has already been released into the world through the work of the Spirit. As such, the church lives between the times. It is already living into the full reality of God's redemptive future—the already, even as it awaits the final consummation of the judging of sin and death—the not yet. A proper understanding of the already/not yet also keeps a clear eschatology at the center of God's works of creation and re-creation.

Each of these core perspectives of understanding the Spirit-led, missional church involves, of necessity, understanding culture in relation to the work of the Spirit. As discussed in chapter 2, the Spirit was the agent of God to bring the creation into existence, giving birth to both cultures and contexts. The Spirit is also the agent of God to bring the church into existence in the world for the purpose of experiencing salvation and fully living into the redemptive reign of God in Christ. Likewise, the Spirit is the agent of God to engage the reality of every cultural context with the reality of the redemptive reign of God in Christ and the church as God's new creation of community in the world. The amazing thing about this new community is that God's intent and purpose is (a) to bring together persons of diverse cultures and to form them into a new type of community, one that can find unity in the midst of diversity, and (b) to send this community into redemptive ministry within its context. The Spirit leads and teaches this church to engage the world, and in doing so the ministry of the Spirit is carried out in convincing the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11). In addressing sin, the Spirit leads the church to unmask the powers that deny life and corrupt human existence. In addressing righteousness, the Spirit leads the church to demonstrate before a watching world the possibilities of what it means to live as redeemed humanity. In addressing the presence of the kingdom of God in his person and ministry, he had the whole world in view. The redemptive reign of God in Christ has as its horizon the possibility of bringing back every dimension of life into reconciled relationship with the living God. A proper understanding of the redemptive reign of God in Christ keeps a clear Christology at the center of God's redemptive work within all of creation.

Relating the Work of God's Spirit in the World to Congregations in Particular Contexts

A congregation needs to proactively engage its context. Congregations need to systematically study their contexts to evaluate trends that are taking place. But more importantly, they need to look at their contexts through theological lenses to discern the work of God that is taking place. As noted earlier, change always brings with it new opportunities for ministry as well as challenges that must be addressed. Embedded in a changing context are two key questions that congregations need to regularly ask in relation to the contexts they seek to serve.

What Is God Doing?—The Issue of Faith and Discernment

The first question: What is God doing? This question requires faith and discernment. The world belongs to God. It is God's creation. The church must seek to discern what the Spirit of God is doing in relation to the dynamic changes that are taking place within a particular context. These activities of the Spirit often present fresh opportunities for ministry to congregations. This work of the Spirit in all of creation was presented in chapter 2 and is discussed in more detail in chapter 4 in relation to understanding the ministry of the missional church. For now it is sufficient to note that God is at work in the world beyond the church. Discerning this work of God is foundational for effective ministry. The church is called and sent to participate in God's mission in the world. The responsibility of the church is to discern where and how this mission is unfolding.

The church in Acts—conflict, disruption, interruption, surprise (faith and discernment). Interestingly, the expanded mission and growth of the church under the leading of the Spirit is characterized in the book of Acts as much by conflict, disruption, interruption, and surprise as it is by any planned strategy. This required the church to engage in discernment to interpret what was happening. The point in Acts
is clear: The Spirit empowers, teaches, and leads the church, even when the church fails to discern, understand, or engage the fuller purposes of God in living out its missionary nature. Examples of this stand out in the book of Acts, including (a) conflict between groups in the church that led to the recognition of the need to appoint more leadership (Acts 6); (b) a severe persecution that scattered the believers (Acts 8); (c) challenges to the dominant theology that came from the margins of the church at Antioch (Acts 11); (d) a conflict between Barnabas and Paul that led to the emergence of Paul as the primary leader (Acts 15); and (e) the Spirit redirecting the mission team to Macedonia through a vision (Acts 16).

In each of these cases, the church encountered significant change that was neither planned nor anticipated. No strategy was in place that directly led to the growth of the church from these influences. The church was led by the Spirit to move in new directions, which resulted each time in new growth taking place, although not without significant pain and disruption.

[What Does God Want to Do?—The Issue of Wisdom and Planning]

The second question: What does God want to do? Congregations need to ask on a regular basis in regard to the contexts they seek to serve, What does God want to do? This question requires wisdom and planning. God desires to bring all of life into reconciled relationship. The church must seek to understand how the intent of God, as expressed in the gospel, can work itself out in a particular context to contribute to this ministry of reconciliation. Changes taking place in a ministry context present challenges that the church must seek to address. This requires careful planning. This work of the Spirit is related to the redemptive activity of God in the world. For a church to be a steward of the good news of the gospel, it must engage in focused missional planning in considering how to participate in what God wants to do in a particular context.

The church in Acts—an intentional strategy (wisdom and planning). Within the Spirit’s leading of the church in the book of Acts, there are indications that some intentional strategies were used. Being sent necessitates making strategic choices. For example, the Twelve chose to go to the temple daily to proclaim the good news about Jesus, even when forbidden to do so. In a similar manner, Paul and those working with him made a regular practice of trying to win converts in the synagogues from among Jews of the Diaspora as the foundation for planting reproducing churches in key commercial centers of the various provinces of the Roman Empire. As churches were planted, they moved on to the next province, working their way westward.

The church’s use of an intentional strategy for evangelizing normally results in expanded mission and the growth of the church, although the church may be redirected at times in how a strategy is actually carried out. For example, Paul and his companions had an intentional plan to get to Ephesus in Asia on Paul’s second journey, but were redirected to Macedonia, where they continued with the same strategy of evangelizing persons from synagogues in major cities of key provinces as the basis for starting new congregations.

So then, two patterns are evident in the book of Acts. There is intentional, planned activity that leads to growth—a strategy as illustrated in the work of the apostles and Paul’s mission team. But there is also the Spirit’s leading of the church in or through conflict, disruption, interruption, and surprise into new and unanticipated directions that resulted in growth. When considering the ministry of the Spirit-led church, it is essential to utilize wisdom and planning to develop a strategy, but it is also essential to consistently exercise faith and discernment in the midst of unexpected change. A congregation experiences the leading of the Spirit through both processes.

The Gospel as Good News in Every Context

Every congregation is responsible to share the good news about Jesus Christ with others both verbally and through its actions. This responsibility is to be engaged in both corporately and individually by a congregation as it seeks to participate fully in God’s mission in the world. But to be good news, the gospel must make sense to those who are hearing it. It must embody the promise that is embedded in the incarnation—that the Word became flesh. In becoming flesh, Jesus Christ as the living Word became understandable, knowable, and accessible for all time and to all persons. The incarnation is a
helpful and foundational framework for understanding the inherent translatability of both the gospel and the church.

**Inherent Translatability of the Gospel**

Jesus as the incarnate Good News took on the particularity of his context. But even in his particularity, he retained his universal relevance. This is part of the mystery of the good news of Jesus Christ. In its particularity we find the promise and the reality of its universality. Just as Jesus, the living Word, took on the particularity of a specific context, so also the gospel of the good news about Jesus Christ is inherently translatable into every particular cultural context with a view toward being universally applicable. This means that it can become good news to everyone, everywhere, about everything in language and within cultural expressions that are understandable, knowable, and accessible. Through this translatability, this same gospel of good news invites persons to come to know the living and true God and to become enfolded into the worldwide church.

**Inherent Translatability of the Church**

Just as the gospel is inherently translatable to every cultural context, so also the church is inherently translatable in the same way. The church that is professed as being catholic, as stated in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, is able to find expression everywhere. This same church, then, has the inherent ability to live every place, to become contextual within any and every setting. The church that is missionary by nature inherently seeks its contextuality—it seeks to become responsive within and adaptive to every context in which it finds itself.

These premises regarding the inherent translatability of the gospel and the church have profound implications for mission and evangelizing. The church is responsible to translate the good news of the gospel along with its own organizational reality into every cultural context that it encounters. To do so requires that the church plan strategically for this work even as it seeks to discern the leading of the Spirit. As noted in the book of Acts, this often comes through conflict, disruption, interruption, and surprise as much as it does through planning and strategy. Through strategy as well as through discernment, the church must engage the principalities and powers of every context with the redemptive power of God. This leads to the importance of understanding the inherent aptitudes of the Spirit-led, missional church.

**Aptitudes of Spirit-Led, Missional Congregations in Context**

The Spirit of God not only creates the church by calling it into existence, the Spirit of God also leads the church by sending it into the world to participate fully in God's mission in all of creation. This means that congregations are missionary by nature. This Spirit-created missionary nature provides congregations with certain inherent aptitudes that need to be cultivated so that Spirit-led ministry can be expressed. The following seven aptitudes represent dimensions of how the Spirit-created church is to live out Spirit-led ministry.

1. **Aptitude 1**: Spirit-led, missional congregations learn to read a context so they seek their contextuality. It is critical that congregations develop the ability to read a context. This is an aptitude that is inherent within the church being missionary by nature. This means that a church that is Spirit-led will always seek to be contextual wherever it is located. To do so faithfully and effectively, the church must understand its context. The importance of this aptitude has become increasingly recognized in recent years, and many tools have been developed to assist congregations in this task. The key point, however, is that the reading of the context should not be limited to its demographics and sociology. It should also include a theological reading of this data. This is where the faith-and-discernment task of answering the question, What is God doing? comes into play. This analysis of the context also brings the other responsibility into focus, that of wisdom and planning, which asks the question, What does God want to do?

2. **Aptitude 2**: Spirit-led, missional congregations anticipate new insights into the gospel. As the gospel engages new cultures within various contexts, Spirit-led, missional congregations anticipate new insights into understanding the fuller meaning of the gospel. The act of translating the Bible into new vernacular languages often opens up fresh understandings regarding the meaning of the gospel. This
is illustrated in the New Testament when the gospel was translated into a Hellenistic worldview at Antioch. The Hellenized version of understanding the gospel helped break Jewish Christianity out of its provincialism and later became the normative expression of the faith for centuries to come.9

Lamin Sanneh makes this same point regarding the translation of the gospel into the African context. In spite of all the transplanted Western forms, the gospel found its indigenous voice within the cultures of the African peoples as new expressions of the faith and new forms of churches emerged.10 This aptitude of missional congregations anticipating new insights into the gospel is related to these same congregations always forming within their context. In doing so, fresh resources for understanding the faith are often released.

**Aptitude 3: Spirit-led, missional congregations anticipate reciprocity.** One of the interesting things about the ministry of the Spirit is that over time the gospel often brings about reciprocity. Reciprocity occurs when the cultural group that brings the gospel into a different context is itself changed over time by those who received the gospel. An example of this in the book of Acts is Peter’s encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10). This story is as much about the continuing conversion of Peter as it is about the conversion of Cornelius. Another example is the spillover effect of the persecution described in Acts 8 that resulted, seemingly circumstantially, in the development of the Gentile church in Antioch (Acts 11). Given time, the gospel that was proclaimed at Antioch as “salvation by grace through faith plus nothing” came to be accepted as the gospel of the entire church (Acts 15).

In the latter example, what began on the margins came to the center. This is often the case with reciprocity. An example of this in the U.S. today is evident through many of the newer immigrant communities. Coming from churches in what were former foreign mission fields, many new immigrant congregations are now relocating within established Anglo communities, both urban and rural. These congregations are inviting a deeper level of understanding the gospel’s call for reconciled unity between Christians. Many are also bringing their own missionary activity into the U.S., where they view their new location as being in need of hearing the gospel, once again, for the first time.

**Aptitude 4: Spirit-led, missional congregations understand they are contextual and, therefore, are also particular.** Our language illustrates this point whenever we refer to a congregation as a local church. “Local” means that, of necessity, a congregation is particular to its time and place. While it is also catholic, bearing the full marks of the church universal and the historic Christian faith, it is profoundly local in contextualizing these realities to the community it seeks to serve.

This local-catholic dynamic means that there is always a certain provisional character about the church as it lives within a context. As contexts change, the church should expect to change, even as it attempts to live out the tension inherent in being faithful to the gospel while also being responsive to the context. This point introduces the important issue of how models function in relation to congregations. In reality, there can be no model congregation. While there can be illustrative examples of contextualized congregations that might help inform others, no congregation can function as a model for others to replicate. It is important to remember that it is the work of the Spirit to lead a congregation to contextualize itself within its particular location.

**Aptitude 5: Spirit-led, missional congregations understand that ministry is always contextual and, therefore, is also practical.** Missional congregations understand that the practice of ministry is always normed by Scripture, but they also understand that this takes place in the particular contexts that they serve. Just as a congregation is always contextual, so also its ministry is always contextual. The Spirit leads congregations within particular contexts. Ministry can only take place in relation to a particular context, and as ministry takes place specific practices are developed for that context.

This particularity of ministry means that all forms of Spirit-led ministry are going to reflect the patterns and shape of the culture in which a congregation is ministering. The necessary practices that are developed are the practical outworking of this ministry. This introduces the important issue of how programs function in relation to congregations. In reality, there can be no common program that works the same in each congregation and context. While a basic programmatic framework might inform the development of ministry, each congregation is best served by thinking carefully about how such a...
program needs to be adapted to best fit its particular ministry and the context being served.

Spirit-led, missional congregations understand that doing theology is always contextual and, therefore, is also perspectival. Congregations articulate their confessed faith in what is generally referred to as “theology.” This understanding is shaped by historical, confessional perspectives, but Spirit-led, missional congregations understand that these perspectives have embedded within them elements of the culture and context in which they were formulated. While theological expressions bear witness to the larger reality of God’s truth, they must always be understood as reflecting a particular time and place. The theological expressions of a particular time and place can still have relevance for many other contexts, but there is always a need to engage in interpreting and translating them when moving from one context to another.

This introduces the important issue of how confessions function in relation to congregational life. In reality, there can be no universal confession. Every congregation needs to learn how to confess the faith within its particular context. While congregations need to draw on historical confessions to engage in confessing the faith, they need to actively engage in translating the themes and insights of historical confessions in order to address the issues within their own contexts.

Spirit-led, missional congregations understand that organization is always contextual and, therefore, is also provisional. A Spirit-led, missional congregation develops organizational forms to carry out its ministry and to structure its life. It must be understood that these forms bear the imprint of particular contexts. Organization in congregations is, therefore, always contextual and provisional in character. While there are biblical principles that function across a wide range of contexts, the particular forms that emerge must be seen as being particular to specific contexts. This is part of the good news of the gospel, that congregations are able to relate to any culture and to any context.

The challenge is to allow the leading of the Spirit to give birth to forms that are informed by the historic Christian faith, while also reflecting the realities of the context in which congregations are located. This introduces the important issue of how polity is to function in relation to congregations. In reality, there can be no standardized polity. Polity needs to focus more on guiding principles rather than prescribed practices. This is because polities need to be adaptive and flexible in consciously taking context and culture into consideration in the midst of the ongoing processes of forming and reforming.

Summary

The leading of the Spirit always takes place in relation to specific contexts. This means that the leading of the Spirit involves the church learning to be in ministry within a specific context. It is important to understand how the church came to be contextualized within the specific context of the U.S. It is also important to explore the issue of how the church can sometimes become overly contextualized. The next chapter examines these issues and contrasts them with an understanding of the Spirit-led, missional church.
A conversation emerged among several pastors from diverse denominations at the monthly luncheon for area pastors about how authority is best exercised in the church. Pastor David, a Baptist, wanted to know how anyone could submit to the authority of a bishop. Pastor Lydia, an Episcopalian, responded by inquiring how congregations could ever hope to have any sense of shared identity without some type of central authority. Pastor Carol, a Presbyterian, noted that she agreed with the importance of having central authority but that this functioned best when lodged within a representative body rather than one person. Pastor John, a United Methodist, observed that authority seemed to function best when there was a central person with authority that functioned in relation to a representative body.

As the conversation unfolded, Pastor Bill, an ELCA Lutheran, finally observed that views on authority seemed to be as diverse as the number of denominations that were represented. He went on to inquire, "How did we get to this point, where we have so many different denominations?"

Most Christian congregations in the U.S. reflect in their identity, either directly or indirectly, something of the unique circumstances surrounding the emergence of the church during the colonial pe-
riod and the uniting of the states into a national government.

This follows the point developed in chapter 3 that the church under the leading of the Spirit seeks to become contextual and therefore takes on characteristics of its cultural context. However, one of the challenges facing the church is that it can become overly contextualized within a particular cultural context. This is one of the reasons why the church is always in need of reforming, even while it engages in forming new practices in relation to continued changes in its context. As the church in the U.S. has formed and reformed over the past several centuries, a wide variety of organizational expressions have come into existence. All of these need to be understood as being part of the visible church in this context.

The Variety of Organizational Expressions of the Visible Church in the U.S.

The visible church is that church which can be found within the world at any point in time, and which consists of all the rich diversity of people and organizational expressions of the church that exist. What is important to note is that the catholicity of the church assumes its contextuality. In other words, if the church is able to exist everywhere, then it must be able to become contextual in every place. The inherent diversity of organizational expressions within the contextualized catholicity of the church is not only to be expected, it is also to be valued. This is an affirmation that in the midst of being many, the church is also one. So also, the inherent unity within this diversity is also to be expected and valued. Unfortunately, the church seems to find that expressing its diversity is an easier purpose to pursue than cultivating its essential unity. In order to gain some perspective on the complexity of this challenge, it is helpful to map the various organizational expressions that can be found in the visible church in the U.S.

Congregations. The most common expressions of the church in the world are the gathered communities of faith that we have come to know as congregations. They come in all shapes and sizes and express an incredibly wide range of both theological understandings and organizational forms.

Regional judicatories. Most congregations are organized as a part of something larger than themselves. Typically, they relate to other congregations of their denomination within a geographic area in some type of official church body such as a presbytery, synod, diocese, conference, or association.

Larger assemblies and denominations. Most regional judicatories are part of a larger organizational structure. Typically, these are built around some type of theological tradition and historical polity—e.g., Reformed, Lutheran, Charismatic, Baptist, Mennonite, Catholic, or Orthodox.

Boards and agencies. Every denomination of any size has created some internal organizational structures, usually agencies under board governance, to carry out various ministries. Most denominations continue to struggle with integrating the role and authority of such internal agencies and boards with the authority of the larger assemblies.

Parachurch organizations. Outside the formal structures of denominations are found a wide range of parachurch organizations. Most of these have a specialized focus in terms of their purpose and ministry, as is evident in organizations such as Young Life, Campus Crusade for Christ, Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Youth with a Mission.

Emerging associations and networks. Still other regional or associational connections function as networks, where congregations participate primarily in terms of sharing information or resources. A good example of this today is the Willow Creek Association with its over eleven thousand member congregations.

Movements and Conversations. Yet one more organizational expression of the visible church is what might be best defined as a movement or a conversation. A movement or conversation takes on a shared life among large numbers of persons in terms of purpose and support but without necessarily any formal commitments being made. Examples of some movements include Right to Life, Promise Keepers, and study courses offered through Alpha; an example of a conversation is the emerging church.

These diverse expressions of the visible church in the U.S. context represent various historical developments that have taken place. When considering the contextual character of congregations in the U.S., it is helpful to have some perspective regarding how these various
organizational structures came into existence. The focus in what follows will pay primary attention to the emergence of the denominational, corporate church with its numerous congregations, but the forces which shaped this type of church also helped to give birth to the other organizational expressions noted above. And all of these organizational expressions share a similar genetic code.

It was in the milieu of the colonial setting and the formation of the United States that the modern expression of the denominational church emerged. This represented a substantially new understanding of the church at that time, one that to this day continues to dramatically shape our understanding of congregations. While congregations can be classified through a wide array of types, what is interesting about the vast majority of Christian congregations in the U.S. is one characteristic they tend to share in common. At the core of their identity, what might be labeled as a part of their genetic code, is an organizational self-understanding related to a purposive intent. This tends to lead to a functional or instrumental view of the church where a congregation’s primary identity is related to it being responsible to accomplish something. This functional ecclesiology (instrumental view of the church) of an organizational self-understanding (church viewed primarily from an organizational perspective) related to a purposive intent (church understood as needing to do something) is at the heart of the identity of what is being referred to here as the corporate church.

This understanding of the church is quite different from two other ways in which the church can be conceived. One is the established church where the church’s self-understanding is that it serves as the primary location of God’s presence and activity in the world. This conception of church came into existence in the fourth century with the establishment of Constantinian Christendom and continues to this day within many Catholic countries and in a variety of Protestant state churches. The other is the missional church where the church’s self-understanding is that it is a social community created by the Spirit that is called and sent to participate fully in God’s mission in the world. These three self-understandings provide the framework for thinking further about the responsibility of congregations to be Spirit-led as they become contextual. First, the differences between the established church and the corporate church will be developed, along with an overview of the historical development of the corporate church. This will be followed by a discussion of the differences between the corporate church and the missional church. The chart below sets up these two points of comparison, and what follows will explain these different understandings of the church.

### Established Church versus Corporate Church

The self-understanding of the corporate church is quite different from the self-understanding of the established church that emerged within Europe in relation to Constantinian Christendom. Congregations within established churches, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, carry a self-understanding of being the institutional expression of the geographical location of God’s presence on earth as the one, true church. While they have an organizational makeup, the key to their legitimacy within their self-understanding is that this existence represents the primary horizon of God’s activity in the world. The problems associated with this understanding became painfully evident in the wars of religion that raged throughout Europe from the late 1500s into the early 1600s. The eventual “solution” that was rendered—whose realm, whose religion—ended those hostilities but left unresolved the core self-understanding of the established church.

This is reflected in the continued efforts most established churches made in persecuting other expressions of the church—what they labeled as sects. Such “sects” were understood to be illegitimate.

Interestingly, immigrants from the European state churches as well as immigrants from among many of the sects persecuted by them began to settle after 1600 in the colonies of what eventually became the United States. Here they found that a different core
identity was required to give legitimacy to the church. This alternative conception came into existence around an organizational self-understanding related to a purposive intent, what is being referred to here as the corporate church. By the mid-to-late 1700s, this view became the normative understanding of the newly forming denominations and their congregations in the colonies. Since then, the corporate church has gone through several phases of development over the past two hundred plus years, but the basic genetic code of its self-understanding remains at the center of its identity.

Formation of the Corporate Church

The introduction above provides a basic framework for understanding the difference between the established church, the corporate church, and the missional church. However, to gain a deeper understanding of these differences, it is useful to review the historical development of the formation of the corporate church. The basic premise is that the corporate church finds its primary identity within an organizational self-understanding in relation to a purposive intent. As also noted above, this understanding leads us to think about the church primarily, though not necessarily exclusively, in functional terms where the church is responsible to do something. This is often expressed as being out of obedience to accomplish something on behalf of God in the world (e.g., being obedient to carry out the Great Commission). It is important to note that the formation and development of the corporate church has been dynamic over time. The five phases of the formation of the corporate church within denominational church life in the U.S. are summarized below.10

The Colonial Experience, 1600s–1780s

The formation of the American colonies was the result of diverse interests. Some were economic, some were political, some were social, but embedded in the colonial experience some motives were also deeply religious. Many of the more radical sectarian groups in Europe immigrated to the colonies to secure their religious freedom. Some of these groups, such as the Puritans in the New England colonies, attempted to set up their own version of what might be identified as a type of state church, which some, as Sydney E. Ahlstrom notes, have inappropriately labeled as a theocracy.11 But dissenting groups within these colonies soon challenged this approach, such as the Baptists in Rhode Island. While the Congregationalists (former Puritans) created an established church in the New England colonies, the seeds of religious diversity in these areas were planted and began taking root by the early 1700s.12

Joining the various immigrant groups of sectarian dissenters were numerous immigrants from the state churches of Europe, especially of English Anglicans but also the Scottish Presbyterians, the Dutch Reformed, and the German and Scandinavian Lutherans. In addition, Roman Catholic immigrants also settled into some areas, especially the colony of Maryland. Although the Anglicans established a territorial, parish-church system in most of the southern colonies, by the early 1700s these areas were also experiencing the reality of religious diversity.13

This shared experience of religious diversity throughout the colonies required a new imagination for how to conceive of the church and how to organize congregations. The established identity of a state church that allowed it the privilege of persecuting other Christian sects was obsolete almost from the beginning. However, it took time for this view to be fully deconstructed, and vestiges of it even lingered into the early 1800s in several New England states after the decision to separate the church and the state.14 A new identity was required in the face of the rise of religious diversity, a diversity that was most prevalent in the middle colonies (New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware). It was in these colonies that a new identity was first formulated.15

The formation of this new identity, what is here being identified as the corporate church with an organizational self-understanding related to a purposive intent, resulted primarily from the coalescence of two movements. One movement was the development of free-church ecclesiology as the norm for understanding the church within the colonies. This ecclesiology had emerged over against the European state churches from among the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists conceived of the church primarily in terms of being a gathered social community of persons who possessed the freedom to associate and the right to govern their own affairs.16 While many churches in the colonies brought with them the ecclesiologies and polities of their Eu-
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European state churches, the new context of religious diversity required adjustments almost from the beginning. 17 The primary adjustment made by all toward the end of the 1700s, given the colonial separation of church and state, was the adoption of some form of a free-church ecclesiology. This was done either as the formal ecclesiology or at least as an overlay on the previous established, state-church ecclesiology.

A second movement that contributed to the formation of the corporate church also emerged in the context of the colonial experience. The recently arrived European immigrants had to construct a new social order. While many patterns of European society were carried by the immigrants into the colonies, new social constructions were also required. One important feature of the new society in the colonies was the voluntary association. 18 By the early 1800s, Alexis de Tocqueville would identify this characteristic as one of the more unique features of the emerging American society. 19 The rich fabric of voluntary associations within the colonies included many that were secular in origin and others that were religious. Some of the religious voluntary organizations were shared between various church bodies, while others served the needs of particular churches. This set of organizational structures reflected the democratic principles that were being nurtured in the colonies as well as the natural extension of the logic of free-church ecclesiology. These structures deeply impacted the genetic code of the corporate church that was emerging. 20

The outlines of the corporate church were coming clearly into focus by the mid-1700s. The call for independence and the Revolutionary War cemented its formation. In the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, which was proposed in 1789, a provision was made for the legal separation of church and state. 21 No church would be established. Every church would be protected to practice religious freedom. The organizing principle of denominationalism was affirmed with this decision, which gave impetus to the further development of the corporate church. Within the last two decades of the 1700s, representatives of numerous church bodies in the newly formed United States met to form national organizations. 22 This brings us to the next phase of the development of the corporate church.

The Purposive Denomination, 1790-1870

The newly formed denominations were unique. As noted by church historian Martin Marty, they represented a unique turning point in the history of the church, one which departed from the previous 1,400 years of the church's self-understanding as an established church. 23 The denominational, organizational church—the early version of the corporate church—was a unique creation within the American setting. Largely, the denominational, organizational church was the pragmatic result of a variety of circumstances and events. Interestingly, although some historical precedents were available, these developments were usually rationalized biblically and theologically after the fact, if at all. 24 By 1800, most of the newly formed denominations had created assembly structures at three levels—a national assembly, regional judicatories, and local congregations.

The use of the word denomination to describe initially the churches in the colonies and later in the U.S. came from the term given to alternative forms of church with the adoption of the Act of Toleration in England in 1689. 25 The inherent logic of a denomination is that it is organized to do something, normally with a focus on doing something on behalf of God in the world. It has an organizational self-understanding related to a purposive intent which means it must do something in order to justify its existence. It is essentially functional, or instrumental in its identity and purpose. This follows the logic of organizational sociology where organizations, once formed, seek to accomplish some goal. 26 While this meaning of organization was also true of the established church, it was not the primary characteristic of the self-understanding of that church. The corporate church represents a significant shift away from the identity of the established church that understood itself as the primary location of God's presence and activity in the world. Building on the foundations of free-church ecclesiology, denominations and their congregations were formed around a functional and organizational rationale for their existence.

A significant challenge faced the newly forming denominations in the late 1700s and early 1800s as the frontier opened up beyond the Allegheny Mountains. In response, the various denominations geared up to bring the church to this expanding frontier as settlers poured through the passes into the hinterland. This challenge represented a worthy goal that needed to be addressed.
Inspired largely in the early 1800s by the revivals of the Second Great Awakening on the frontier, the congregations of different denominations developed a variety of methodologies to carry out their functional purpose of bringing the church to these new regions. Methodologies such as camp meetings, anxious benches, itinerant preachers, and Sunday schools became the order of the day.27 Conflicts over the use of such measures were not uncommon, and even led to a split between the Old School and New School Presbyterians in 1837,28 This expanding work on the frontier required new organizational structures at the national level of these denominations. Paralleling this work was the rapidly growing interest in what became known as foreign missions.29 By the 1830s, what had earlier been committees or boards that were made up of active pastors and lay leaders became formal, denominational agencies at the national level, which had permanent staff.30 The purpose of such agencies was to plan for and coordinate the expanding ministries of domestic and foreign missions, along with such emerging ministries of Christian education and publishing houses.

These newly formed denominational agencies, with their representative boards, reflected the logic of what had been either a mission society in Europe (see William Carey31) or the mutually shared, Christian voluntary organizations in the U.S.32 Such extrachurch structures have today come to be known as parachurch organizations. Once again, they were largely the creation of organizational structure out of pragmatic necessity rather than being the result of careful reflection on ecclesiology and polity. They were not without controversy in some denominations,33 but most every denomination followed this pattern during the early 1800s. The biggest question left unresolved in their formation was the relationship between the formal denominational agencies to the previously formed assembly structures of the new national denominations.

The initial logic of the corporate church had vested its self-understanding within its representative assemblies at the national, regional, and local levels. Now a new organizational dimension was placed into the mix—the denominational agency with its representative board. Which would lead? Which was to be subordinate? It soon became clear that the assembly structures would maintain primary control. This was largely the result of the translated polities from European state churches that had built vertically structured organizational assemblies within their contexts of having domain. In such contexts, they did not have the need to develop the horizontal missionary structures that became common in the U.S. A clear example of this can be seen in the development of mission structures by the Presbyterian Church in the early 1800s, when first a board was added and later an agency to engage in mission work. A substantial theological argument was offered for making boards and their agencies subservient to the assemblies, but this argument largely assumed the backdrop of the state church pattern of assembly.34

By the mid-to-late 1800s, the modern organizational, denominational church had become the norm for church life in the U.S. Congregations of a particular denomination usually differentiated their existence from others primarily in terms of theological and confessional distinctives. These distinctives were also related to the different polities of the Congregational (autonomy of the local church to govern its life), Presbyterian (representative governing body beyond the congregations), and Episcopal (government by bishops) forms of church government. But underneath these theological, confessional, and polity differences lay a common genetic code. The corporate church was now the common reality for most denominations—at the national, regional, and local levels and within their boards and agencies.

The Churchly Denomination, 1870-1920

Coming out of the Civil War, most denominations began to develop a more elaborate infrastructure as the frontier rapidly filled in and as cities began to grow. By the latter part of the 1800s, another phase in the development of the corporate church became discernible. Refined methodologies for developing new congregations were developed as existing congregations came to be supported in new ways.35 During this time, most churches began to take on a more programmatic approach to their ministries. In education, standardized curriculums for the expanding Sunday school systems were formed and put into place by denominational publishing houses.36 Denominational youth ministries came into existence by the late 1800s, often patterned after the parachurch ministry of Christian Endeavor.37 By the turn of the century, especially in the new urban congregations,
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...one began to see such programmatic activities as the construction of extensive educational buildings that accommodated classes for instruction broken down by age and gender, the formation of robed choirs, the provision of a variety of recreational facilities for family activities, and the development of church libraries. In effect, a total church program was being put into place that would deal with members from cradle to grave. 38

Also during this period an increasing number of ministers were becoming seminary trained, leading to a growing professionalization of the clergy. Related to this development was the increased importance of seminaries within denominational church life. In the midst of these changes, denominations were becoming complex, organizational systems with multiple boards and agencies at the national level. Over time, these national-level structures began to find their counterparts at the regional level, and even to some extent at the local level, where organized committees tended to parallel the design of the national church. The churchly denomination was now a reality and new approaches to governing them were being required. 39

The Corporate Denomination, 1920–1970

While the suggested date that divides the previous phase from this current phase is somewhat arbitrary, a discernible shift became evident within denominational church life during the first decades of the twentieth century. As noted above, the growing complexity of the churchly denomination required new ways for structuring and managing the church. Interestingly, during this period of time the newly emerging field of organizational management was gaining influence. Although several sources were involved in the formation of this new social science discipline, the most important for denominations in the U.S. was the stream stemming from Frederick Taylor and what became known as Scientific Management. 40 This movement focused on bringing productivity and efficiency into the business organization. It did so by de-skilling tasks, organizing similar work activities into functional units, and building coordination systems through the establishment of hierarchical bureaucracy.

This movement found a voice in the emerging world of complex, churchly denominations through the work of Shailer Mathews, dean of the Chicago School of Divinity, who in 1912 published Scientific Management in the Churches. The focus was on treating the church as "something of a business establishment." 41 The increasingly rationalized world of the modern bureaucracy began to become the norm for denominational church life. Boards and agencies at the national level increasingly adopted corporate forms of organization and management as the number of departments was expanded and more staff were increasingly added.

By the end of World War II, when the rapidly growing suburbanization of the church took place, the corporate denomination was well positioned to wage the campaign of starting new corporate congregations in cooperation with their corporate judicatories. High birth rates for over two decades (the baby-boom generation from 1946–1964), an expanding middle class, increasing levels of education, the mass-produced automobile, three-dollar-a-barrel oil, a newly expanding interstate highway system, and the creation of the thirty-year fixed-rate mortgage all contributed to making the suburbs become the new destination of choice. 42 Migration from both the central cities and rural areas fed the growth of these suburbs. Continued high levels of denominational loyalty during this period allowed for the rapid growth of suburban congregations among almost all denominations.

Thousands of organizational, denominational congregations were started. The logic of the corporate church was now coming to full expression as the good life of the American dream was packaged and commodified as the suburban ideal. 43 It was an ideal to which millions aspired but which was mostly realized by the emerging white middle class. The darker side of this suburban success was what Gibson Winter labeled in 1962 as the "suburban captivity." 44 With its profound success during the two and half decades from 1945–1970, the denominational, organizational, suburban congregation extended the logic of the organizational self-understanding of the corporate church to a new level.

The primary logic of the previous city-neighborhood congregation had continued to be a mixture of intergenerational relationships that operated in the midst of an increasing programmatic structure that was fed by the denominational agencies. But in the suburban congregation people's relationships became largely functional, becoming tied to attendance at a variety of activities rather than being rooted...
primarily in a shared sense of social community. This shift was partially the result of increased rates of mobility in society and the difficulty of developing sustained relationships. Here a corporate identity came to be established primarily around shared programmatic activities. It is interesting that the small group movement began to emerge during this time to try to bring some sense of social community back into congregational life. The organizational, program phase of the corporate church was now in full bloom. What is also interesting is how rapidly this type of congregational understanding of the corporate church imploded in the midst of the dramatic cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s.

A whole range of movements define this transitional period—e.g., the civil rights movement, the youth movement/counterculture, the feminist movement, the ecological movement, and the anti-war movement, among others. But what is important to note is the rapid collapse of institutional identity among the emerging generation. The boomer generation left the church in greater numbers than any previous generation and came back in fewer numbers. The starting of new congregations by denominations as franchise models came to a screeching halt by the mid-1970s. Standardized, denominational educational curriculums went into decline and most were out of business by the 1980s. In the midst of these dramatic changes, the corporate church entered into yet another phase of development.

The Regulatory Denomination and Emerging New Networks, 1970 to Date

There have been two primary shifts taking place since the 1970s. On the one hand, the more traditional denominations, especially mainline denominations, have struggled to maintain their viability. On the other hand, a whole new pattern of emerging networks have begun to come into existence, which portray many of the patterns of denominations but which are also quite different in other ways.

Traditional denominations. Many traditional denominations, especially those known as the mainline, are now in substantial decline. While some of the more conservative or evangelical denominations are still growing, many of the forces of change impacting the mainline are also affecting their ministries. Revenue to national church offices is dramatically down, which in turn has led to continued downsizing of national agencies and churchwide staff. The median age of members of most mainline denominations now exceeds the national median age in many cases by twenty or more years (fifty-five and older versus thirty-five). In the midst of these changes in the mainline denominations, some of those that are more conservative have shown growth, and a new movement of independent congregations is now rapidly expanding.

Clearly, we are currently in a period of transition in the life of the corporate church in the U.S. From the 1960s through the 1990s, new movements emerged that tried to give direction in the midst of the changes that were taking place, all of them working primarily from a functional ecclesiology of an instrumental view of the church. The church renewal movement of the 1960s and early 1970s focused on trying to make existing structures more relevant to a new generation in the midst of a rapidly changing context. The church growth movement of the 1970s and early 1980s placed emphasis on evangelism and focused largely on pragmatic technique. By the 1980s and early 1990s, the church effectiveness/health movement brought the wider range of a social science, organizational perspective to bear on trying to manage and lead congregations through renewal and growth in the midst of change.

In the midst of these movements, a host of market-driven models of church, or what some have labeled as "mission-driven," came into existence. The seeker-church phenomenon pioneered by Willow Creek Community Church is probably the most influential, especially as it came to be operationalized into the purpose-driven church by Saddleback Church under the leadership of Rick Warren. At the heart of these various market-driven or mission-driven models is a theology of the Great Commission where mission is understood primarily as something the church must do, which reinforces a functional view of the corporate church within its organizational self-understanding related to a purposive intent.

Declining denominations have not been immune to these recent movements as they struggle to reinvent the logic of the corporate church. Many have created internal versions of similar programmatic approaches. But overall, the corporate church within denominational church life has tended to become more regulatory in character. When denominational loyalty is lost, one of the options available is to turn to rules and procedures to seek compliance. Another option avail-
able is to try to reinvent the core identity. But the genetic code of the corporate church has yet to be sufficiently examined to allow for this. Those who have gone this route tend to still work inside of the same assumptions of a functional approach to ecclesiology and polity, a view that gave birth to the corporate church to begin with.\(^6\)

Emerging new networks. There is clearly a new pattern in how many congregations now express their understanding and practice of the catholicity of the church, i.e., of being a part of the larger whole. A whole series of associations and networks have emerged in recent decades, usually around shared interest. These have become most apparent in relation to the rapid growth of what are referred to as the megachurches (e.g., Willow Creek Association\(^7\)), along with the recent development of the emerging church (e.g., Emergent Village\(^8\)). We now find new patterns of associating and networking among congregations that cut across denominational lines and represent a wide range of interests, such as mission (e.g., the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization or the Frontier Mission movement), worship renewal (e.g., Charismatic Renewal or Concerts of Prayer), discipleship and evangelism (e.g., The Alpha Course or Bible Study Fellowship), and single-purpose moral agendas (e.g., Right to Life).

The Corporate Church versus Missional Church

The contrast between the established church and the corporate church is critical to understand in dealing with congregations in the U.S. Likewise, the contrast between the corporate church and the missional church is also becoming critical to understand because the issues of ecclesiology and polity from a missional perspective are now front and center. The table below sets up this contrast.

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<th>Established Church</th>
<th>Corporate Church</th>
<th>Missional Church</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Self-understanding: Exists as the primary geographical location of God’s presence on earth through which the world can encounter God, with this authority being legitimated by the civil government.(^7)</td>
<td>Self-understanding: Exists as an organization with a purposive intent to accomplish something on behalf of God in the world, with this role being legitimated on a voluntary basis.</td>
<td>Self-understanding: Exists as a community created by the Spirit that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God’s mission in the world.</td>
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A vibrant discussion took place during the last half of the twentieth century regarding ecclesiology, i.e., the doctrine of the church. Expressions of this discussion were evident in such developments as the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1947 from the earlier Faith and Order and Life and Work movements, the merger of the former International Missionary Council (IMC) into the WCC in 1961, Vatican II in the early 1960s, multiple church mergers in the U.S. throughout the 1960s, and a convergence in missiological circles around a mission theology related to the missio Dei and the kingdom of God. By the end of the twentieth century, these various movements and discussions led to a fresh understanding of ecclesiology from a missiological perspective, what has come to be known as the missional church.\(^9\)

The missional church conversation brings together two streams of understanding God’s work in the world. First, God has a mission within all of creation—the missio Dei. Second, God brought redemption to bear on all of life within creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the kingdom of God. This redemptive work of God through Christ is best understood in terms of its announcement and inauguration by Jesus as the presence of the kingdom of God in the world.

A missional understanding of God’s work in the world from this perspective is framed as follows: God is seeking to bring his kingdom, the redemptive reign of God in Christ, to bear on every dimension of life within all the world so that the larger creation purposes of God can be fulfilled—the missio Dei. This missional understanding has the world as its primary horizon and the church is placed at the center of the activity in relating the kingdom of God to the missio Dei. The church’s self-understanding of being missional is grounded in the work of the Spirit of God, who calls the church into existence as a gathered community, equips and prepares it, and sends it into the world to participate fully in God’s mission.

Interestingly, the missional church conversation has introduced a new dimension into the discussion of the identity of the church. At the center of this conversation is the relationship of the church to its context in light of a different understanding of the nature or essence of the church. In this conversation, mission is no longer understood primarily in functional terms as something the church does, as is the...
case for the corporate church. Rather it is understood in terms of something the church is, as something that is related to its nature. But also of importance in this conversation, mission is not subsumed under ecclesiology, as is true for the established church where the church is seen as the primary location of God’s activity in the world.

The missional church, in contrast, shifts the focus to the world as the horizon for understanding the work of God and the identity of the church. This understanding is expressed in terms of the relationship of the missio Dei (the larger mission of God) to the kingdom of God (the redemptive reign of God in Christ). The organizational self-understanding related to a purposeful intent of the corporate church is replaced by a missional self-understanding of the church. To catch the fuller implications of this shift of perspective one needs to understand the biblical and theological foundations for the missional church—what might be called a missiological ecclesiology.

Trinitarian Foundations for Ecclesiology

There have been significant developments in the past few decades in trinitarian studies regarding an understanding of mission. It should be noted that the emergence of the concept of mission has its roots in the colonial period of Catholic missions. The twentieth century saw the unraveling of the massive colonial systems spawned by both Roman Catholic and Protestant nations over the previous several centuries. In their embarrassment, many churches in the West that had come to be associated with these colonial systems began dropping such words as mission or missions out of their ecclesiastical vocabulary during the last half of the twentieth century. However, during this same period some significant developments took place in trinitarian studies that began to bring missiology into direct conversation with ecclesiology.

Growing out of the strong tradition of biblical theology that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, several important theological streams began to find their voice shortly after midcentury. One stream is represented in the work done by the former International Missionary Council (IMC). Building on a renewed emphasis on the role of the kingdom of God in relation to mission as expressed during the Whitsby gathering in 1947, the Willengen meeting of the IMC in 1952 gave fresh expression to understanding mission. Although not formally used until after the conference when the summary documents were prepared, the concept of missio Dei was formulated in trinitarian terms as the foundation for engaging in mission. The emphasis was placed on the mission of the Triune God in the world in relation to all three persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Subsequent meetings of the IMC and its successor body, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) within the WCC, continued to draw on this significant reconceptualization of mission to formulate an understanding of the role of the church in the world. A primary emphasis was placed on the missional nature of the church, with this missional nature being the basis of God sending the church into the world to participate in God’s mission.

During the 1960s, some mission scholars were writing about the missional nature of the church on the Protestant side, but the focus tended to remain more on the discussion of the church’s mission in the world rather than engaging in a fuller reconceptualization of ecclesiology. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II developed a more substantive understanding of ecclesiology in light of the missional nature of the church. But by the 1970s, the field of missiology was dominated by a conversation about the missio Dei and the kingdom of God. What is intriguing is the remarkable level of convergence that emerged by the 1980s around these concepts among ecumenical, evangelical, and Roman Catholic missiologists.

Now after fifty years of wrestling with these issues, their fuller implications for our understanding of the church have begun to come into play. The substantive contributions of trinitarian studies in regard to mission are now being directed to the field of ecclesiology, i.e., an understanding of the church. There are two streams within trinitarian studies that inform this conversation.

The Western emphasis on God’s one nature. One stream is represented by the theological tradition usually associated with the Augustinian tradition in the Western church. This stream tended to emphasize the one substance of the Godhead and focused more on God as absolute subject than as being relational. An example of this can be found in the work of Lesslie Newbigin. The focus is on the
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sending work of God—God sending the Son into the world to accomplish redemption, and the Father and the Son sending the Spirit into the world to create the church and to lead it into participation in God's mission. This stream of trinitarian studies comes directly into the missional church conversation through the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, especially, as noted earlier, in the widely read volume published in 1998, entitled Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.

The Eastern emphasis on perichoresis. The Eastern church, especially the Cappadocian Fathers, placed an emphasis on the relationality within the Godhead—the interrelationships between the three persons of God. The social reality of the Godhead, in this approach, becomes the theological foundation for understanding the work of God in the world. Created humanity reflects this social reality of God through the *imago Dei*—humans being created in the image of God. When this understanding is brought into conversation with the Western view of the Trinity, we begin to understand the church, through the redemptive work of Christ, as being created by the Spirit as a social community that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God's mission in the world. An earlier work that continues to be very influential in stressing this emphasis is by John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church.* A recent work that explores aspects of this Eastern view of a trinitarian approach is Miroslav Volf's *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity.*

These theological streams of trinitarian studies are contributing today to a renewed understanding of ecclesiology in relation to missiology. The fuller mission of God, understood as the *missio Dei,* is now being related to the redemptive work of God as best expressed in the kingdom of God. This relationship of God's continued work in all of creation being related to the redemptive work of God through Christ in relation to the kingdom provides the framework for understanding the nature, ministry, and organization of the missional church. In developing a fuller perspective on the Spirit-led, missional church, it is helpful to explore the biblical framework regarding God's work in the world now in relation to both creation and redemption, even as the church awaits the eschatological future of the not yet of the kingdom of God.

A Biblical Framework for Understanding the Spirit-Led, Missional Church

The Old Testament story is about creation, fall, redemption, and the expectation of the day of the Lord. God's passion for the world is made clear throughout this story. The whole world was created to be in relationship with God, but the fall devastated this design. After humanity's fall into sin, the story of redemption unfolds around God's continuing concern for the entire world. This is made clear through the various covenants that God initiated with the human community.

The Old Testament Covenants

There are a whole series of covenants in the Old Testament that provide us with perspective on God's mission in the world. These covenants start with Noah (the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9) and extend through Abraham (the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12, 15, 17), Moses (the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 19), David (the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7), and the prophet Jeremiah (the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31). In each of these covenants God made it clear that the larger horizon of God's intention was always the world. It is especially important to understand that God lodged the particularity of redemption for the whole world in the selection and election of Israel. However, Israel's election was never about privileged status, but rather about being selected for witness and service to the world. Israel was to be a "light to the nations" (Isa. 42:6; cf. 60:1-3) and a "city set on a hill" (Matt. 5:14; cf. Isa. 2:2-4). Their communal life was to bear witness continually to the redemptive purposes of God so that this redemption would be available to all. The whole world was always in view, that all the nations might come to know the living and true God.

God's covenants in the Old Testament are God's clear statement of intent that, in spite of the fall and our own sinfulness, God is not finished with the world. Redemption is not just about some special people being chosen as an end in itself. God's election of Israel as a particular people was for the purpose of bringing the good news about God to all the nations. Election in the Old Testament was for
service, not privilege. Unfortunately, Israel often turned the focus of its election inward and built barriers to keep the nations out rather than constructing bridges to bring them in (Amos 9:7; Isa. 19:24).

The coming of Christ into the world is in direct continuity with God's intention in these Old Testament covenantal commitments. When Jesus announces at the Last Supper that the new covenant is coming into full reality through his death and resurrection, he proclaims that the forgiveness of sins is now available to all (Matt. 26:28). In Scripture, whenever the forgiveness of sins is announced, it always has the whole of the world in view. Being "in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17) is never about privileged status but rather about being selected for witness and service to the world because "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (v. 19).

Critical to understanding God's redemptive purposes is understanding that the universality of the Good News is always embedded in particularity. There is no abstract gospel. Gospel is always clothed in culture and comes to expression through particular people within particular contexts.

The implication that became clearer over time in Israel's history was that participation in God's redemption in the world, while anticipating the fully revealed kingdom of God, was more about suffering service than privileged status (see especially the role of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53-54). This is a lesson that comes clearly into focus when Jesus tried to help his followers understand that the role of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 must precede the full revealing of the reigning King of Daniel 7. In Jesus's words, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). This is the same lesson the missional church throughout the ages is called to indwell, a lesson which it has often struggled to embody. The gospel frees the church to live in a posture of vulnerability within the world such that this vulnerability often leads the church to the margin. All too frequently the church has sought to amass power at the center in order to build and to maintain domain, as seen in both the established and corporate forms of the church. This domain is often more about serving the interests of the church than being the church for the sake of the world.
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...to all people and to the ends of the earth and to bear witness to its truths in relation to all of life (Matt. 28:19-20; Luke 24:47). Jesus also conveyed to these followers that they would be led in this work and empowered to carry it out through the presence of the Spirit among them (Luke 24:49; John 14:25-26; 20:22). Jesus clearly anticipated that a movement (persons who later came to be known as “Christians”; Acts 11:26) and a new type of organization (what came to be called the church [the ecclesia as a called-out community]) would grow out of the work of these followers as they were led and taught by the Spirit (Matt. 16:18; John 17:20).

In this regard, it is critical to understand the relationship of the biblical imperatives to the biblical indicatives. Matthew 28:19-20 is built around the key imperative “make disciples,” but this imperative is premised on the fact that those receiving this expectation are already a changed community empowered by the Spirit. This is reflected in Matthew 5:13-14 where the believing followers are reminded that they are already the “salt” and “light” of the world. This is an indicative statement of fact. The same point is made in Acts 1:8, where the followers of Jesus are told that they “will be [Jesus’s] witnesses.” This is also an indicative statement of fact. To express it as a double negative: you cannot not be Christ’s witness if, in fact, you are empowered, taught, and led by the Spirit.

The book of Acts becomes a demonstration of this new reality. It began at Pentecost as the intensive indwelling of the Spirit took place within the community of 120 believers gathered together in Jerusalem. And it quickly spread within a growing church that soon spilled over into the larger world. As developed in chapter 2, the ministry of the Spirit led this early church into the world to engage in both evangelizing and holistic mission (as will be developed in chapter 7). The church’s responsibility to be involved in both aspects of ministry continues to this day. The missional church conversation is helping congregations recapture an understanding that the Spirit-led church is inherently missionary by its very nature.

Summary

In the biblical framework outlined above, the Spirit-led, missional church is identified as living between the times. It lives between the now and the not yet. The redemptive reign of God in Christ is already present, meaning that the power of God is fully manifest in the world through the gospel under the leading of the Spirit. But the redemptive reign of God is not yet fully complete as the church looks toward the final consummation when God will remove the presence of sin and create the new heavens and a new earth.

The kingdom of God, the redemptive reign of God in Christ, gives birth to the missional church through the work of the Spirit. Its nature, ministry, and organization are formed by the reality, power, and intent of the kingdom of God. Understanding the redemptive purposes of God that are embedded within the kingdom of God provides an understanding of the church being missionary by nature. The church participates in God’s mission in the world because it can do no other. It was created for this purpose. This purpose is encoded within the very makeup of the nature of the church.

In this approach, ecclesiology, our understanding of and participation in the church, comes to expression and identity in relationship to God’s mission in the world. The genetic code of the missional church means it is missionary in its very nature or essence. This means that congregations exist in the world as being missionary by nature. The self-understanding of such congregations is not first of all being established (that they represent the primary location of God’s activity in the world) or being corporate (that they do something on behalf of God in the world), but rather their self-understanding is missional (they are a created social community of the Spirit that participates through the Spirit’s leading in what God is doing in the world).

Congregations are created by the Spirit, and their existence is for the purpose of engaging the world in bringing God’s redemptive work in Christ to bear on every dimension of life. In being true to their missional identity they can never function primarily as an end within themselves—the tendency of the self-understanding of the established church. In being true to their missional identity, missional congregations can never be satisfied with maintaining primarily a functional relationship to their contexts and communities—the tendency of the self-understanding of the corporate church. The missional church has a different genetic code.