



# MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

The Rise of the  
Post-Congregational  
CHURCH

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## “LET THERE BE ... MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES”

The e-mails come every week or so. They usually begin with something like: “I feel called to start a church but I don’t want to replicate the existing model.” Maybe they are a bit more specific: “The church plant I have in mind doesn’t center on a worship service; it functions more like a network of people engaged in serving the community.” Often the e-mailers are not clergy; they are frustrated church members. They say something like, “I am just not happy any more being a religious consumer—I want to get outside the walls of the church.” Or, “I am tired of just doing church over and over; shouldn’t we be paying more attention to what we do with the rest of our week?” Then typically the senders raise a question: “Do you know of anyone else thinking like this?”

Yes, I do. Thousands, actually. And they are doing something about it.

We are witnessing the rise of a new life form in the taxonomy of the North American church. Though it contains the DNA of the movement that Jesus founded, its expression is different from the institutional church that has developed over the centuries. It is church in a new way for

a new day—our day—a period that can be described as the post-congregational era of Christianity. This new church life form is the missional community.

There you have it! This is the essence of the book's message. Rather than making you wait to get the point—here it is, up-front. Perhaps now that you know, you'd rather not read any further—this phenomenon doesn't interest you. But if you want to know more, perhaps even explore your own possible involvement, by all means read on.

The heart of this book is the telling of stories about some of the various approaches to these new missional communities. Each story is different, illustrating a fresh chapter in God's work in and through the church. By showing you some early iterations of missional communities, my hope is that your own imagination will be excited, possibly to the point of your trying your own hand at it!

In many ways the rise of missional communities takes the church back to its early days, when it was a movement, before it became church-as-we-know-it. Before it became church as congregation.

## **Church as Congregation**

For most of Christian history congregations have served as gathering places where geographically approximate adherents could practice their faith. It was not always this way.

For most of its first three centuries Christianity was mainly a street movement, a marketplace phenomenon that spread through slave populations and social guilds of free laborers. Gatherings of adherents took place primarily in homes and some suitable public places, convening primarily for fellowship, teaching, and worship. However, the gatherings were not the point or focus of Jesus-follower spirituality. Christianity was primarily a practice, a way of life.

Love of God and love of neighbor meant adopting a life of sacrificial service that distinguished followers of Jesus as a counter-cultural force, differentiated from those around them by the character of their lives. Early believers rescued babies (especially girls) abandoned by Roman households. They stayed behind to tend to the sick people when plagues drove the population out of the cities. In other words, Jesus followers demonstrated allegiance to Jesus primarily when they were away from their gatherings, engaged in lives that typically and routinely intersected with and included non-Jesus followers. The church represented a lifestyle that was radically different from its cultural surroundings but radically committed to the well-being of the people in the culture.

Along the way, though, this orientation changed. The church movement became domesticated. The imperial edict by Constantine is usually blamed but a shift was already under way with the rise of a clergy class. These two forces—the need to create a state religion and a clergy eager to comply—combined to centralize and institutionalize the Christian movement. The church congregationalized. This move profoundly altered its way of being in the world.

The idea of adherents gathering together as the central practice of the faith gained ascendancy when the church settled down into a religion dominated by clergy. Church as congregation developed the expectation that people would demonstrate their devotion to the faith by participating in congregational activity, which centrally involved the worship service. Rather than a lifestyle of counter-cultural sacrificial love of neighbor, adherence to “the faith” became centered on assenting to a set of doctrinal beliefs. Christianity became defined as a set of theological propositions rather than a way of life.

The ensuing schism between belief and practice promoted a sacred-secular dichotomy that greatly influenced the nature of congregational life as something distinct from the rest of life. Church became a “sacred place” where specific religious acts were performed. The congregation served as home base for Jesus followers, a sort of refuge, effectively pulling the church off the streets. Loyalty to Christ was measured by one’s participation in congregational activity. In exchange for this support the church provided religious goods and services to its “members.” The “member culture” would eventually give rise to a culture of competition, as congregations vied for the affection and financial support of existing and potential customers.

The most enduring legacy of the congregational church is its worldview. Church as congregation became something other than the people who were its constituency. The church became an “it.” It stood outside people. This notion is in contradiction to the New Testament understanding of church as a “who.” Biblical teaching on the church sees the church as the ongoing incarnation of Jesus in the world, an organic life form vitally connected to him, even married to him, depending on the metaphor chosen by the writer. Church as an “it” followed the inevitable path that all institutions travel. Institutional goals eventually became separated from and supplanted spiritual mission. The clergy, who initially served as spiritual leaders because they were *spiritual* leaders, over centuries became increasingly captured by organizational concerns at best or political agendas in the worst cases.

Although the Reformation adjusted some of the theological categories, it did little to alter the notion of church as a congregational expression. In fact, Reformation ecclesiology remained centered on the congregation. Church vocations still referred to clergy roles. Orders and practices guided and focused on what the church did in its corporate gatherings,

worship, and activities. In many denominations the idea of church itself became inextricably tied to the proper administration and functioning of gatherings, worship, and activities, especially if it was a way of distinguishing one denominational tribe from another.

The post-Reformation modern era did not move to alter the congregational understanding of church. Though several developments affected its practices, nothing challenged the ruling paradigm of church as congregation. Twentieth-century developments in transportation and the corresponding infrastructure such as freeways allowed people to travel greater distances more quickly with relative ease. People could choose among congregations to select their spiritual “home.” This, in turn, fueled congregational competition, giving rise to the customer-service orientation of the contemporary program church (and spawned a church growth industry that promoted the idea of building even bigger and better “churches”—meaning congregational organizations). The assumption was that community and individual transformation would result from having great congregations with well-trained clergy and lots of programs.

The rise of the megachurch in the second half of the twentieth century paralleled what was going on in the retail world as the center of gravity shifted from the “mom-and-pop parish” to the large “big box retail centers.” These megachurches have maintained their core sense of identity as a congregation—that is, for those who attend, church is something outside of me that I belong to, that I attend or “go to,” an institution that I support.

This sweeping and admittedly broad-brush treatment of church development over the centuries might sound as if church as congregation is and was bad. I do not mean to imply or even to suggest this. To the contrary, many

congregations do a lot of good. Some pack hundreds of backpacks of food every week to send home with school children who are food insecure. Others conduct mentoring and tutoring programs for underperforming students. Some churches are building wells in overseas villages so people can have access to clean water while at the same time creating microeconomic development opportunities for the villagers. Still others work to liberate women and children from sex trafficking and slavery. Certainly without congregational effort, the clean-up efforts after Hurricane Katrina would have been far less extensive and effective. In fact, the faith community saved the day for many—and is still working to rebuild that part of our country. Disaster relief abroad as well would be much diminished without the altruism expressed through American congregations. Added to all this is the spiritual teaching and nurturing of millions of Americans each week! All of this should be honored and celebrated.

Nor do I mean to seem to be predicting the end of the congregational expression of Christianity. Millions are served in their spiritual journeys through its efforts and millions more are helped to enjoy a better life through its ministry. The congregation is here to stay!

I am simply trying to point out that this one view of church has been so predominant in Western culture that it has made it seem as if it is the only legitimate expression. Anything that takes place outside of “church as congregation” has seemed suspicious to some. Even terms like *para-church*—a word that makes no sense biblically (one is either in the church or not)—is an organizational term invented to affirm the supremacy of church as congregation. It has taken years for the house church movement to gain respect, even though it was the predominant form of church expression in the first three centuries of the Christian movement and is a potent life form in countries where the church is growing virally.

What I am after here is opening up the discussion of missional communities so that we can begin to see that God is up to something new. I am suggesting that we expand the bandwidth of how we think church can express itself in our culture.

We need to or else we are in real trouble.

Even with the rise of megacongregations, decades of emphasis on church growth, and large infusions of money and people resources, the congregational approach to “doing church” has entered its declining period. Church attendance is holding up as well as it is only because Americans are living longer. Even so, participation is slipping. The prognostication is not good. A variety of indicators all point to the same conclusion: we have entered an era that is ripe for and needs a post-congregational church.

### **The Post-Congregational Era**

For millions of Americans, the congregational form of church expression does not work for them. They either cannot or will not convert to the church culture. Many of them cannot match its participation rhythms because of their employment. They work in the hospitality industry, in health care, or in some capacity in which they serve as first responders (like police, fire protection), in public utilities, or in a host of entertainment industry options. Simply put, these people don’t have the weekend off from work to “go to church.” Millions more have lifestyles that don’t accommodate church attendance or engagement. Weekends might be spent visiting children of ex-marriages or be filled with leisure pursuits or kids’ sports leagues.

The numbers tell the story. The fastest growing religious affiliation in the country is the “non-affiliated”—a category that has doubled in the past fifteen years! This designation

reflects a rejection not just of Christianity but every organized religion (Hinduism, Buddhism, Wicca, and so on). One out of six Americans (16 percent) says he or she doesn't wish to be identified with any existing group. Underneath that number are two startling findings: the rate of nonaffiliation is 20 percent of men and a whopping 25 percent of young adults ages eighteen to twenty-nine! These "nones" are not antispiritual. Half of them believe in God and the Bible. It's just that they are not turning to institutional, traditional church as part of their spiritual journey. They are not alone. More than one in five Americans who say they are absolutely sure about believing in God virtually never attend church, according to the research of Robert Putnam published in his recent book *American Grace* (Simon and Schuster, 2010, p. 473). This does not portend well for the future of the congregational church expression.

Just in case you are wondering if these diminished numbers could be turned around with aggressive marketing and outreach, don't hold your breath or call a committee meeting. The number of people who say they would attend a church if invited has trended downward dramatically over the past four decades. Gallup polling confirms this in reporting a near-record high in the percentage of people who say that religion is losing its influence in America.

These developments have come about while we have been building the best churches we have ever had—complete with waterfalls, executive chefs, and weekly productions rivaling anything Broadway can produce. The American church now gobbles up over \$100 billion per year for all causes, including media outlets, schools, real estate development, and church programming—with increasingly less return on investment! The nonchurched aren't comin'—no matter what we do!

We would be wrong to read this allergic response to church as an indication of a decline in spirituality in our country. Americans remain incredibly intrigued by all things spiritual. After decades and even centuries of secular humanistic philosophical arguments, Americans still believe in God. Atheism and agnosticism capture a fraction of the population (8 percent). In fact, spirituality is in vogue, whether on the Oprah cable network, the movies, the speeches of politicians, or the spirituality sections of bookstores. It’s just that people aren’t seeing church as the way they want to pursue their spiritual journey.

We are whipped if we consider church as congregation as the only true expression of church. But it’s not. We have options.

### **Taking a Page from Our Past . . . for the Future**

We can look to the earliest days of the Christian movement to find those options. At that time, the popularity of the gospel was drawing in a huge number of non-Jewish people. Gentiles eagerly responded to the invitation of the early Jesus followers to join them in the new faith but that trend didn’t thrill everyone. Some began to insist that Gentiles should become Jews first in order to receive the gospel. After considerable deliberations (the Acts 15 conference) the church declared this step to be unnecessary. New spiritual realities in the first century successfully broke down old religious categories and approaches. With this single decision the church secured its future—avoiding becoming a sect of Judaism and instead launching a global missionary movement. Bottom line: early church leaders refused to force people to become like them in order to become Jesus followers.

The corresponding issue for the church in North America today is whether or not we are going to insist that people first become church people in order to experience the gospel of Jesus. If we do we will seal our fate as an institution that will continue to diminish as fewer and fewer people fit our profile. We will miss the spiritual revival that is under way. And we will miss the heartbeat of a missional God who is always seeking us no matter where we try to hide—whether in urban centers, suburban malls, or church pews.

Not insisting that people become like us in order to follow Jesus does not mean we have to abandon our own personal spiritual preferences and practices. In fact, as you will see, many people participating in missional communities are retaining their congregational affiliation. A perspective informed by the first-century church wisdom simply acknowledges that God encounters others in ways that are different from our own experience. In our time that “different” way increasingly appears to be a missional community setting. In the stories that follow you will learn that some of this new expression of church is even being sponsored by existing congregational leaders who see that church as congregation *and* church as missional community both fit into their strategy for sharing the gospel.

The good news is that many people who are not intrigued to become part of the church culture are nevertheless wide open to spiritual engagement. People who would never attend a church service will bring their entire families to help feed the homeless or serve meals to disaster victims—and have spiritual conversation with others while doing it. And some who would never consider joining a congregation will enthusiastically participate in a group setting in a neighbor’s home where Bible study, prayer, and life debriefing take place.

The further good news is that this is where Jesus is hanging out anyway. The church culture I grew up in challenged me to “lead lost people to Jesus.” The assumption was that Jesus’s preferred environment was the church (“where two or three are gathered”), and the world was a godless and hostile environment that we were to take Jesus into. I now understand that “lost people will lead *me* to Jesus.” After all, Jesus said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). This means that Jesus is already in the world, inviting church people out to play! We run into Jesus in homeless shelters, battered women’s homes, high-rise offices, hospital waiting rooms, AIDS clinics—wherever people need him, Jesus makes a point of being there.

And what am I supposed to do when I connect people with Jesus? The church as congregation culture taught me to “reach” people for Christ, meaning “turn them into church people.” The path to discipleship led to the church door. Their adopting a congregational life rhythm and lifestyle was the proof we sought that life transformation had occurred. The problem today is that people don’t want to be “reached” by the church and turned into church people. They have had friends “reached” and it’s like they have been abducted by aliens. They can’t find their friends anymore—they are now living in the mother ship. Sadly, church as congregation has become very good at socializing its people away from the very mission field where God placed them.

This reality hit home to me on a recent airplane flight. I wasn’t eavesdropping. It’s just that in a small regional jet, if the people seated behind you decide to carry on a conversation, then you are smack dab in the middle of it. Their physical proximity makes it impossible to avoid hearing every word they say. On the flight I sat in front of two guys who chatted the entire trip, mostly about playing golf

and their travels. Both were headed home. Just as we were landing the younger of the two identified himself as a staff member of a local congregation and invited his seat mate to church. “We’ve got a lot of good things going on,” he said proudly. The other passenger politely made it plain he was not interested. “I play golf every Sunday,” he said. “Well,” the church staffer replied, “if you ever get rained out, we’d love to have you.” That was it. No mention of God. No spiritual inquiry. No connection. The conversation ended.

Last week I spoke at a conference where a denominational executive took some time to tell the attendees about his latest “witnessing” opportunity. It involved the neurosurgeon he was newly seeing for a health issue that had cropped up. When the doctor inquired about the executive’s occupation, he said he was a minister. The doctor, a Hindu, then initiated a conversation inquiring about the patient’s basis for believing in Jesus. The minister brought him a book on apologetics on his next visit. “I don’t have time to read that,” the doctor said. “Why don’t you tell me what’s in it?” At this point the clergy person invited the physician to church! The doctor replied, “I’d rather have tea and talk with you.” On revealing that request from his doctor, the platform speaker said, “Pray for me as I continue to ‘witness’ to my doctor.” My response was to urge him to have tea. “Don’t talk *church*. This guy is looking for God,” I said. He looked bewildered at my suggestion, if not a little offended.

These two episodes reveal the major limitations of church as congregation and why alternative church life forms are needed. We need to reverse the trend of replacing gospel messages with church marketing. Because the congregational church model relies on attracting new members to sustain its business model, this dynamic has been reinforced for centuries. But we are seeing the end of the success of this

model. A declining percentage of the population relegates their spiritual quest to a prescribed set of religious activities conducted at a specific place and time. More and more people are either unable or unwilling to alter their life rhythms to match congregational rhythms and expectations in order to pursue their spiritual journeys.

A post-congregational culture requires a strategy of engaging people right where they already live, work, play, go to school, and pursue their hobbies and passions. It’s incarnational. It lets them live more intentionally, learning to love God and their neighbors more, making a contribution to their community, all with people they know and are known by. This is the recipe for a new church life form—missional communities.