

A Chaotic Perspective

Change, Young People, and Church Leadership for the 21st Century

Steven C. Mabry

*Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it,
Listen for what it intends to do with you.
Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to,
Let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.¹*

Many questions—few answers—the privilege of wondering; it's what a paper can offer. Informed by learning theory, management, human development, theology, physical science, leadership, family systems theory, and, blatantly, speculation; this paper looks at a rapidly changing world, a dynamic population of young people, and the leadership possibilities required for an old church in a new century. It begins and ends with questions.

Big Question #1

“What are we going to do?” I've heard this youthful question for decades. Coming through the door of the church, classroom, or youth building, young people wonder what's next. Pastors, teachers and youth workers respond with program information and lesson plans but mostly miss the real issue cloaked in the all too familiar and nearly rhetorical. Adults take the query as sort of a, “Hi, how are you?” We say, “Come in and find out,” “Not much,” “It's a secret”—translation: “I wish I knew *what* we were doing!” “What are we going to do?” is an adult question too, but we don't think much about that either. No time. We fill in the gaps by commissioning curriculum writers to outline precisely what to do. Got it! But we don't get it. The question at the door lingers.

“What are we going to do?” Indeed. It took a long time for me to understand just how loaded this query might be. Loaded with hope:

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I might be appreciated just for me, loaded with possibility: I might be able to learn something useful or share in something significant, loaded with fear: I might be exposed—this may be a waste of time. What would it take to thoughtfully answer the question, “*What are we going to do?*” Young people want to know whether any worthy thing will take place. Will this affect my friendships or honor my spiritual search? Could I be helpful, interrupt loneliness, feed a child, learn something relevant, or make any significant difference?

Young adults considering the pastorate, or rather not considering the pastorate, want answers too. They want to know if they are really welcome? They have new ideas, lots of energy, and high hopes. Many tell me that their churches don’t want anything new and can’t seem to hear them when they speak. They say their churches want their service but only to carry out someone else’s idea for ministry. They don’t feel acknowledged. Who will shepherd their hopes and dreams? Or did they get their reply coming through the door? Have we given them entertaining programs when they needed spiritual partners? It seems like many sigh, “Too late,” when we encourage them to ministry—or do we still bother?

Youth-less churches² have their own spin for the youth’s question, “*What are we going to do?*” More than words connect these questions. Only recently has the Church and others—perhaps out of fear for survival—taken this seriously. Now we commission research in addition to curriculum. But the barn door has been open for sometime.

I like Abraham Maslow, who, when curious about how people became self-actualized, studied self-actualized people. Perhaps if we research young pastors, asking what lead them to ministry when few peers share their path? Maybe if we explore the ministries of pastors who have, mysteriously or conspicuously, left in their wake a wave of youthful pastors?

will we just tread a little water while searching for solutions?

Are we seeking to understand the absence of the young or the young themselves? Or will we just tread a little water while searching for solutions? Parker Palmer once bemoaned, “We turn every question we face into an objective problem to be solved and we believe that for every objective problem there is some sort of technical fix. That is why we train doctors to repair the body but not to honor the spirit; clergy to be CEOs but not spiritual guides; teachers to master techniques but not to engage their student’s souls.”³ Our culture is addicted to problem solving.

This question, “*What are we going to do?*” reveals a

profoundly personal crisis not about programs and vocations but about the human spirit. Our finest hopes rest in being useful to others by the gifts and grace of God.

So God created human kind in his image,
In the image of God he created them;
Male and female he created them...
God saw everything he had made, and
indeed, it was very good.

(Genesis 1:27 –28,31a, NRSV)

In image and likeness, male and female, to my very bones and yours, God gifted us with likeness. The biblical testament begins with God creating people and *giving* them stewardship of the earth. It ends with Christ bestowing the Holy Spirit on people and *sending* them out to the world. The church, on the other hand, begins by *needing* people as stewards of buildings and programs and ends by *calling* **church becomes all about filling positions rather that fostering ministries** constituents and traditions. I

recognize the severity that one might hear in that statement. I write it loving the Church, and yet believing that our choices have caused great damage to the body of Christ and the world, and believing that these distinctions have cultivated misunderstandings between young people and their churches.

The process of *call* for pastors illustrates all too clearly. First, we poll the congregation to see what *we need* in a pastor, the *what*. Then, we fashion a job description. Who can blame us? The question is, “*What are we going to do?*” Next, we search for the closest *who* that fits our *what*. I was reminded of the slot-filling nature of this process recently while on the phone with a good friend. His congregation has happily filled their top slot, “senior pastor.” He’s it. Now he leads the congregation as they staff their two additional needs: a senior associate responsible for evangelism, mission and pastoral care, and a young pastor devoted to Christian education and youth. Another round of first, *what*, then *who*, begins. Is it any wonder that clergy engage lay leadership through the same flawed process? First, *what*, then *who*, results in slot-filling ministries from lay leaders down to the pastor. The church becomes all about filling positions rather that fostering ministries. This has everything to do with the spiritual question, “*What are we going to do?*”

My data-centered, cost accounting professor at The Ohio State University introduced me to the parts required to make a mock-up car,

“widgets” and “cogs.” Congregations, I fear, believe that ministry is like the mock-up, one simply needs an adequate supply of parts, human widgets and cogs, and the church engine will run smoothly. This will not do. Pastors and young people know when they become widgets. Not even mothers and ordained ministers have the heart to encourage their offspring into such a system. “*What are we going to do?*” How will young men and women perceive vocational church leadership? Will they eagerly serve as a cog for a predetermined *need* of the organization, or, might they find an opportunity to offer their unique gift to the life-giving organism, which is the body of Christ? For what has God prepared them?

Big Question #2

A second big question voiced often by youth, “*Who is going to be there?*” I spent a good part of my adult life encouraging youth to attend church programs. I cajoled, bribed, squeezed, provided scholarships, transported, and conspired with parents, friends and teachers to insure young people *got there*. It worked. Says Woody Allen, “Showing up is 88 % of life.” Whether on the phone, in the school hallway, or by post-it note message, they made it the first question: “*Who is going to be there?*” Perhaps this query also carries a bigger burden that I first thought?

Young people want to know whether they can relate to the others who might also show up. Do I share any significant interest or activities with these folks? Will old friendships be honored and new friendships made? Can I trust leaders and peers? Will my voice and opinion be valued? Will my gifts, skills, and resources be welcomed? Will my spirit be lifted? I remember being in Air Force ROTC in 1968. The “men” of my platoon sparked my one, irrepressible question, “Would I want to go to Viet Nam with *these guys?*” In the spring of 1969, Richard Nixon put the Ping-Pong balls in the cage. My birth date popped up #278. I resigned ROTC. When the church struggles to give a satisfactory answer to, “*Who is going to be there?*” will young people resign? What can we tell young men and women about their companions in ministry? Are they the brightest minds, the most competent colleagues, and the most faithful of friends? Who do young adults see when they view their peers in ministry? Who are the traveling companions?

It seems to me that the two big questions above correlate strongly to the absence of young people in church leadership. Maybe this generation is challenging the traditional church process of *what* centered

versus *who* centered? Congregational literature points firmly to the essential *what*. The high-ups advise us to be principle centered, vision focused, and purpose driven. Apparently, people come somewhere after that (unless of course the stated purpose is to be people centered!). I am convinced that the people know this. Older and deeply committed generations find it stifling. Young people find it positively show-stopping.

While writing about youth and their quest for welcome and meaning I woke up one morning in the fresh memory of a dream.

Deep in pre-dawn sleep I sat on the front porch of my New York home with my family. From a full block away, we heard the clamor and saw

the commotion of a Volvo station wagon crammed with rowdy youths. Many voices and much laughter somehow made it apparent, they sought the welcome mat, that place where they fit, a home for their life passion. Reminded of my own VW Bug escapades in high school (okay, we weren't looking for meaning!), I watched with knowing amusement as the energy went from home to home. Then, with people hanging out the windows, like a scene out of *Back to the Future*, the wagon turned and fairly flew up the street toward us. A quick donut in the cul-de-sac in front of our home landed the vehicle half in—half out, of our driveway. The pack emptied in a blitzkrieg of giggling, interrogatives, and anticipation, blurting out, “Hey, is this the place?” I woke with a start—the youths weren't youths at all—the wagon was loaded with the young, old, and middle aged. I should have guessed it—a Volvo?

I'm not one to make a big deal out of a passing dream image but it occurred to me that this was my subconscious reminding me that all ages seek the promise and place where they fit, where meaning, acceptance and activity come together. Perhaps the church puts too much interest in the shrinking leadership of the younger sector while ignoring the shrinking of every individual and ultimately, the shrinking of the entire church. From young people to older adults, lay people to pastors, the traditional system of ministry calls people to serve the Church, which many times has nothing to do with their gifts or passions. When we place volunteers where we *need* them, rather than sending them to be used as God has constructed them, we do no service either to Church or God.

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A Couple of New Things

Historians, educators and theologians have focused much attention on change and the distinctions among generations. Premodern people put great faith in religion for the ordering and explaining of life. In contrast, modern culture invested largely in rationalism and objective science, amplifying the individual as self-determining, lifting reason above all else, unconstrained by the traditions of the premodern world-view.⁴ Postmodernism blows all this into outer space—almost literally. Leonard Sweet captures the image, “The number-one postmodern icon is the picture of a blue marble planet hanging in space.⁵ Postmodernism sets aside the science that came before it without reverting to the religion that came before that. Released from objective traditions and ancient subjective belief systems, postmodernism sums itself up in a new generation’s mantra, “whatever”.⁶ With humanity’s foundational myths and scientific stories set aside—

[...] we are forced to live in a world of religious and cultural diversity which is explained by a new metanarrative of pluralism. In this metanarrative, no single story can possibly be all encompassing for all people in a given culture—especially as global culture emerges and the world’s religions are found in everyone’s hometown. Diversity relativizes all stories. The grand stories of the world religions have thereby become miniaturized. Everyone is left with his or her own stories, knowing full well that others live by other stories.⁷

Left without the great stories—or rather, with *all* the great stories—and lacking the security of objective truth, a new generation (including our church youth and young adults) gropes about for the handles, choosing from among the many. Listen to the testimony of one member of that generation:

As a member of Generation X, I have been raised in a postmodern world. Like many others my age, I do not hold as sacred the tenants of modernity—the centrality of the individual; the superiority of objective, verifiable truth claims; the finality of absolute standards of moral and ethical behavior, and the uncertainty of subjective belief systems.

I came of age during a period of radical deconstruction of language and meaning. I was taught that nothing was objectively verifiable, given the subjectivity of all thought, for absolute standards tend to benefit those with enough social power to establish the standards in the first place [...] Also, the rising dominance of television and film in the last half century, the development of the World Wide Web, and the increase of global travel have all exposed my generation to a diversity of cultures and belief systems at a young age. Unlike many of our elders, we tend to take this diversity for granted.⁸

And, the beat does not stop there. Barna profiles the next set of youngsters in his book, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture*. Calling them “Mosaics,” he depicts a non-linear generation connecting the dots between “a mosaic of feelings, facts, principles, experiences, and lessons.” These kids embrace the traditional and its alternative, relate in fluid and integrated ways, connect through “the most bizarre, inclusive and ever-changing pastiche of information ever relied upon by humankind” (the internet), and blend a cocktail of religious views and practices.⁹ The good news is that these children and early teens hold a keen interest in spirituality, supernatural things (consider Harry Potter), world religions (think about the world since September 11), and in personal faith experiences—especially healing and health.¹⁰

Everything But People

Yet, even with the great changes around us, convincing evidence still suggests that human needs may actually change very little. Okay, maybe I’m just a throw-back-modernist wanting to trust in the social sciences. But I don’t think so. I want mostly to trust my information—gained from my feelings, senses, experiences, and personal research while working with people of many generations for nearly thirty years. My conclusions are confirmed by the work of many great masters who spent their life energy learning about human beings. Forgive their masculine language. Can the idea be so simple? Do people just want to feel as if they matter? Is meaning about being valued, taken seriously, and appreciated for our unique contribution to the world? Viktor Frankl put it thus, “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation

in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives," adding—"as for the causation of the feeling of meaninglessness, one may say, albeit in an oversimplifying vein, that people have enough to live by but nothing to live for; they have the means but no meaning."¹¹ In 1959 Frankl predicted the major symptom of this emptiness would be a young population depressed, aggressive, and given to addiction.¹² Considering the teenage world of the late 20th century, his words weigh in as prophetic. Carl Rogers noticed as well, "Certainly the disease of our age is lack of purpose, lack of meaning, lack of commitment on the part of individuals."¹³ And Erik Erickson pronounced the primary task of the adolescent to "identify himself with the life goals worthy of commitment."¹⁴ The hunt is on and legions of adults, making up for lost time, have united with the younger set of seekers. They make up the constituency most in absence from traditional congregations because they are not fitting into traditional systems. Notice, I did not say they misfit with church people, but with church systems.

What are we Going to do?

Shifting sand makes for a grand and stimulating time to be alive and in ministry as postmodernism requires an exceptionally aware and attentive leadership. Why then are so few entering this challenging arena? Ideas abound. Roy Oswald and Otto Kroeger suggest the pastor's roles are too confusing and too many. Quoted in *Congregations* they list, "leader, communicator, teacher, comforter, public relations manager, administrator, conflict resolution specialist, counselor, fundraiser, social coordinator, strategic planner, and trainer." The author of that article, a consultant and executive coach, says they missed a few, like manager, team leader, and coach.¹⁵ In addition to roles, pastors in traditional settings often contend with a lack of community esteem, low compensation, and long, evening and weekend hours. And, say younger pastors, ageism and structural suffocation creates the tension of "This is how we've always done it, this is how we've always climbed the ladder, this is what successful ministry is like in the church you either conform to that or go somewhere else."¹⁶ It adds up to too many roles, too little reward, too little support, and thwarted dreams.

Nevertheless, some expressions of American Christianity do not suffer the mainline drain of young people and young pastors. Willow Creek Association's Jerry Butler offers an alternative, "We cater to the risk-taking, change agent kind of pastor. We're actively trying to touch

the younger leader [...] they know we're about innovation and creativity."¹⁷ Over 2600 college and seminary age people considering ministry attended their training events in the year 2000. Young people vote with their feet. But their absence is an indictment of the traditional church systems, not traditional church people. Traditional systems emphasize command and control rather than creativity and permission. We need to be clear on this so as not to personalize the absence of young people. There is already enough awkwardness without adding what Parker Palmer describes as "fear of the judgment of the young."¹⁸ And while their absence is an indicator so is their presence. Perhaps we need to look, without judgment, at the places that attract young people? What have we to lose? What could we learn?

The Fear Factor

So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt 10:31)

Several fears keep churches from being the congregation of young people. Innovation and creativity clearly frighten many traditional church leaders. We know, inherently, that change and learning are not benign but destabilizing and chaotic, and that places us, as mused by my former professor, "in grave danger of growing." Erick and Joan Erickson, writing as octogenarians, noted, "older people seem to enjoy their older things the way they are" offering "supportive continuity."¹⁹ They know and understand that defenses against change sometimes center in being true to the comforting and familiar. We conform to the established standards of the faith, preserving the traditional and conventional, the mainstream and orthodox behaviors and perspectives. But the root meaning of *ortho*, as in *orthodox*, has little to do with dogmatism and more precisely speaks to an act of straightening and correcting, as in *orthodontia*.²⁰ Picture God as orthodontist bracing Christ's Church for growth. Which part needs aligning? In this day and age, how would we agree on the true standard for straight? What if we faltered in our selection? Wouldn't it be better to defend Church heritage that make a major alignment and be wrong? The founder and President of Polaroid cameras, Ed Land, posted this plaque on his wall:

A mistake is an event,
the full benefit of which

has not yet been turned to your advantage.²¹

With the world on the precipice, teetering on an axial point, shifting paradigms and changing nearly everything, Church will not survive

without changing. If we choose to thrive we must accept movement and learn to lead it. “The only person educated is the person who has learned how to learn; the person who has learned to adapt and change; the person who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives base for security.”²²

Some steadfastly refuse to acknowledge the dramatical motions of a postmodern world, clinging instead to the fundamentalism of a pre-modernism. They prey on the fears of the traditionalists, leading by anxiety rather than hope. But change will not retreat. How long shall we make fear-based decisions? Maybe the Church should seize on the Outward Bound motto: “If you can’t get out of it, get into it!”

A second fear for congregations is the loss of control. Bill Easum grills the traditional church, “Control is the Sacred Cow of established churches, and it needs to be ground into gourmet hamburger.”²³ Easum offers a clear distinction between control and accountability, “Accountability occurs *after* action takes place [...] *Control* occurs before a person or team takes action.”²⁴ Church leaders might lament that after is too late! Too late for what? Learning? Forgiveness? Evaluation? All abound. The command and control model is a greasy slope (read that slippery) to high performance. Bill Brenneman, writing in a very business centered management book, *The Dance of Change*, allows a very sacred comment, “instead of divine rights, authority figures have divine obligations: to their owners, their peers, their colleagues, their subordinates, their constituents, and the organization as a whole.” When people take responsibility for their own learning and performance they “work out the answers to their obligations.”²⁵ Each of us has accountability to God for our gifts, learning, and our contribution to the common good. The traditional church has fostered a parental environment where others take responsibility for us, recruiting, directing and controlling our service. This kills human dreams, disables spiritual growth, pushes competent people away, and needs to stop.

One final fear—the fear of conflict. I once served in a church where an older, well-respected member of the congregation would frequently rise in church meetings to call for a vote in these exact words, “Mr. Chairman, I move the nominations be closed and the congregation cast a single, unanimous ballot.” Never has a person’s need for unity been more clearly expressed. We’re just one big happy family. Strange, when they invited me to serve as their pastor they specifically asked about my skills in conflict management and congregational communication. This was a false, conflict-avoiding community or what M. Scott Peck describes as “pseudo community.”

True community does not avoid conflicts; true community resolves conflicts.²⁶ He later adds, “To achieve genuine community the designated leader must lead and control as little as possible in order to encourage others to lead.”²⁷ I believe leaders avoid conflict because they see it as divisive and chaotic. But chaos is the precondition to creativity. Hoping to avoid facing our own fears, we deny change, conflict, and our own controlling ways. Parker Palmer notes that leaders given to this form of denial often ask the people around them to “keep resuscitating things that are no longer alive.”²⁸ Ahhh, but no one in the Church would ever do this? Would it be on point here to recite the Alcoholics Anonymous definition for insanity—doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results? Conflict is energizing when people truly hear and see one another’s perspectives. It frequently leads to higher quality decisions and performance. That, of course, depends on open people who can conflict, resolve, and unite behind a decision made.

The handwriting is on the wall, says Spencer Johnson, author of, *Who Moved My Cheese?* Change is here to stay! In his little book, two tiny people, Hem and Haw, share a maze with two mice named Sniff and Scurry. The four are confronted with unexpected change; someone keeps moving their cheese—a metaphor for the goodies in life—however you define them. As Sniff and Scurry rush off to explore and find new cheese, the bookmark on the next page falls on top of Hem and Haw.

Change Happens

They keep moving the cheese

Anticipate Change

Get ready for the cheese to move

Monitor Change

Smell the cheese often
So you know when its getting old

Adapt to Change Quickly

The quicker you let go of old cheese,
The sooner you can enjoy new cheese

Change

Move with the cheese

Enjoy Change!

Savor the adventure
And the taste of new cheese

Be Ready to Quickly Change

Again and Again
They keep moving the cheese²⁹

Learning organizations don't just do something new; they build their capacity for doing things in a new way by building capacity for ongoing change.³⁰ If all this sounds chaotic that's because it is! Say hello to the new world.

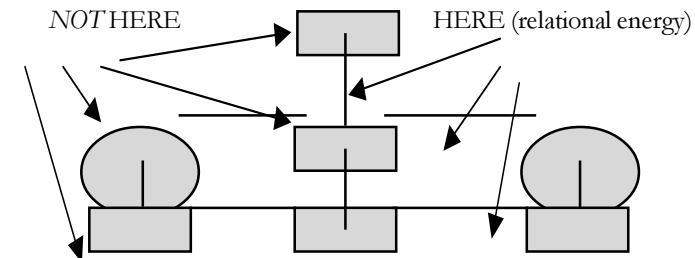
Quantum Mechanics Chaos Theory

*A complex system is one with lots of parts.*³¹

[Ralph Abraham, mathematician and master of understatement]

Two things about quantum mechanics and chaos theory must be understood. First, chaos is not new. It was with God in the very beginning and it forms the basis for all creation/ creativity, not to mention human creation stories. The word chaos first appeared in a book called *Theogony*, by Hesiod, one of the early Greek poets. In Hesiod's creation poem, chaos does not mean disorder but rather represents an abstract cosmic principle referring to the source of all creation.³² Out of chaos God created and ordered the world in a way that humans could grasp. Humans have been limited by that simplistic view until recently when quantum physics generated a crack in our perspective. With the help of mathematics and computer generated imagery, chaos reveals itself not to be "chaotic" at all but quite visibly self-organizing. From ferns to broccoli florets, from canyons to clouds, human kind has begun to decipher the underlying structures of a heretofore-thought world of randomness. It turns out that chaos is not random at all. Humans simply had too narrow a view. Plot out the activity, take a long view, and pieces of the chaos seem magically drawn to each other. Scientists have dubbed the organizing influences of chaos, "strange attractors."³³ Management and leadership researchers wonder whether strange attractors exist among the chaos of people—but more on that later.

The second thing one must understand is that chaos theory is all about relationships. Let me attempt to convey my own understanding by example, leaning heavily on Margaret Wheatley. Imagine an organizational chart with the lines drawn in-between different positions or departments. Think of the connecting links not as lines of authority but rather as channels of creative energy flowing into the making of new ideas or things. Such a schematic centers the viewer not on the fixed roles, people, or departments—as if frozen in place—but instead aims the eye toward the space in-between, the places of energy exchange. People and/ or roles and/ or departments are not fixed but dynamic. For example, the senior pastor does not contain an associate pastor any more than the governing board of a church contains the senior pastor. One role does not *contain* but rather *involves* the other in an ongoing swap of constantly fluctuating energy. Chaos theory calls our attention to the space in-between; the energy levels, interactions, proceedings, and relationships. Remarks Wheatley, if we sketched an organization using an S-matrix process it would depict energy at any given time and "our attention would be directed to the energy needed to achieve a desired outcome."³⁴



An "S-matrix" organization examines the lines between organizational positions.

The Second Law of Dynamics also has input into this conversation as we draw closer to applying science to leadership. It proposes that any system that closes itself to outside influence will wear down as a result of giving off energy that it cannot retrieve, resulting in a state of entropy. In textbook thermodynamics language, such an isolated system would first evolve to a state of equilibrium, followed by a period of decline marked by an incapacity for change and diminished productivity. By contrast, an open system remains in a state of non-equilibrium, always a bit off-balance, using new information and means to formulate an ongoing "out-of-balance" balance. The penetration by external influence does not result in co-opting the system but

rather results in stimulating a more resilient, energetic, and self-governing system. If that sounds paradoxical then I have achieved the scientific point.³⁵

Openness to environmental information over time spawns a firmer sense of identity, one that is less permeable to externally induced change. Some fluctuations will always break through, but what comes to dominate the system over time is not environmental influences, but the self-organizing dynamics of the system itself. High levels of autonomy and identity result from staying open to information from the outside.³⁶

The self-governing characteristic serves the system well in unstable settings by facilitating orderly transitions. As a result we discover another surprising paradox, *freedom* and *order* do not oppose one another but in partnership they produce appropriate structures, responses, and autonomous systems.³⁷ Quoting:

I find pleasure in letting these new concepts swirl about me. Like clouds, they appear, transform, and move on. Clouds themselves are self-organizing, changing into thunderstorms, hurricanes, or rain fronts with the influx of atmospheric energy or foreign particles. We are capable of similar transformations when we trust that new thoughts and ideas can self-organize in the environment of our minds and our organizations. And we would do well to take clouds more seriously. They are spectacular examples of strange and unpredictable systems; structured in ways we never imagined possible. “After all, how do you hold a hundred tons of water in the air with no visible means of support? You build a cloud.”^{38 39}

The science of this is all fantastically stimulating and loads of fun until we apply it to traditional Christian leadership in America. Then, the seven last words of the church *SHOUT*, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Thomas Bandy compares the process of traditional

churches (denominations and congregations) to a croquet game, with hoops everywhere, a rigid game plan to be followed, and the unambitious goal of just getting through it all. Or, in an even less appealing metaphor, he likens traditional church process to plumbing; it has a fixed path dictating source and destination for all the energy flow. Ouch. In contrast, he compares thriving denominations and congregations to a jai alai game; “the goal is to be caught and thrown back—at high velocity—into the game (world),” or, an “electromagnetic field in which energy is accelerated and then released to unknown destinations.”⁴⁰ This would sound like quantum mechanics in Los Alamos but more probably like chaos (dare we say anarchy?) in Eugene. What then do we need from 21st century leaders in the church?

21st Century Leaders

Some confusion exists around the concepts of *leadership* and *management* to the extent that people often interchange the terms. Business literature clearly distinguishes between the two. Credit Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus for clarity: “To manage means to bring about, to accomplish, to have charge of or responsibility for, to conduct. Leading is influencing, guiding in direction, course, action, opinion. The distinction is crucial. Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing.”⁴¹ Put another way, “The distinctive role of leadership (in a volatile environment especially) is the quest for ‘know-why’ ahead of ‘know-how’.”⁴²

Both management and leadership offer extremely positive values and great importance. We manage money, time, and details but according to Peter Drucker (management consultant to God), “One does not ‘manage’ people. The task is to lead people. And the goal is to make productive the specific strengths and knowledge of each individual.”⁴³ Managing people is an attempt to make them responsible by taking responsibility for their responsibility, which, in the end, only serves to heighten their dependency on the one taking responsibility. Taking responsibility for another person actually obstructs the possibility that they would take responsibility for themselves.⁴⁴ If the language feels confusing, imagine how the people caught in the control trap feel? As opposed to managing people, a leader fosters and supports the responsibility of others, or, as Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal put it, responsible leaders “create conditions that promote authorship.”⁴⁵ Focus on helping others to identify and claim *their* mission and build their competency. Managing people

condemns them into a downward spiral of dependency and incompetence. If the church reader can avoid getting hung up on the word ‘customers,’ Peter Drucker (at age 89?) lifts up the hunger for inclusive management in a surprising example (in a management book!).

The starting point for management in the 21st century is “what customers consider value.” One example is the pastoral mega-churches that have been growing so very fast in the United States since 1980, and that are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last thirty years. Almost unknown thirty years ago—there were no more than a thousand churches then that exceeded two thousand people—there are now some twenty thousand of them. And while all the traditional denominations have steadily declined, the mega-churches have exploded. They have done so because they asked, “What is value?” to a nonchurchgoer. And they have found it is different from what churches traditionally thought they were supplying. The greatest value to the thousands who now throng the mega-churches—and do so weekdays and Sundays—is a spiritual experience rather than a ritual, and equally management responsibility for volunteer service, whether in the church itself or, through the church, in the community.⁴⁶

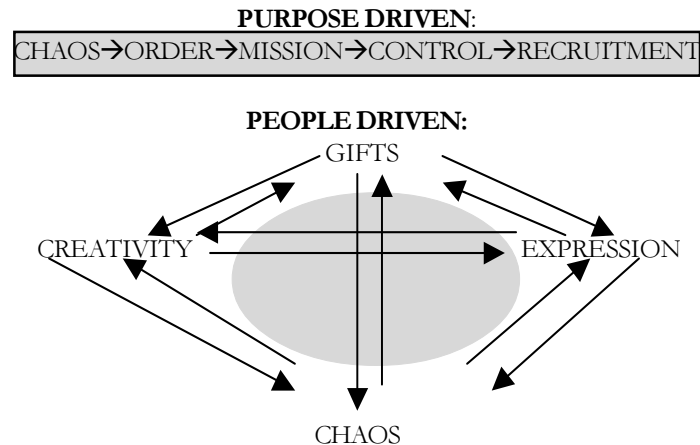
I don’t wish to raise the worship style debate—and I am not—so turn your focus on the volunteer’s need to be responsible for management. The obvious implication here is that traditional churches over-managing their people, creating dependency rather than authorship. We must commit ourselves to discovering and valuing each person as the manager of their own service, a leader in their own right. And, honoring biblical imagery and the importance of all parts of the body, we must insist on valuing each role as equally significant. This can be difficult for us because humans clearly value different roles

over others and often confuse the value of a role with the value of a person. We’re different, but while we pay verbal homage to diversity, traditional churches most often reflect demographic homogeneity. Churches institutionalize this even by the nature of their procedural language, ‘assimilating’ new members. That sounds like a threat from the Borg in a Star Trek episode, “You will be assimilated into the collective.” The Borg represents the very essence of evil, assimilating only what they need from a life form, disregarding the individual.

Unlike the Borg, we are willing partners in the body of Christ, each part interdependent on the others and holding equal value. Yet, most do not fully commit themselves as threads in the knitting of a whole. When conflict arises we question the unity of the church. When new ideas come we put them through the ringer. When we don’t like the decisions we withdraw our support and sometimes our membership. Psychiatrist Scott Peck writes, “The process of community-building begins with a commitment—a commitment of the members not to drop out, a commitment to hang in there through thick and thin, through the pain of chaos and emptiness. *Such commitment has not generally been required by the Church.* Now the time has come to require it. For without that commitment community is impossible.”⁴⁷ [emphasis added]

Our world is experiencing one of the greatest paradigm shifts in history *right in our lifetime*. At the moment, we are over-managing and under-leading our people. We won’t become effective leaders by studying group dynamics, system theory, or management techniques. Leaders first study themselves.⁴⁸ We must learn the gifts and passions of our own soul and strive to identify and respect the same in the lives of those around us. We must equip ourselves with our own, clearly conceived and clearly defined positions in order to stand, self-differentiated from the organizations we serve. We must be conscious and strong enough to remain differentiated so as to make our unique contribution. At the same time, we must be caring enough to understand and accept the differentiation of others, welcoming their one-of-a-kind contribution as well. We must resist any disrespectful notion that we can conceive and define others, thus ending the “triangle of motivating *their* minds, or overcoming *their* resistance.”⁴⁹ Once we discover this path we can tend the lines in-between, the channels of energy in the S-matrix. Remarks Wheatley, “I have changed what I pay attention to in an organization. Now I look carefully at how a workplace organizes its relationships; not its tasks, functions, and hierarchies.”⁵⁰

Down With Purpose Driven Ministry—Up With People Driven Ministry



In a People Driven Church it would be difficult to define the mission/expression of ministry (unless the mission was to be people driven) because organisms are inherently messy and gifted people are quite unpredictable. One never knows what they'll do.

A few weeks ago I had a profound experience while undergoing arthroscopic knee surgery. I asked the anesthesiologist to give me 'spinal' rather than 'general' anesthetic (so I could watch the video monitor). Although well informed about the procedure, I was ill prepared for the reality. I had a complete absence of sensation, from my belly button to my toe-tips. My nerve memory told me my left leg was lying still, exactly next to my right leg. I puzzled to see the physician's assistant placing a leg in the surgical carriage; my left leg but without any knowing on my part. It struck me—I *can feel whole without being whole*. I had good bone structure, muscle tissue, circulation of blood and oxygen, but the spinal had masked off part of my body. Completely blocked, I could not manage the points in-between.

As I constructed this paper I wondered what blockage has occurred that, still being one body—and we are still one body—we can no longer communicate with the whole body. I thought about organizations and about organisms, I remembered a passage from, *The New Reformation*, which revolutionized my understanding of church from *organization* to *organism*. Greg Odgen wrote, "[...] the church in

its essence is nothing less than a *life-pulsating people who are animated by the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ*,⁵¹ not *organization* but *organism*! I wondered [...] if this is so what keeps so much of the body apart?

Last weeks junk mail included promotional literature for *The Sun*, "It's a magazine completely unlike any other, always personal, always meaningful, always unexpected." If that were so I'd be willing to pay dearly. Right. What if the church were always personal, always meaningful, always surprising? Bandy says people don't join churches because they want to join a church but because they want to be made well. He says they don't want first to be *called* but to be *healed*.⁵² More wondering: does this help explain why young people stay away? Kids want to know if this stuff called Christianity works? What do we show them?

"In the beginning God [...]" (Genesis 1:1). From the beginning of scripture the order is first *who*, then *what*. The ancient tellers of the Judeo-Christian creation story first identified the person, and only after, the activity. This confuses most people because most people believe that the person *is* their activity. Walking by the sea Jesus saw two brothers, "And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). In the role model of Jesus, people come first.

While researching this paper I discovered the writing of Jim Collins, who spent five years researching a vexing question, why do some companies make the leap from good to great and others don't? His research team identified an elite set of companies who had sustained great performance for at least fifteen years having never been exceptional prior to that period. They also identified companies that were good but never seemed to achieve greatness. They wondered what distinguished one set from the other? In the spirit of learning organizations Collins has published the findings in a book titled *Good to Great*. My obvious pleasure with this work may taint my objectivity a bit, but since this is a postmodern world we can let that go with a giggle. One directive Collins gave to his research team was not to focus on the leader. Enough, he said, of the mythical, bigger-than-life leader. Find the sustaining growth energy in the workplace but don't isolate the Chief Executive Officer. But every good to great company shared a leadership pattern that refuted his instruction. A good scientist, Collins accepted the data even when it confronted his personal belief (take notes, all people of the church). And, in the end, he made this surprise a main point of the book:

The executives who ignited the transformations from good to great did not first figure out where to drive the bus and then get the people to take it there. No, they first got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and then figured out where to drive it [...] If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we'll figure out how to take it someplace great.⁵³

In three parts,

- 1 prioritizing *who*, not *what*, permits ready adaptation to a changing world. “But if people are on the bus because of who else is on the bus, then it’s much easier to change direction.”
- 2 “If you have the right people on the bus, the problem of how to motivate and manage people largely goes away. The right people don’t need to be tightly managed or fired up [...] they will be self-motivated.”
- 3 “Great vision without great people is irrelevant.” Rather than creating a strategy for change, good to great companies *always focused first on people*. They injected “an endless stream of talent.”⁵⁴

And for the mere mortals among us, Collins adds, “dowdy doesn’t count. It’s possible to turn good into great in the most unlikely of situations.”⁵⁵ I will grant you this, getting the “wrong people” off the bus in the church creates huge problems. It may have to be done in some special circumstances (ask any church who has had a special circumstance). So let’s focus our attention on “the right people” but mind this, the hunt is not for the right people to carry forward *our* vision or satisfy *our* determined need. Instead this is a hunt for leaders who embody the characteristics of disciplined people, with disciplined thought, and the capacity for disciplined action.⁵⁶

The first rule in the leadership hunt is this; if you question whether you’ve found the right person, keep looking. How many times in the church do we fill the slot just to have it filled? Don’t do it. Wait it out. Rule number two; make the people changes when you know it needs to be done. Says Collins, “It is unfair to the people who need to get off the bus to defer.” I delayed terminating a church secretary for incessant gossiping on extremely confidential issues. I own the responsibility for the damage that ensued. I will never again hesitate. Last tip; don’t have your finest people trying to solve your biggest problems. Instead, put those blessed with determination and creativity on your greatest opportunities. You may get *good* by solving your problems but you will only get *great* by seizing your best opportunities.⁵⁷

The Chaos of First *Who*, Then *What*

A question: *What is keeping young people from getting on the bus?*

A declaration: *What is keeping young people from getting on the bus.*

We need to decide which bus the Church wants to drive? Are we driven by *what* or *who*? Let’s return to the original questions, “*What* are we going to do?” and, “*Who* is going to be there?” so as to flip their order in keeping with *Good to Great* research. I believe our preoccupation with *what* is keeping talented young *whos* off the bus. Why fit in a mold when your special intelligence and creativity will be treasured in science, medicine, research, social service, and O so many more places that seek the gifted ones? “*Who* is going to be there?” Make it the question and shazam, chaos. And, and this is very good, strange attractors.

In the planning stage I asked the American Red Cross trainer if he would prepare people for disaster relief work that he knew might not volunteer to do it? Of course, he replied, training is important and not everyone who gets trained will think they fit. On the first night of NCC’s Disaster Relief Training, he reiterated saying, “Part of our Red Cross goal is to find a niche for every body that takes advantage of their unique skills. There’s room for everyone. If you don’t find a match here then keep looking for your place to serve.”

That search is driven by the needs of each person to find meaning

in their life, which clearly include feelings of worth and self-esteem.⁵⁸ Viktor Frankl raised the urgency declaring that the questions of meaning burn under our fingernails.⁵⁹ Robert Kegan connected meaning to community, defying American individualism as he noted that our meaning depends on other people to recognize us.⁶⁰ Here is an opportunity and a cutting edge for the Church. The body of Christ called Church must recognize people for their God-given gifts, not for the roles they fill. Church must ask about their passions and feed their dreams, their dreams, not ours. Your journey is already too difficult to follow my dream. Bandy writes, “One accompanies Christ, not out of obligation to fulfill someone else’s mission, or some institution’s mission, but out of eagerness to fulfill ‘my’ mission.”⁶¹ To each person God has given gifts for the common good. When the community affirms them, when we are called upon to employ them for the good of others, confidence and faith builds. What is the mission? That wonderful question must be asked pointedly of each gifted person (that’s all of them, one at a time). I am pleading here for a Church centered first in the children of God—the who, not a Church centered first in a principle, purpose, or program that first leads to what.

Robert Coles reminds us that the root word for volunteer is from the Latin *voluntas*, that is, a choice, from *velle*, to wish.⁶² Everyone is wishing for meaning and significance. To gain significance the work must be theirs, not someone else’s. It has to be our Church, not my church. The business professors understand: “Everyone’s different. A big part of love is caring enough to find out what really matters to others.”⁶³ Decades ago Carl Rogers wrote these words, “By taking over the conceptions of others as our own, we lose contact with the potential wisdom of our own functioning and lose confidence in ourselves.”⁶⁴ Each person has a responsibility to understand who he or she was created to be and to let others know. Drucker: People have the right and responsibility to help others understand how they best function and request that they communicate to their strengths.⁶⁵ No square peg should suffer round presumptions. I believe deeply that God asks us to express our gifts, which sometimes fit nicely with church recruiting. But barring the fit, we are asked to first be faithful to the gift, to ourselves, and to the common good that God intended us to deliver. Expression of the individual’s gift may not fit church needs and it might surprise everyone, including God. But neither is an expression of the gift optional. Jesus said, “Go.” He didn’t say, “If you get a chance, stop by.”

Young People, Young People, Where Art Thou?

And this brings the conversation back to young people in the church, or more pointedly, the absence of young people in the church. In Martin Marty’s book, *Education, Religion, and the Common Good*, he reminds us that argument is

Founded on disagreement about answers to problems. Conversation, by contrast, we defined as being determined by questions. In conversation, we make suggestions, we are tentative, we try out this, we imagine that, we are attentive listeners, and we speak in ways that show we are open to change [...] we arrive at options together.⁶⁶

But according to research on youth culture by George Barna, “One of the skills sadly absent from so many youth ministries and churches these days is that of conversation.”⁶⁷ This precludes one of the time-tested paths for spiritual development of the younger generation—the mentoring of older folks.

Growing up in a postmodern culture, young people experience wide input from many sources. It is difficult to distinguish genuine parts of Christianity from popular myth and culture. Are angels daring and dancing like John Travolta in the movie, *Michael*, or like the meddling ones on television in *Touched by an Angel*? Or neither? We need time and gentle ways of walking with young people as they process outlandish ideas and struggle for clarity. I’ve often heard an older person’s passing remark, “I wish I could be young and know what I know now. But you can teach me, or better still, someone younger. Erickson continues on saying that adults of a given society owe the younger generation a safeguarding of the opportunities and the conditions in which the basic strengths can be developed. They provide the foundations for all future generativity, creativity, and productivity.”⁶⁸ And Carl Jung, challenging elders 70 years ago, wrote these spiritual words, “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life’s morning.”⁶⁹

Not all the responsibility can or should be assumed by the grown-ups. Youth, for their part, must understand that access to information and exposure to adult venue does not merit truth or maturity. Fromm

chastened anyone who would listen, “Get over the naive idea that you need no master, no guide, no model, that you can find out in a lifetime what the greatest minds of the human species have discovered in many thousands of years—and each one of them building with the stones and sketches their predecessors left them.”⁷⁰ The problem is finding mentors. Many older people fear the role. Many young people do not know how to search. Young pastors complain of a lack of older people who can relate to their problems. They wander— isolated from peers and mature colleagues.⁷¹

Teenagers feel this vacancy too. In the studies conducted by Barna, 41% of the respondent teens “could not think of any individual whom they respect enough to consider a role model.”⁷² A *mentor* in Greek literature revealed the qualities of “an instructor, a moral example, a wise and revered figure” and offered an “infectious capacity to help a young (person) grow and find his (or her) way.”⁷³ *Who* will *mentor*, in the ancient sense, the youth of Church? *Who* will walk with them to understanding? *Who* will be their answer to *who* is going to be there?

Here is my reminder, Steven! Pay attention to the gifts and mission of God’s people. Tend their connections to one another and to their source of power. It’s great to have *your* vision and *your* purpose. Better still for them to have theirs.

What are we Going to do?

Listen, watch, and wait. “Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.”⁷⁴

Remember. Vocation comes from the Latin word for voice. “Vocation does not mean a goal I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”⁷⁵

“All of us have our explanations as to why the young are not joining the ranks of ordained ministry in significant numbers. The real question—and the one that remains largely unanswered at the institutional, congregational, and pastoral levels—is this, “Do we have clear and sufficient reasons as to why they should?”⁷⁶

Yes we do. The clear and sufficient reason is that God has gifted some to carry the mantle of leadership in the Body of Christ. We have missed their offerings, not seen their yearnings, and hidden our face

from them by our busi-ness. We have set aside their new ideas, bored them in church school, and misunderstood their worldview. But those who have the gifts will find that life holds less meaning for them because they have not found the place of expression. Our role as Church, as it has always been, is to be their community, recognize their passions, engage in conversation, see and affirm their gifts, offer support as they discover and clarify their path, sponsor their mission, and in general, provide a giant “yes” to their life.

Vocation does not come from a voice “out there”

Calling me to become something I am not.

It comes from a voice “in here”

Calling me to be the person I was born to be,

To fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.⁷⁷

Who is going to be there?

God is. And I will be.

What are we going to do?

Your mission.

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