

Chapter 10

Church Life Beyond the Bushel

Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket,
but on a lampstand and it gives light
to all who are in the house
(Matt. 5:15)

At one point the last stereo system ever fitted with an 8-track tape player rolled off the assembly line. Immediately somewhere out there a company that had specialized in manufacturing tape parts—tiny rubber wheels and other gizmos—found themselves without a reason for existence. Probably a few of them hung on, resisting change while hoping for a resurgence of the large clunky players. It was a revival that was never to come. Statistically speaking, some companies out there must have gone bust. However, more astute manufacturers had probably been aware for some time that the 8-track tape would become the next Do-Do bird. They reconsidered their mission, retooled, and then successfully reentered the electronics industry from another angle.

The now defunct eight-track market is an object lesson for all of us. It reminds us that we are never above a robust critique of what we are doing and why. Has our mission been identified? If so, are we still on target with it? Are there necessary adjustments to be made concerning its application? Most sweeping of all, was the mission itself correct to begin with?

Whenever we state a guiding purpose or articulate an aim we're dealing with the concept of mission. And where the mission of a group is lofty, noble, and within reasonable reach, people are bound to get on board with it. One of the most attractive features of early LC involvement was the momentum attached to its mission of "taking the earth" (and a horde of similar rallying cries). These phrases were a bit radical for some. A German believer once told me that he stayed away from the LC Movement because his country had already gotten involved with "taking the earth" once and it had turned disastrous. Still, the core idea of enlightening the world with sublime biblical truths seemed harmonious enough with evangelical goals.

Eventually that superficial resemblance would fade. Down the rabbit hole of LC nuance, "Taking the earth" became inexorably hitched to "spreading the Ministry" which in turn, meant starting churches and training centers that were outposts of the Living Stream fold. If dissatisfaction emerged with the arrangement, someone could always point up to the top of the well, at the tiny circular patch of sky far overhead, and speak of the "heavenly vision" and how that Paul "was not disobedient" to it.

Meanwhile, the frenetic pace of Movement life continued to give a sense of forward motion, however warped it had become. Various projects and moves spilled out on a regular basis absorbing member energy and money. But after churches had existed in that state for decades, the plug was pulled. Certain congregations then became post-LSM, which meant that they were no longer acting as ministry franchises. In the ensuing vacuum, saints suddenly found themselves asking, "What are we doing now?" Perhaps more than anything else, that is the question of the hour. As long as it is not answered, churches that have severed ties with Movement headquarters will face a gradual drift without the anchor of LSM moves, publications and

programs. Ironically, they stand to share the same fate as their estranged sibling Movement churches. The difference is that Movement churches will likely last longer since a powerful triad of pride, money, and tradition buttresses their existence.

Filling In the Blanks

Post-Movement churches must fill in the purpose blank if they want to survive. Newcomers and even existing members will find it difficult to invest precious time and money into a directionless church. No one wants to tithe for the sole purpose of keeping the utilities on at the meeting hall. Neither is anyone likely to be inspired by a goal of perfect meeting attendance for the next fifty years.

A church not framed by coherent, practical purpose is a “widget”—an object whose identity and use is essentially unknown. “Widget” churches are usually dotted with telltale signs that the missional concept is not very strong with them. For one thing, their members notice that the strongest examples of consecration among them were in the past. Young hearts that are willing to risk all for Christ seem scarce now. People are habitually late to meetings or sporadic in their attendance. Grounds are poorly kept except by the faithful few who are willing to keep doing it until the end of the age. When guests appear on Sunday morning, they tend to be members of other local churches. When they are genuinely new, they rarely last for long.

Additionally in this kind of church, golden experiences of the Christian life all seem securely book marked in the past. “I’ll never forget the Hebrews training” or “I loved that crazy brothers’ house” are cherished memories that tend to have no contemporary counterpart. Nothing, it seems, can compete with the glorious past. This is especially so in the lives of post-

LC Movement people. Why? Because to a large extent, all of the idyllic past we so fondly remember occurred within a mission-charged atmosphere. Even without a succinct mission statement, the morale of a large group of people zealous for “truth” was powerfully motivating. The prospect of spreading that truth was even more exciting. A circus-like ambience at international gatherings helped. Long ponderous outlines, boisterous performances at microphones, calls for full-time workers (that were generously answered), and “exercising the spirit” at ear-splitting volume served to heighten the feeling that “these people are going somewhere.”

Of course zeal alone doesn’t make something right. Even erroneous or derailed missions can galvanize people. Consider the religious hypocrites who “traversed land and sea to make one proselyte and made them twicfold a son of hell than themselves.” We also find a crowd in Acts chanting “Great is Diana of the Ephesians for two hours” and devotees of Baal cutting themselves with lancets for six hours in 2 Kings. All were examples of empty religious energy, driven by some misguided purpose or another. Then, add today’s cult suicides, the indefatigable door to door efforts of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, and the murderous works of Islamic extremists. The passion underlying each of these examples proves nothing about the inherent truth of the systems promoted. In fact, the cases cited are warped cargo riding on the rails of mission gone haywire. But good, bad, or ugly, they supply living proof that in the absence of more accurate knowledge, people will ultimately latch onto some purpose that makes sense of their universe.

The need for a cause is part and parcel of our God-created human make-up. Eviscerate Christians of mission and they will be like a compass in a world where the magnetic poles have been removed. The needle will drift towards any random metal object—a belt buckle here and a paper clip there. In the case of

post LC Movement churches, the “needle” typically aligns itself upon traces of bygone Movement ideals—forms, practices, and thoughts associated with being the only proper gathering of Christians in a city. No doubt these default settings can provide a comfortable familiarity for ex-Movement members. But my observation to date is that the many curious theological accessories that we hold as part of “the vision” rarely help post-Movement churches. Instead, where we currently borrow and adapt these items into the church’s mission, the church itself tends to become unnecessarily burdened. We find ourselves not being allowed to do this or get involved with that. We cannot use this or participate in that. Like overloaded ships it will be difficult for our assemblies to manage any appreciable speed or maneuverability. Once Christ and the simple community of the redeemed is not our only cargo, “church life” gets complicated, prohibitive, and heavy.

Sounds like Mission but It’s Not

In today’s post-movement matrix, churches are going to need clear, unadorned statements of mission. That remark might surprise you. After all, aren’t we more than clear? Volume-wise, probably no group has stressed the topic of eternal purpose more than we have. Yet lofty teachings don’t easily translate into action. For instance, to say that the purpose of a church is to be the organic testimony of Christ, an expression of the triune God is fine as far as ecclesiology goes. But these ideals tend to be statements of being rather than of intent. “Being” identifies what we are. “Intent” relates to mission. Yes, statements of being do contain imbedded missional concepts and perceptive thinkers can unravel them. The problem is that the less insightful will find such interpretations a bit dubious. What does “testimony” “organic” and “express” really

come down to, anyway? These words seem inclusive of every general thing and at the same time they do not mean anything in particular. Eventually to the pragmatic mind, a mission that embraces everything looks like nothing. Jesus understood this. As we will see later, He did not leave it up to us to deduce what the church ought to be doing after He ascended. He left explicit authoritative commands to accomplish certain things.

It is extremely important not to blur the distinction between “being” and “doing.” When we see our mission as “being,” then we fixate upon purported church orthodoxy, “straining the gnats” of various forms and structures and the numerous issues attached to them. Doubtless, an understanding of the church and its holy, heavenly, non-sectarian nature is important. Healthy ecclesiology is critical as the starting point and framework of any church, but it cannot be the mission statement. Any group whose chief aim is self-preservation and maintenance will find itself in a closed loop. Paradoxically, fresh resources can only appear inside of it from what is already inside of it. This is a bit like turning your car’s air system on “re-circulate.” It will seem that there is a rush of fresh air blowing from the vents, but it really is just old air that you had formerly breathed, yawned, coughed and sneezed in.

Many Local Churches unknowingly go on in re-circulate mode. Although their most cherished teachings are full of purposeful sounding language, the practical reality is that they have a closed loop mission. The goal of their existence in a city is to exist in a city. It is very difficult to break out of that pattern. For some reason, when LC workers or leaders discuss the subject of the church, the oil of fellowship quickly turns into maple syrup. Machinery gums up that should have vigorously moved toward fulfilling the Lord’s more definite commands. For instance, introduce the subject of the Local Ground—one church, one city—and hours

will be spent going around the mulberry bush with various points and views. Ask what the church should be named and there will be more of the same—concerns for the right amount of article adjectives and prepositions. All of this is incomprehensible unless you have gotten used to life under a bushel. For there, out of sight of the world, the perpetuation of a church subculture makes perfect sense.

As the years pass, a Local Church can continue in a self-occupied state, completely obscured from the world. The congregation is unknown to area Christians, except for brief scuffles over whether the LC Movement is a cult. In terms of the city or community, the sum total of Local Church service contributions may well be zero. Its affect on the unsaved is typically limited to rare forays out from under the bushel to get some “new ones.” Then, it is hoped that those gathered will turn around and join the church underneath the bushel. No matter how we celebrate the inherent excellency of the lamp’s “being” with its golden nature, shape, and shining, all is meaningless under a basket.

There are other concepts of mission that LC members hold at least unconsciously. These are often wonderful items and to some degree they convey statements of intent. However they still fall short of the New Testament objective. One of the most highly cherished among them is the thought that our mission on earth is spiritual enjoyment. “We just need to enjoy the Lord” is a common response to proposals for action. Yes, the joy of the Lord has tremendous importance. For one thing it is an indicator of the quality of our current fellowship with God. It is also the fuel that enables us to live according to God’s will—“The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). Spiritual enjoyment has its particular place in the Christian life, but not as the end all. A church mission defined and dominated by enjoyment can easily turn subjective. Members will tend to be supremely occupied with their personal

condition, always striving for the quintessential happy state. They will treat legitimate external concerns as being annoyances to their inward repose. Even holy concerns like prayer, Christian meetings, and spiritual gifts will be appropriated solely as means for self-edification. Paul warned us of such an unbalanced approach (1 Cor. 14). Once the church sees its mission on earth as being its own bliss, the world becomes invisible to it and it becomes invisible to the world. The bushel has come.

Local Church members have another powerfully lodged concept that “truth” is their mission. Indeed, many exalted “high Peak truths” during the last decade to the point of obsession. Of course healthy teaching defines our content, our package, the very biblical reality we extend to the world. It is hard to overstate the importance of it. Yet the cargo itself is not the mission. Mining the riches of the Word is profitable but there is an old question: “What is the most important thing to ever come out of a mine? The answer is, the miner! We Christians have tunneled into the Bible in quests to extract gold, silver, iron, bronze. But if we don’t emerge from the mine to engage our community, who cares about any of it? The precious goods we have received will remain warehoused safely out of sight, underground—along with us. Achieving greater stages of clarity at the bottom of a hole cannot be our mission. It will be gratifying for those who prefer academic pursuits. The rest of us, however, will eventually grow tired of a classroom church life that does not connect with the rest of the human race. The bushel will have struck again.

The Mission in Plain View

Before it lifts a finger, any church interested in pursuing the New Testament mission needs to have a certain prerequisite understanding. The Lord Jesus

identified this mandatory concept in two of the four gospels when someone asked Him, “What is the greatest commandment of all?” He replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength...and the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself...” (Mk. 12:30-31). Any mission will quickly become an empty, duty-driven exercise without love for God at its kernel. Likewise, the neighbors we are alleging to serve will become depersonalized objects of religious work if love is not the animating force in that service.

I dare not diminish the essential matter of love when the Lord said it was the first commandment and when the Apostle Paul said it “is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10), “never fails” (1 Cor. 13:8) and is the greatest among spiritual things (1 Cor. 13:13). Still, God wants more from us than our affectionate feelings. After all, His own redemptive love for mankind was unproven until it burst forth in the giving of His Son (John 3:16). Disconnected devotion doesn’t accomplish much for anyone. That’s why Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him. When Peter replied in the affirmative, the Lord didn’t nod, smile and back off. He added a series of “if then” statements—“Do you love Me?... “Feed My lambs,” “shepherd my sheep” “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). The greatest virtue described and commanded in the Bible is love for God and men. God, however, wants love to find significance in a mission of His own choosing.

The New Testament contains a richly textured body of commands stretching from prayer to forgiveness, from morality to church order. Any one of them could be isolated and made a direction in itself. This is why it is a good thing that the Lord Jesus delivered a clearly worded mission to us right before He left this world. His charges at the end of the four gospels form a composite that shaped first century apostolic labors and

then the very nature of Christian work for all time to come. The one in Mark, tells us to “preach the gospel to all creation” (Mk. 16:15). Luke’s account is slightly more layered, which says, “Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name” (Lk. 24:47).” John’s gospel says, “feed my lambs” and “shepherd my sheep” (Jn 21:15-16). Finally, the Gospel of Matthew goes the farthest by commanding us to “Make disciples” (Mt. 28:19). Thus the Lord defined the mission and the Apostles, the representatives of the church, received it.

The simple, unfettered charge in the gospel of Mark makes the kernel of all our duty a spoken word, a “witness” (c.f. Acts 1:8), empowered by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by our living. Surprisingly, we are never explicitly told to “go get people saved.” Instead, our duty is to go get the message out. This obviously saves the church from a lot of wrangling, wrestling, arguing, manipulating, or trying to talk people into things or out of things. We have not been ordered to do the Holy Spirit’s work of convicting men and drawing them to Christ. Nor should this word be confined to the inside of a meeting facility. “Go into all the world” means having a gospel with a suitcase handle on it. When we understand these simple instructions unencumbered with today’s evangelical extras of “closing the deal,” or the LC baggage of “Calling on the Lord three times,” then we can fearlessly take this gospel everywhere, simply speak it, and peacefully leave the results to the Lord Jesus. I recently read of a Christian who spends time sharing the Word in the environs of the Mormon temple in Utah. When fellow gospel preachers asked him why he chose such a difficult place to witness, he said that his duty was not to convert Mormons but to announce the good news. Once the word was faithfully spoken, he trusted that the Lord Jesus knew how to do the rest. When the whole church begins to gain this kind of assurance, something good will always seem to

be happening between church members and the unsaved people in their circle of life.

Our past church culture occasionally sought to codify exactly what ought to be spoken to the unsaved. Cavenuous differences were made between something called the “low gospel” and “the high gospel” as though there were two separate gospels that might be preached. Unfortunately what we ended up with was typically a steamer trunk, bulging at the sides with truths from Genesis to Revelation. In reality, our core message, as commanded by Jesus, was quite a bit less complicated. He told us to preach “repentance and remission of sins in His name” (Luke 24:47). “But I’m tired of sin and repentance topics. They’re kind of low,” the Bible-saturated Christian says. “There’s so much more to talk about.” Obviously there is the whole counsel of God to be taken into account, but the central theme to the unsaved must always be their problem with God, their need to change their mind about the way they’ve been living, and the gracious gift of God’s forgiveness. Please remember that repentance and forgiveness are much more than subjects for a Friday night snack-and-Bible-study. They describe the redemptive truth that actually releases perishing slaves. In the real world that exists outside of our enjoyable meetings, sin is a terrible, destructive force that is still at work everywhere. It’s a holocaust of souls out there. If we’re bored with the twin themes of repentance and forgiveness, then it’s probably because we no longer have the exhilaration of seeing people liberated from death. Instead we’ve allowed these simple, potent points of grace to become theological trinkets. Our joy must advance from the gospel studied to the gospel applied. Only those who remain disconnected from the front lines of life will arrogantly persist in labeling redemptive miracles as “low Christianity.”

Happily, People are going to respond to our announcement. Some are going to believe. This is why

at the end of the Gospel of John, the Lord told Peter to “shepherd my sheep” and “feed my lambs.” And so He added another layer to our mission, demonstrating that we are not restricted to encounters with non-Christians. Post-salvation shepherding encompasses all efforts to help believers stay on the “the way, the truth, and the life.” The would-be shepherding church must understand its role to include leadership, protection, and course correction, but that it never involves manipulation tactics like shaming or flattery. We are, after all, hoping to see the sheep continue in the living Person of Jesus Christ and not merely doing things to personally please us. The connected thought of feeding the lambs has to do with nourishing their spirit. No doubt this involves teaching. However, there is a vast difference between feeding and indoctrination. The feeder offers words of scriptural truth that have been “cut straight,” joined with personal experience and served up with a humble attitude. The programmer on the other hand, insists on the peculiar doctrinal positions of his group and nicely rams them down the gullet of anyone perceived as open. Both approaches have their outcome. The former results in healthy happy functional sheep. The latter results in dogmatic automatons. The world is afloat in corrupt information. Therefore, the church must take seriously the mission of offering the genuine milk and meat of the word to the Lord’s children.

The final and farthest reaching missional component is found in Matthew. The punchline of that gospel has long been thought to say, “preach the gospel to all the nations.” The actual wording is to “Disciple all the nations.” Again, some understand this command as being the same as “Teaching all the nations” as if to offer instruction in theological tenets. But that isn’t quite what was meant, either. Certainly teaching is involved, per Matthew 28:20, but in context it does not summon the image of disciples enthusiastically waving

outlines over their heads and commending the richness of the ministry. Instead, the teaching in Matthew leads to literal observation of what Jesus taught. All the subsequent nuggets that later develop in the epistles are contained within that gospel, such as the development of one's ministry (the parable of the talents), relationships among the believers (forgiveness, reconciliation), matters specific to the church (its foundation, building up, and authority), morality and virtue, healthy spirituality, spiritual warfare, the kingdom of God, salvation, and a number of other things. The Lord's expectation in delivering this body of truth goes well beyond inspiration and education. It terminates in obedience. Not until the Christian life reaches inward and outward conformity to Christ will the Lord's mission of discipleship be satisfied.

Some may argue that the parting charges of the Jesus to the apostles were exactly that—only apostolic, restricted to the twelve and in the Gospel of John, limited to Peter himself. But in reality all genuine Christianity is apostolic. The apostles were representative repositories of truth, as Jesus prayed, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their Word" (John 17:20). So when they were told to preach, feed, and disciple, then we were also, through the spiritual connective tissue of the church. The body of Christ must locally integrate the New Testament mission into the context of its members going to school, working, playing, raising families—in general, living life within its specific geographic and demographic boundaries. And, as ripples on a pond, it should anticipate spreading from that place to gradually larger areas (c.f. Acts 1:8).

Where churches refuse to carry out this plainly commanded four-fold mission—evangelizing, feeding/shepherding, discipling—opting instead for some other mysterious purpose, then what can be said except that disobedience is involved? We do well to

involve ourselves with the view of God's eternal purpose as espoused in the books of Ephesians, Revelation, and elsewhere. Eventually however, those heavenly visions need to land here on earth in someone's sneakers. They should become our daily mission, the pragmatic lightning rod that connects eternity to time, revelation to realization, and, yes, God to man.

Well-versed LC members have for many years heard about the primacy of the church and the necessity of building it up. Some may wonder why, if the Lord's four-fold gospel mission is truly comprehensive, He didn't include "Go build up My church" among His parting commands. But looking at the "preach-repent-feed-disciple" mission and not seeing in it the building up of the church is religious blindness. It is like observing all the things on a construction site—excavation, electrical wiring, plumbing, steel and concrete work—but not being able to perceive in them an emerging skyscraper.

Theoretically, the New Testament mission sounds good—so good that most churches claim it as their priority. This includes groups like the LC Movement, whose members migrate to new cities, countries, and continents under the impression that they are mirroring the book of Acts. Perhaps a superficial resemblance between the two will hold up for a while until the dust settles and the congregational plant has been established. Then similarities between the authentic New Testament mission and that of the church program will prove terribly faint. A congregation might own the correct mission statement or a paraphrase of it, but in practice, not really care about it at all. Rather than look at mission acronyms like BNPB, YPG, GTCA or insider lingo such as "truthize" or "churchize," we should examine the spiritual habits and structure of the group. That is where the congregation's real attitude toward the New Testament mission will become apparent:

- When asked to state the mission of the church, can members annunciate something very close to what the Lord Jesus commanded in the gospels or do they resort to weaving explanations composed of esoteric revelations?
- Has the congregation grown appreciably over time by adding the unchurched/unsaved or does it rely on growth through proselytizing from other Christian groups?
- Does the weekly congregational schedule reflect a priority for involvement with the unchurched/unsaved or are members tied up with internal activities (or worse), warned against having friends and doing worldly things?
- Do scheduled gatherings offer the meat and milk of the Word, or do they mainly just function to serve the interests of veteran Christians?
- Is the overall presentation of the church culturally sensitive for the sake of welcoming the community or is it riddled with language and practices that only make sense to the church itself?
- Do members have a habit of following-up on visitors because they are genuinely interested in them, or do they only get involved if it means that they could “gain a new one?”
- Are there local opportunities to receive mentoring for a deeper Christian life or are visitors offered an avalanche of books, videos, and invitations to conferences?
- Are there local opportunities to receive coaching in order to develop personal

ministries or is the prevailing attitude that ministries are a threat to the congregation?

Obviously if the church in question mostly answers the above survey in the negative, then it's time for some "come-to-Jesus" honesty. No matter what else is said, the life, attitudes, and behavior of a congregation—its very DNA—tell the real story about its mission.

Congregational Vision—Getting Practical

We could beat ourselves up for not being more mission-minded toward our respective cities but that still wouldn't get the job done. Nor do sheepish concessions like "Yeah, our church really needs to get into that more." Such vague, open-ended acknowledgments are ladders without rungs. A mission will quickly stall if there are no practical resolutions upon which it can ascend. Where should we start? This question is far simpler if the lone Christian answers it. As we deal with groups of people, however, it becomes another story. Even smaller congregations have a diversity of gifts and abilities. Tapping into the power of its "priesthood" requires a team work approach.

The first step lies in establishing a common vision. According to LC Movement culture, "vision" is a word powerfully steeped in universal, big picture sentiment. It is welded to a host of other terms like "organic," "consummation," "dispensing," and "eternal economy." Here, we won't use it that way. Instead, we'll use "vision" referring to how you see your congregation carrying out the New Testament mission, that is, how you see the members preaching, feeding, and discipling others in a particular community. In general all Christians share the same mission, but congregational vision is diverse. XYZ church in Podunk Falls, Iowa has forty members who are all middle aged with teen children. They know that their mission as the

church is to find the lost and then disciple the found. ABC Church that has 3,000 young Hispanic members in Chicago shares the same understanding. Yet the way of carrying out that mission is different between the two congregations. The variance lies in where their congregations are located, their group demographic, their resident gifts, community needs, the Lord's leading, and a number of other particulars. When we take all of these variables into consideration, then predict the desirable course of future ministry, it is typically called vision. In his book *The Power of Vision*, (which I highly recommend), George Barna says,

“Vision is specific, detailed, customized, distinctive and unique to a given church. It allows a leader to say no to opportunities, provides direction, empowers people for service and facilitates productivity” (35).

When we capture this vision in succinct and practical words it is called a vision statement, a one or two sentence description that sets specific parameters around the labor of the church.

Within the very same city, groups of Christians are seeking to carry out the New Testament mission. Sovereign restrictions imposed by the Lord Himself keep any local assembly from being a spiritual monopoly. No church can offer everything to everybody in a city, even if it thinks it should and tries to do so. Adopting a congregational vision therefore, is a group's virtual self-admission that it is not the end all of ministry efforts. The vision statement therefore humbly says, “We can do this, but not that” and “We have this but not that.” The realistic conclusion: “We will do this but not that.”

A cardinal weakness of the Local Churches was their assumption of being “it”—the only legitimate representatives of the body of Christ in their respective

cities. More appropriately, they should have confessed to being part of the expression of Christ's body there, jointly bearing the testimony of Jesus with other congregations. I have never known a Local Church to possess the entire gamut of gifts and ministries necessary to meet all the needs of a large community. I will be so bold to say that the thousands of churches I have not visited are without a full compliment of ministry as well. Few stalwart LC members who claim that they are "it," have considered how the Lord Jesus would reach the slum areas through them, the affluent neighborhoods, the elementary, middle, Junior High and High School populations, all the college campuses, the local intelligentsia, immigrants, the political arena, the prison population, and all of the high-profile, white collar, blue collar, or otherwise marginalized folks. Yet that is exactly the domain and duty of the church local. A cloistered group of thirty-some people could never soberly claim to "represent" a labor of such magnitude. Only the diverse combined efforts of local congregations can successfully meet the needs of modern metropolitan areas. Each must bear its measure of vision and responsibility.

Determining A Congregational Vision

As we realize our inability to be the entire body of Christ and begin seeking our place, more questions emerge: Where should we go? Whom should we reach? Into what niche do we properly fit? I have already touched upon this matter in chapter 4, so I will only briefly expand it here. Congregational vision can develop through a variety of means.

First, we should pay attention to indications of the Spirit's work already within the congregation. What is happening at the "grass-roots" level? Unfortunately churches are notorious for simply continuing in the way of convention and ignoring springs of life within their

own members. This doesn't mean that the entire congregation should change directions every time someone has a desire to do something. But when there is a general and long-term convergence of leading among saints, it could very well provide the foundational substance for a new vision.

Items that you have hanging on your spiritual tool belt can also highly influence the shaping of a vision. Why try to reach particular people or do certain things for which you are not equipped? Take an inventory of congregational gifts. It might become obvious that teaching, evangelism, hospitality, or music talents among the members are natural lead-ins to carrying out the New Testament mission.

Vision could develop through listening to people as they describe what they and others need and how those needs have been overlooked. Since Christians easily lose themselves in religious bubbles, it is easy for them to simultaneously disconnect from the outside world. Casual conversations with members of the community will yield information about current crisis points in their lives. The complaint that "my neighborhood isn't open" will tend to evaporate when we realize that it is we who probably aren't open to the abundance of cues and signals the unsaved are giving us.

Another possible consideration in the development of a vision statement lies in observing population groups that have been ignored. The gospel may have had little or no penetration within a certain demographic or geographical vicinity. This approach has recently influenced the beginning of a new church in our area. For a period of time we've observed that newly graduated singles and recently married couples often enter a spiritual disorientation that lasts for years. Rather than lament "this current generation of slackers" or "the self-centered shallowness of today's youth," we've begun to feel a moral responsibility to

confront that demographic with loving truth. Therefore the vision statement of our new church plant incorporates this concern by saying that “We will seek to impact the generation newly settling into adult life.”

Vision might be developed as simply as considering where your meeting is located. In most cities, typical Local Churches have had no serious positive affects on the neighborhoods surrounding their meeting places (this is not counting members who deliberately move in and buy up real estate around the meeting hall). Post-Movement churches that have not already damaged their community relations would do well to adjust their attitudes and see their neighbors as people to serve. In some cases the church should consider relocation. Another area of the city could benefit from its presence more. Construction booms regularly occur in new suburbs as young couples buy starter homes and begin to plan out their entire lives apart from the Lord. Perhaps no suitable Christian presence exists there yet. Taking the opportunity to reestablish the church in a new area can become the single most significant breath of fresh air that the congregation has ever had.

Due to their past understanding of mission and vision, Local Churches will find it difficult to identify a niche of service. “Our vision is the whole city” they would say. That is a wonderful and necessary ideal, but as I pointed out before, it is a practical impossibility. Start with a congregational vision that enables the members to get their arms around something measurable—a beachhead or starting point. When people begin showing up in the meetings that are not identified in your vision statement, then it will be time to invoke the “whole city” attitude. That way, genuine seekers will not be excluded just because of your desire to be practical.

The Church Going Public

According to the Lord, His own body is the greatest evangelical force on earth. In His prayer to the Father, Jesus said that through the church, “the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:21, 23). Furthermore, Paul believed in the power of the gathered church to influence the unsaved so that they would drop to their knees and confess the reality of God (1 Cor. 14:24-25). That is why the church is like a lamp that must never be concealed.

A congregation tucked away under a bushel and thus veiled from public scrutiny can't be healthy for long. Strange, ingrown tendencies will multiply in it like rabbits. The meetings become a place that is weird to new people—as I heard recently that a visitor to a Local Church called the gathering “a bunch of freaks.” I remember vividly the anxiety many of us felt as we anticipated a neighbor or friend or relative attending their first meeting. It wasn't unusual for a phone call to be made with the desperate entreaty of “Please don't say anything against Catholicism.” Even if slurs weren't made, there would certainly be forced shouting, rhythmic choruses of “amens,” and songs sung repeatedly until they were dried of life. Witness Lee's name would often be bandied about as though it were an item of our faith. And then there was groaning, bobbing, weaving, tongue-clicking, and doctrinally overloaded prayers. Is it any wonder that after the whole thing was over, the most common question was whether the new person “got blown away?” Those who overcame the gauntlet of negative impressions that they might have received during that two or (gasp!) three hour meeting were deemed “open.” But it never occurred to us that most of the people visiting for the first time were already open and that our meeting paraphernalia had done a lot to close them.

Those were the old days, you might say. But then you'd be wrong. Long after parting company with the Living Stream Ministry, we may still pack plenty of people-repellant items in our meetings. These habits can short circuit our attempts to get a fresh lease on life even after we've acquired a shiny new vision statement.

Allow me the tried and true example of fishing. Many variables govern whether the fisherman will be successful. He must take into account noise levels, bait, hooks, line, poles, time of day, weather, season, water visibility, the particular body of water, lunar phases, water oxygen levels, ph levels, vegetation, depth, structure, bottom matrix, and species habits. Ignore all of these matters consistently enough and apart from freak accidents, fish will never seem to end up on your line.

Please don't think I've cited some cute random example, either. The Lord Jesus compared human beings to fish (Matt 13:47-48) and the New Testament mission to fishing (Luke 5:9-10). What we have typically done in Local Church "fishing" is to trumpet successes that have come despite our disregard of all the rules. It's like the kid who catches a trophy bass on a safety pin and sewing thread. He paid no attention to the host of fishing guidelines I cited above and (by miracle) succeeded anyway. Similarly, we tend to neglect firm principles and uplift exceptions—sensational gospel incidents that have become folklore among us.

We argue with common sense issues such as ordering the church and its meetings because we have peculiar stories as "evidence" to show that it doesn't really matter what we do. Whenever principle advises not to do certain things in the meetings for the sake of new people, there is always something somewhere that suggests we don't need to think too much about it. Yes, people can end up among us for any reason. There will always be a John or Jane Doe who have "Aha!" moments

in meetings, even though the message itself was far too long, the saints had slipped into semi-comatose boredom and the air conditioning was broken. Such things will always be the prerogative of the Holy Spirit. But they are divine mercies. They do not establish ways of labor. Having heard about the kid and the trophy bass, we don't toss our fishing equipment and replace it with safety pins and sewing thread. Instead we concede that fishing sometimes grants unlikely victories and that God favors little kids. Exceptions should never be allowed to determine our methodology.

The biggest and most obvious thing to be said about revamping our church life has to do with how not to chase people away from our gatherings. Nearly every thriving congregation treats its Sunday morning gathering as a visitor's front door into the church. And some guests form final judgments on the congregation before they enter the building. Do the people here come late? How do they treat kids? Is the meeting place clean? Are the folks friendly? This only represents the view from the car to the lobby. Then there's the meeting itself. In the following chapters, we'll consider many items that have to do with our public conduct and basic approach to gathering. Hopefully as we constructively address them, we will progressively find ourselves out from under the bushel, shining in an unobstructed way.