

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

LutheranRenewal

CHRISTIANITY

Is an Organic Movement

By Bill Easum

Most theories about congregational life are flawed from the start because they are based on an institutional and mechanical worldview. These views lead to the assumptions that all congregations follow a similar pattern of birth, growth, decline, and death and that their health can be fixed only for a limited amount of time. After that, they are beyond repair. Such a view is not biblical. Instead, it is fatalistic and self-serving because the goal is to fix and preserve the institution for as long a life as possible. Such a worldview allows one to focus on mere organizational and institutional survival rather than following Jesus onto the mission field for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission.

However, the Old and New Testaments are based on an organic worldview. They clearly show a bias for “salvation history” rather than institutional viability. Beginning with God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will be a blessing to all humankind, the concept of “blessed to be a blessing” had been at the heart of the Scriptures. Both Judaism and Christianity were meant to be a blessing to the rest of the world. As such, they are concerned with the movement of God throughout history, instead of the growth and health of organizations or institutions. We desperately need to recover this distinction.

Christianity is concerned with the unfolding of the Kingdom of God in this world, not the longevity of organizations. Much of the prophetic message was focused on the unfaithful leadership

of those who put institutional law above bringing about change in the world. Many of the Jewish leaders of the first century were more interested in protecting the “health” or viability of their culture than pursuing the salvation history of their people. Jesus’ primary criticism of these leaders was that they worshipped the institution of religion instead of the mandate to be a blessing to the world. What ultimately killed Jesus was his pursuit of this mission at the risk of self-destruction and his denial of the importance of looking after the “health” of the faith community. The same thing surfaces again in Acts 15 as the Jewish Christians are more worried about pursuing a spiritual diet plan for the community than about expanding the mission to the Gentiles.



The key to unfreezing the church to be with Jesus on the mission field is to view our congregations and denominations as the roots and shoots of an “organic movement” that go far beyond mere organizational survival. Movements are very different from institutions and behave much differently. For example, movement replaces religion, flow replaces program, midwives replace priests, mentors replace teachers, and worship is the microcosm of life’s experience rather than a re-enactment of ancient history. When we understand that our congregations are part of the movement of God throughout all history, we begin to evaluate the faithfulness of our congregations based on their participation in that move-

Lutheran Renewal

(Independent of North Heights Lutheran Church)

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ment rather than factors like health or growth. We do not ask whether or not they are healthy or growing, but whether they are contributing to the greater movement of God in history. As such, Christianity, in whatever form it manifests itself, must never be evaluated based on institutional or mechanical standards.

To follow Jesus into the mission field means that to be effective on the mission field, Christianity must once again become a movement. As we have seen in the road stories shared by St. Luke, both his gospel and The Acts of the Apostles portray Christianity more as a movement than a religion. It's time we recognized that fact and begin to live like disciples committed to a radical movement rather than entitled members committed to protecting our institutions.

“For the first three centuries...Jesus was all that mattered.”

Envisioning Christianity as a missional movement rather than an institutional model calls for restoring

biblical Christianity to its role as an engager and transformer of individuals and culture rather than a fortress to protect the elitist haves (religious hierarchy) from the barbaric have-nots (pagans, Gentiles, God-fearers). It is a call to quit reducing evangelism to gaining new members and mission to sending money to denominational projects. It is a call to join Jesus on the mission field!

Movements Follow a Leader

Movements are centered around a revered leader. Remove the leader, and the movement soon becomes an institution or religion. For the first three centuries the person and work of Jesus Christ dominated the conversation. Who was he? What did he do? Why does he matter? Jesus was all that mattered. Every aspect of theology hinged on an understanding of Christology. Christianity was founded on what God did in Jesus Christ. Institutional rules, dogma, and rituals are never a substitute for a living relationship with Jesus, the leader of the Christian movement.

Movements Embody the Spirit of the Founder

One of the earliest names for Christianity was “The Way” (Acts 9:2). Long before Christianity become known as a “faith to be believed”, Christianity was a way of life that resulted from

redemption in Christ. To be a Christian meant to live as Jesus lived, to join him on the mission field.

In movements that thrive long-term, subsequent leaders embody the spirit of the movement's founder. Christianity thrived because people like Paul, Apollos, Lydia, Barnabas, Peter, Mark, Stephen and others caught and lived out the resurrected spirit of Jesus by following him into the mission field. Christianity thrives today where leaders embody the spirit of Jesus. Their leadership is not based on professionalism, personality, office, or even institutional ordination. Their leadership is based on how well they emulate Jesus among the Gentiles.

“To be a Christian meant to live as Jesus lived, to join him on the mission field.”

One of the problems Christianity faces today is that too much of the focus has been on the needs of the institution rather than on the task of embodying the spirit of Jesus. An example of this is the shift from being called “People of the Way” in the first century to “People of the Book” since the Reformation. Knowing the Bible often becomes a substitute for holy living. Performing rituals often replaces ethical living. The result is that faith does not automatically stimulate ethics.

Movements Are Guided by Mission Rather Than Rules

As a movement, Christianity is guided by an overriding mission, which eclipses all rules. No longer is there only one right way to do something. We now must ask what is the right thing to do in this particular part of the mission field? So how does a congregation know when to break from the established rules? It breaks when the mission is in jeopardy. Movements are fueled by a cause; institutional religion is the cause. The cause for which Christianity lives and breathes is the redemption of creation. Christians will do whatever will assist in achieving that mission.

The clash between Paul and the Jerusalem church gives us some help here. When the Jerusalem church heard that Paul had been baptizing converts without first circumcising them, they rebuked him. But after hearing of the marvelous work that was occurring in the lives of people, the council changed its mind. The guiding principle: if it transforms lives, you do it even if it is illegal because the redemption of people is more important than keeping institutional traditions. The early Christians

didn't let a little thing like legality get in the way of their radical devotion to Jesus. The early Christians were fanatical about their faith, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith. That is why many considered them to be a cult.

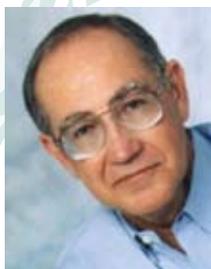
Movements Are Mobile Rather Than Static

Movements are mobile, able to change at the whim of their leader. To be on the Way with Jesus means to be ready, willing and able to go wherever Jesus leads us. Thus, in this time of traumatic transition, we see institutional Christianity being left behind because it is tethered to its physical moorings and can't join Jesus on the way. In its place we see the rise of House Churches, Storefront Churches, Cell Churches, Cyber Churches, Café Churches, Bar Churches, City Reaching Movements, Multiple-site churches, and Biker Churches. What do these ministries have in common? They are able to pick up and move with Jesus the moment he moves. They are not

tethered to place, property, and tradition. Unfortunately, the mission field does not afford us the luxuries of stability, location, status quo, and familiarity. Nor does it allow us to try to separate reality into sacred and secular, and thus focus on "sacred space".

Where Do We Go From Here?

We're not living in the second Reformation. We're living in the first century all over again. God is calling Christianity out of its institutional prison, out from behind the cloistered walls of the sanctuary, out from the safety of denominational dominance, out from the marriage of Church and State, away from the merger of culture and piety, away from the professionals, into the dangerous, uncontrollable, deadly byways and highways. Jesus is calling us to the back roads of real life, where once again Christians associate with pagans, Gentiles, and God-fearers. It's time to join Jesus on the mission field. Go get your traveling shoes.



This excerpt was taken from *Unfreezing Moves: Following Jesus into the Mission Field* by Bill Easum © 2002. Used by permission of Abingdon Press; Nashville, TN.

Bill Easum is President and senior Managing Partner in Easum, Bandy, and Associates, a church consulting and futuring firm (www.easumbandy.com). One of the most widely sought advisors on congregational health and vitality in North America, he is the author of several books including *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (with Thomas G. Bandy), and *Leadership on the Other Side*, all published by Abingdon Press.

Bill will be speaking on Wednesday at the August 2-5, 2006 "Reformation...Reloaded!" Holy Spirit Conference. →

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Starbuck's, Walmart and the Church

By Paul Anderson

I failed at reaching the lost in the community where I served. And, unfortunately, that holds true for most. Yet scores of parachurches are effectively harvesting, such as: Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth with A Mission, Intersarsity, Young Life, Campus Life, Child Evangelism, Teen Challenge, Teen Mania, Youth for Christ, and dozens more. Why is the mandate given to the church accomplished by organizations that do not have as their mission to grow churches, while most churches flounder? Consider this:

Parachurch organizations draw people to Christ, not to church. The message of the Church began changing when we started building churches. Our motto morphed into, "Build and they will come." We spend big bucks on buildings that people don't want to come to, and then try a variety of methods of getting them there. When they come, we attempt to keep them, knowing that unless they are engaged we will lose them. Parachurch embraces a different purpose, the one we were given in the first place, to make disciples.

Our message and our methods actually keep people from Christ. We were never commanded to bring them to church. But because of our budget and our building, we need to keep them coming. But it still does not make us go. We find comfort, a sanctuary, a predictable place. We know the people and the songs—well, some of them. Many of us have grown up at the church. But what if we were to spend more time on the campus or at Starbuck's instead of on our turf? That is what parachurches do. They meet people where they are. Get this: they don't have a church to bring them to, so they bring them to Christ. They think "kingdom" rather than "church." They go "out there" rather than trying to get them "in here," and the difference proves startling.

What if we stopped trying to draw people to church? While most people don't want to go to church, they are hoping that their family doesn't fall apart, that they find how to pay the next bill, that Dad quits drinking, or that Jimmy gets off drugs and goes back to school. What if we helped them over their problems rather than giving them our church address?

Church doesn't possess a good reputation with these troubled people. Few of them are thinking, "You

know, if I just went to church, my marriage would not explode. And I could stop using." The church houses religious people, super-clean people, prejudiced people. Worldly people think, "I'm not that kind of person." But many of them, in fact, most of them, think that God has something to do with their solution. They still believe in prayer, and they want to have faith. Interesting!

So we keep trying to get them to church, and they keep staying away, and churches keep closing down. Meanwhile, what Jesus said two thousand years ago still rings true—the harvest is plentiful. There is no lack of harvestable people. What if we went to the harvest rather than attempting to draw unharvested people into places that prove unsafe for them? Then we would be doing what the parachurch is succeeding at.

Parachurch escapes the consumerism of churches. Mega-churches function as the Walmarts of the religious world, taking the business away from the small neighborhood firms. They offer more, and smaller companies can't compete. Big churches are doing what we wish we could do—get them to our church. Are they winning the lost? In fact, small churches are winning more lost people percentage-wise than big churches according to Church Growth analyst Christian Swartz. But they are winning because they are drawing in the consumers with

Many of us have grown up at the church. But what if we were to spend more time on the campus or at Starbuck's instead of on our turf?

the big P—programs. They advertise better products: children's programs, a gym for high school kids, a dance program, music program, drama program, moms with kids program, and the like. They have support groups for grievors, eaters, drinkers, gamblers, fighters, bikers, and victims. And the little store goes out of business for lack of customers. While some competition no doubt exists between parachurch organizations, the harvest keeps them focused on their mission, while the church often loses sight of its mission because of the need to attract customers. So they attempt to bring in customers rather than making converts. And the average church wins one person a year to Christ.

Parachurch uses an incarnational model. They go to where the people are, like the campuses or the



neighborhoods. My friend Gary and I started a Young Life club while in seminary. We were instructed to go to the high school and meet the students. So we went to their football games and school activities, and we met for activities in their homes. Can you see how more comfortable that made them rather than inviting them to our church? We are the body of Christ in the world. The only Jesus some people see is us. If the single option they have for connecting with us is coming to our church, they probably won't come.

We are the body of Christ in the world.
The only Jesus some people see is us.



I held a Dream Seminar recently in a church that worships one third the number of people as it did six years ago, when it lost its senior

pastor of thirty-five years. The decline impacts the budget, so they need to grow to survive. But they can't compete with the mega-churches, one of which started in their basement and now has ten times the worshipers.

I surprised the leadership team by saying, "You don't need to try getting people to church. It isn't your mandate, and it never was." We talked about how to multiply rather than grow. Because they have many mature believers, some of whom drive up to an hour to get there, I suggested that they encourage them to start house churches or at least cell groups.

Then I surprised them again: "If you win Josh to Christ, don't bring him to church. Start a house church, using his circle of friends as the core. The problem of starting house churches out of existing churches is that all you have is Christians. And most have lost their non-Christian friends. New converts like Josh still know contacts in the world, and they prove to be the best harvesters. When Matthew began following Christ, he hosted a dinner party for all his tax collector buddies. When Jesus brought the Samaritan woman into the kingdom, she immediately went back and told the townspeople what had happened. A two-day revival resulted from her conversion. If you bring new converts to your church, most will slowly lose their zeal for the harvest. But if you plant a church through them, you focus on lost people rather than on the newly saved one. Josh will grow much quicker by going after his non-Christian friends than by going to church activities. And his friends will more likely visit a home with him than a church."

Parachurch focuses on the harvest. I participated in Campus Crusade for Christ at UCLA where a guy named Hal Lindsay served as director. He went right into the "enemy territory" of fraternities and gave powerful messages about the Lord's return. Hundreds responded over the course of several years. We didn't win hundreds at our Young Life Club, but we won scores. We felt no pressure to get them anywhere but to Jesus—and we had a blast getting to know them, their families, their problems—and then introducing them to Jesus. Dear brother and sister, it is still true—the harvest is plentiful. The Church must embrace the harvest, not expect the world to come to the church to be harvested. When I could not get the women from a half-way house to come to our church in California, I wish it would have occurred to me to plant a church right there in that house, but I was thinking "church" instead of "harvest."

But it can be different. For those wanting to adopt a harvest mentality, consider the following possibilities:

1. Sit in the smoking section, as the author of *Organic Church* recommends.
2. If you build a gym, consider using it for reaching into the community, not keeping your people occupied so they won't go into the community.
3. Make your church user-friendly and make people in the world the users. When I asked the leaders of our church to consider letting the AA group use our facilities, they turned me down. They pictured cleaning up cigarette butts the next morning and having to paint the lounge every six months. I know they would make a different decision today, because they are thinking harvest.
4. Don't be surprised when people in the world live like it. But God has changed you—and He wants to change them—through your aggressive love. Just don't try to get them to church.
5. And one recommendation to parachurch organizations: plant churches. Quit worrying about offending the Church by doing what the Church struggles to do. We will be encouraged by your example. Parachurch needs to think local church, and local church needs to think like parachurch.

While I make these observations, I confess that the parachurch I lead has not succeeded in winning the lost. At Lutheran Renewal we have made a new commitment to focus on the harvest.



See you at Starbucks!

Paul Anderson,
Director of Lutheran Renewal
and his wife, Karen



RESOURCES

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