



EXPONENTIAL
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UNLEASHED!

**FINDING EPIC ADVENTURE
IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

BY BILL COUCHENOUR & ED BAHLER

Unleashed!
Finding epic adventure in everyday life

By Bill Couchenour and Ed Bahler

Ver. 1.0

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Praise for Unleashed!

Bill and Ed strike the right balance between inspiration and exhortation. They paint a picture of a better world that begins with you! The biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers holds the key to renewal not just for the church but for our country.

Reggie McNeal, missional leadership specialist and author, including *The Present Future* and *Missional Renaissance*

If you want to know what “missional” is in a hurry, use Google. If you want to know what “missional” is with depth, discernment, and distinction, forget Google and spend some fun time with *Unleashed: Finding Epic Adventure in Everyday Life*.

Leonard Sweet, best-selling author, professor (Drew University, George Fox University), and chief contributor to sermons.com

God knows we need more and better church pastors and leaders for the next season of ministry. But I think Ed and Bill have it right here. The more critical and important need is for Everyday Life Missionaries that penetrate the community as salt and light on a 24/7 basis. This book is filled with practical and real world examples to follow. Effective pastors know that Everyday Life Missionaries will change the landscape, and they’ll support this movement by helping distribute this booklet to their congregation. *Unleashed!* highlights the call that every believer should acknowledge and act upon NOW.

Dave Travis, CEO of Leadership Network

Bill and Ed are both personal friends and some of my favorite heroes. This well-written work is something of their personal manifesto written to call the contemporary Church to the kind of action that really counts—discipleship beyond the confines of the church buildings which they themselves design and build. *Unleashed* is both a brave and visionary book.

Alan Hirsch, founding director of Forge Missional Training Network and co-director of Future Travelers. Author of numerous award winning books on missional Christianity www.alanhirsch.org

For years Ed Bahler and Bill Couchenour have demonstrated their uncommonly clear and creative thinking about effective church facilities. Now they demonstrate that they also see the way for countless individuals, not just churches, to be missional and live their everyday lives for the glory of God and the good of others. It’s an uncommonly fresh view.

Marshall Shelley, editor in chief, Leadership Journal

Unleashed! Finding Epic Adventure in Everyday Life is for the 99 percent of the church that are not pastors or clergy. This book challenges Christ-followers to see their life as an exciting missionary journey and a quest they’ve been sent on by Jesus. Authors Ed Bahler and Bill Couchenour are good friends and great examples of Christ-followers who approach their personal lives, families, and businesses as missionary explorations with

Christ. If you've ever wondered how you can make a difference or live out the Jesus Mission every day, you need to read *Unleashed!*

Dave Ferguson, lead pastor, Community Christian Church, author of *Discover Your Mission Now*, *On the Verge* and *Exponential*

Inside the hearts of many people in our congregations is a longing to be unleashed. They know that following Jesus and being a disciple is more than attending a service, volunteering a couple hours, and writing checks regularly. They want to live more fully the mission of Jesus, not just within our organized structures, but in their everyday life. This is a dangerous book...one that the forces of Hell will fear. If we can unleash the people of God in the mission of God in everyday life, we will find ourselves in the middle of the next great revival. With this book, Bill and Ed have put into the hands of those people (and the pastors who lead them!) a signpost pointing the way forward.

Rob Wegner, pastor of life mission, Granger Community Church, co-author, *Missional Moves: 15 Tectonic Shifts that Transform Churches, Communities, and the World*

More of us are realizing that the worn path of "growing a church" leads to one brief sugar high after another. There is a new thing God is stirring in the leaders of His church. I've found these guys and these concepts helpful in going to the next place. You will like Bill and Ed's excellent adventure.

Brian Tome, senior pastor, Crossroads, Cincinnati, OH

When I first met Bill and Ed, I knew that they were going to be an important part of shaping the missional conversation for the church in the U.S. They are not pastors; they are business leaders who understand the holy discontent that so many Christ-followers are feeling today. If God is stirring your heart to understand and live out the mission you were created to live, this book needs to be an essential part of your journey.

Brian Bloye, senior pastor, West Ridge Church, Dallas, GA, president of the Launch Network, co-author, *It's Personal*

Unleashed! is a great addition to the disciple-making conversation. In it Bill and Ed speak from a much needed perspective as ordinary businessmen called to live as missionaries in their own communities. This must become the new norm if we are to reach the changing culture of North America. A must-read for pastors and lay people.

David Putman, founder of www.plantingthegospel.com and author *Detox for the Overly Religious*

We are called into the ministry because we are all called to love on mission! Bill and Ed have lived this. Every Christ-follower should read this book.

Shawn Lovejoy, lead pastor, Mountain Lake Church, Cummming, GA, author of *The Measure of Our Success: An Impassioned Plea to Pastors*

The most important thing about this book is that Bill and Ed are living what they write. From firsthand experience they impart wisdom that is nothing short of transformational for every follower of Jesus.

Greg Nettle, visionary leader of RiverTree Christian Church and president of Stadia

Two insightful Christian lay leaders—one insightful book for all churches and Christians. This book fills a big gap in helping the everyday Christian live the Gospel 24/7. It gives purpose, direction, and practical hints in being involved in partnering with Jesus to change the world in which we live.

Happy Leman, National Vineyard board member, senior pastor of Central Illinois Vineyard

The world lives and breathes by the question, “What have you done for me lately?” The expectation to be served my way and as quickly as possible permeates every facet of our lives including the spiritual. The crushing weight this places on churches and pastors can be suffocating. Ed Bahler and Bill Couchenour have found a way to breathe a breath of fresh perspective into this unreasonable expectation. In their insightful book *Unleashed*, they challenge the everyday person to ask the better question, “What have I done lately?” Written through real life experiences, Ed and Bill challenge every person to go and make disciples of Jesus Christ regardless of what they do and where they are in life. It’s a practical approach to empowering Christians to go and do. As I read this book, I, too, felt called to go and do something, and I know you will feel the same.

Pastor **Tim Harlow**, Parkview Christian Church, Orland Park, IL

We're inspired when we see someone doing something wonderful. We want to jump in and do something wonderful too. In *Unleashed!* Ed Bahler and Bill Couchenour encourage us to act on our impulse to engage. This is a tool that helps normal people (who sometimes believe meaningful ministry is reserved for vocational clergy professionals) find the joy of accepting God's invitation to a 24/7 life of epic adventure.

Mark Beeson, founding pastor, Granger Community Church

Unleashed! Finding epic adventure in everyday life

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to our fathers, who intuitively lived missionally out of their love for Jesus. It was their example we've modeled our lives after, and it's their passion that has guided and inspired us.

Unleashed!

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Acknowledgements

The genesis of this book began around a table in Austin, Texas, in September of 2011. We were in between [Future Traveler](#) gatherings and reflecting on the missional movement in the U.S. church. During that conversation, Todd Wilson, president of Exponential, mentioned how the majority of literature written on the missional movement was geared to pastors and church staff. Nothing much had been written to the average Christ-follower to help them make the kind of paradigm shifts that were taking place through Future Travelers. In fact, it was on that day that Todd Wilson gave us the title for this book—*Unleashed!*

We thank Todd, Alan Hirsch, Rob Wegner, and Dave Ferguson for their friendship and their partnership in the mission of Jesus. And we thank the Future Traveler pastors that have been willing to risk it all for the sake of Jesus.

We'd also like to express our deep gratitude to Marian Liautaud, an editor with *Christianity Today*, who helped give this book one voice from two authors. We came to know Marian through a joint ministry initiative between the Cornerstone Knowledge Network and *Christianity Today*. Marian was indispensable for helping us get this writing project done. She was a constant source of encouragement and a great sounding board as we developed and articulated our ideas for this book. At the same time she was helping us publish our first eBook, she was busy publishing her own. You can [see her work here](#).

Last, but not least, we are so grateful for our families. Our wives, Annette and Pam, embody God's grace to us. They are a tangible expression of his unmerited favor. We certainly didn't deserve them. Their love and support makes everything possible and makes everything worthwhile. Our children, those who have been born to us and those we've been blessed with through marriage, continue to teach us. You are the future of the church and the hope of the world. We love you all!

—*Bill Couchenour and Ed Bahler*

Foreword

It's a rare thing when competitors share their trade secrets and struggles with each other. It's even rarer when they share their lives. But that's exactly what Ed Bahler and Bill Couchenour did.

The first time I met these two was at a conference for church leaders where they co-presented a workshop on designing effective ministry space. What? Competitors co-presenting at a conference? I had to know more.

As Ed and Bill wove their personal story of friendship through their PowerPoint of slides highlighting various church facilities, it became clear that God brought these two men together to do something unique. While they both have spent their entire careers designing and building churches for their own companies, their hearts beat for the ministries that ultimately fill these spaces and make them sacred.

This book is a reflection of their shared love for the church—her people—you and me, the ones Jesus died for. Their driving passion is to see all of God's people discover the adventure he has in store for each of us.

As I've edited the pages of this book, I've been reminded and challenged to live out Christ's call on my own life—to go and make disciples and play my part in this epic adventure of my everyday life. Ed and Bill's writing reminds me that no task is too menial and everything becomes sacred when all that we have and do is offered up for God's glory.

Before Ed and Bill ever wrote a word of *Unleashed!*, they were already living it. Their lives speak a constant "to God be the glory!" May yours and mine do the same as we give ourselves freely to the God who created us and wants us to become all he imagined for us.

—*Marian V. Liautaud*

Introduction

The Splinter in Your Mind

When the science fiction action film, *The Matrix*, was released in 1999, it quickly captured the imagination of many in our culture. The film depicts a young computer programmer who senses that something is not quite right with the world—that there’s more to reality than meets the eye. After cryptic messages referring to a “Matrix” repeatedly appear on his computer screen, Thomas Anderson (aka “Neo”) is driven to discover their hidden meaning. What he finds is that he’s living in a world in which reality as he knows it is actually a simulated reality. Humans are really living in cyberspace and are being controlled by machines.

The Matrix went on to become a multi-tiered franchise with movie sequels, comic books, short animated films, and video games. Released at the same time the Internet had reached the collective awareness of nearly all Americans, *The Matrix* played on our latent fear that something wasn’t quite right with the world; that this great, new, unknowable, virtual world that was now available may be leading us to an unintended outcome.

Morpheus describes this subtle undercurrent of unease to Neo in *The Matrix*:

“Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me.”

We reference *The Matrix* to make a point, not about technology and the Internet, though those are important topics to ponder. *The Matrix* provides a useful illustration of individuals growing uneasy with the reality they’ve been told to accept. It’s a film that gives us permission to question the way things are done—to look thoughtfully at the approaches we’re using and to challenge the reality these approaches create.

Have you ever had that sense that something is not quite right with the church in America?

If this is the Church of the Almighty God, why does it so closely resemble the world?

Does it seem as though a life with Jesus should be more than attending church three out of four weekends, giving a percentage of your income, and participating in a missions project once or twice a year?

Have you wondered about the way we’re doing church?

Have you felt a kind of holy discontent you don’t fully understand?

Day after day we come in contact with pastors, church leaders, and everyday Christ-followers that have this “splinter in the mind”—that gnawing sense that God wants to do something more, something different, something amazing.

There’s a stirring in the church in America, a growing unease that something’s not quite right. There is a decline in the church as an institution, and cultural Christianity is waning, giving credence to the theory we’re in a post-church culture. You can see it in the dismal statistics that point to an exodus of young people from the church. Recent [Pew Research](#) shows that fewer than one in five young Americans consider themselves Protestant anymore.

It is to those who recognize this splinter in the mind—believers who sense there’s more to their faith life than what they’re currently experiencing—that we write this book. Our greatest desire is to help you, fellow Christ-followers, experience the complete joy and satisfaction that comes from being unleashed for God’s purposes. By exposing some of the barriers that may be keeping you from living a life of mission and purpose, we hope to re-envision with you a church in which all people are given permission to lead change—change in each other, and change in the world.

For pastors, our hope is that *Unleashed!* will help you set your congregation free to use the gifts and talents each person has been given by God. The people in your pews (or chairs)—the priesthood of believers—desire to be used by God in a significant way. They see a world that is in need of the salvation and restoration of Jesus, but they need a new paradigm to know how to engage. They want to be the hands and feet of Christ in a world gone awry, but too often the systems and structure of our churches inadvertently create artificial barriers that keep believers from living out God’s unique mission for them.

Future Travelers

For more than three years, we’ve been involved with an initiative called [Future Travelers](#). This ministry was born out of a meeting of several multisite, megachurch pastors who wondered if they should be looking for the next rung on the ladder or for an entirely new wall. That first gathering didn’t have a specific agenda or projected outcome, but each of the founding participants had the sense that something wasn’t quite right about the way they were doing church. Each was wrestling with a splinter in their mind. Although their churches would be considered extremely successful by the usual standards, something was amiss in their ability to make disciples. They wrestled with the question, “Could the prevailing model of church in our country launch a viral movement of the Gospel?” We became part of Future Travelers in its first year because of our shared desire to better understand where the church needed to go to fulfill the mission of God in the United States.

Future Travelers has evolved into an innovative program designed to help megachurches become missional movements. The year-long journey provides a peer-to-peer learning environment highlighted by three gatherings at practitioner churches. The gatherings are infused with teachings by Alan Hirsch, Rob Wegner, and others. More than 30 churches have now participated in the Future Traveler journey, and most have experienced a paradigm shift, which is reflected in the missional initiatives they are

pursuing. The most recent journey has expanded beyond just pastors to include denominational and network leaders.

What we're learning through Future Travelers has application for every church, not just megachurches. It's about learning to create disciples who in turn become disciplemakers. It's about fully embracing the priesthood of believers to bring the full weight of the church to bear on our world. It's about developing a strong sense of belonging through missional communities. It's primarily about renewing our focus on the living Jesus. And it's about holding tightly to the precepts of Scripture while holding loosely to the cultural aspects of church.

Much of what we cover in this book is a result of our involvement with Future Travelers, as well as our combined experience over the past 40 years as church design-build professionals. In helping churches create the right kind of ministry space, we've had a front row seat to the struggles leaders face in figuring out how to move people from being merely attracted and connected to Jesus and the church, to being committed and disciplined members of the body of Christ.

We sense a stirring among Christians that there's got to be more to church, and together, we're trying to understand how to tap into this holy discontent for the glory of God. This book is about unleashing this latent power in the church. It's about examining the structures, models, and paradigms that are in place and deciding whether they're creating the desired results for the church. It's about equipping and empowering the laity to *be* the church. It's about laying a path and giving permission for believers to journey with God and each other toward fulfilling his mission in the world in and through each one of us.

Unleashed! is our prayer for the church—that all of us would know what it is to join God in his great adventure.

– *Bill Couchenour* and *Ed Bahler*

Part 1

Discovering a Life Worth Living

Chapter 1

The True Adventure

On October 14, 2012, Austrian Felix Baumgartner set a record by parachuting from 23 miles above the earth. Lifted above the fray by a balloon, he stood at the precipice of his capsule, peering down over all humanity. Looking beyond the curvature of the earth, he felt a fresh connection with God. He was no longer of this world. Within minutes though, he freefell back to earth, sucked down by the gravitational pull of the world.

On November 29, 2011, I (Ed) stood on the edge of my own precipice. It was a cold, foreboding evening leaving my doctor's office in Indianapolis. He had just delivered the news: I had pancreatic cancer. Pancreatic cancer kills 90 percent of people in the first 12 months after diagnosis. At 54 years old, life as I knew it was over.

As my wife and I walked numbly into the empty night and climbed inside our cold, damp car, I turned and asked, "So what do we do now?" Our hearts sank as we suddenly realized we had to tell our seven kids. Our eyes locked. We were about to face our most important parenting moment. How could we deliver the blow without shattering their security and hope? It was just too soon to leave an empty chair.

We traveled from house to house that night without a good way to say, "You're losing your dad." Each time it was quiet, emotional, and awkward. But something powerful began to emerge as each child said, "We'll follow you to the next house." Their love for each other and for us penetrated the icy reality of it all. It was overwhelming to look in my rear view mirror and see the family caravan as we drove the last 60 minutes to our home. The news had already leaked to our two youngest there.

I could see the tribe instinctively circling the wagons. They were searching for hope in each other, but more importantly, reaching for it in us. The stakes were high. Every word shared that night would be remembered. Would my faith be as real in the face of death as it had been through the good times? A still, quiet voice cleared the clutter in my mind and gave me the words to speak. I told my family, "Together we will be thankful. We will not complain, and we will be courageous as long as I have the strength to fight."

Dying well would be my last parenting lesson. I had to find the grace to do it. But could I?

My emotions swung wildly as I prepared for surgery six days later. There were moments of terrorizing fear, as well as tender moments with my wife pondering her life after I was gone. But as hundreds lifted us up in prayer, and we stepped back searching for God in it all, the old songwriter's lyrics became peacefully real:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.*

Something transformational was happening. God was giving me a special grace, a special gift. Like Felix Baumgartner, I was being lifted above it all. I could now see the curvature of my own humanity. The confusion and conflict of this life had faded. What really mattered had become clear. Life was simply about honoring God, lifting others up, and teaching those who would fill in after me.

I did lose 30 percent of my pancreas. But for some inexplicable reason, I ended up having a different kind of cancer than the MRI revealed. I never had to endure the beating of chemo. Twelve months later, I still had no symptoms, and I have less than a 15 percent chance that the cancer will return. My doctor said this outcome was less than a 1 percent probability and violates all they know and teach about pancreatic cancer.

I had received a get-out-of-jail-free card. But more importantly, I have been transformed. I now understood there is a real place above the fray. It's a place of quiet rest where we lift others up and passionately teach them so they can lift others with their life.

Baumgartner said that it was a spiritual experience being that far above the earth. That's how God wants us to feel. He wants us to live up high enough to be able to view life from his angle.

Living above the fray

At a Q conference, Donald Miller, author of *Blue Like Jazz*, told about friends who asked him to help write a play. They sat down and talked about the key elements of a great story. You've got the good guy who's trying to accomplish something, and the bad guy keeps getting in the way. But the key to a great story—what pulls you in—is the battle of the heart that the good guy is going through. He's fighting to overcome selfishness, bitterness, revenge, or fear. What pulls you into the story is his battle of the heart, because it's our battle too.

For all of us, and I had this moment the night I was driving home after being diagnosed with cancer, we ask ourselves, what do I want my story to be? Can I win this battle of my heart and be an inspiration? We desire to make a difference and pull people up—bring peace and hope, pull them closer to God.

Baumgartner experienced closeness to God as he stood peering at the world below. I experienced it when I confronted death.

We all long to live above the fray and in communion with God. It's part of our soul's nature. And people want to know how to get there. Is it real? Do I have what it takes to get above this?

Getting clear on our story allows us to focus our prayer life, align our efforts, and live a life that matters. It allows us to bless the generations that follow us. It starts with a broken spirit, a contrite heart, and the courage to act on the "splinter in our mind."

Facing death has a way of clarifying what's most important. Nothing is more important today and for eternity than committing to the great adventure God has for you. But it means jumping into the unknown of a great paradox—"...whoever loses their life for me will find it."

Chapter 2

The Qualifications

The first question on your mind might well be, am I qualified to join God's great adventure? *I've never taken a Bible course, and I certainly don't have a degree in theology*, you may be thinking. Maybe you've volunteered at church or gone on a missions trip, but nothing that would qualify you for full-time ministry. Yet full-time service is what God's calling each of us to.

The real qualifying question isn't, am I qualified? It's, are you a disciple of Jesus?—an apprentice, so to speak. Are you actively seeking to understand what God is telling you right now, and are you obeying? Are you actively seeking to know Jesus and honor him? If you've answered yes, then you're not only qualified, you're called. And God has called us all, not just a chosen few.

Unfortunately, many have fallen into the trap of believing that religious work is for clergy, not common folks. We live in a culture that hires experts for nearly everything. We hire cleaning services, auto mechanics, and specialists for every type of medical problem. Not that there's anything inherently wrong with getting help from professionals. But in the case of helping people grow in their faith, God doesn't recruit professionals. He looks for women and men who are open and available to collaborating with him to reach and disciple others. We're all called to serve equally regardless of our level of education or life experience.

Unlikely leaders

God has a history of using the least qualified. Remember when God rejected Saul as king and sent Samuel to look for a new king? God sent Samuel to Jesse of Bethlehem because the new king would come from among Jesse's sons. Jesse paraded his sons before Samuel, but none of them were acceptable to God. When Samuel asked if Jesse had any more sons, he said, yes, one more—the youngest, David. Surely it couldn't be him!

King David went on to be a great king of Israel and part of the line that gave us Jesus. Why David when Jesse and Samuel were sure it would have been one of his older brothers? Because *“people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”* ([1 Samuel 16:7](#)).

Growing up, our fathers gave us first-hand examples of what it means to be in full-time, non-paid ministry. My (Ed's) dad struggled to make ends meet after World War II. In the first nine years of his marriage following the war, he had six kids and six jobs. Eventually he felt led to start his own business. People thought he was crazy. In his

prayer time, he promised God he would give 50 percent of his income away for the rest of his life. This commitment changed everything.

He put his business cards at the hotels, restaurants, and gas stations along the interstate near where we lived. When people stopped because they were out of money or stranded, they'd call our house. We always had people over for dinner, especially hurting people. My dad told us to be kind to everybody because they're fighting a hard battle.

As a child, I saw him go out and minister to these people. When we were teenagers, my siblings and I started taking the calls and going out if he wasn't home. Our family also went to Kentucky for mission trips before mission trips were even a thing.

Nobody told my dad to live this way. He didn't wait for his church to tell him to put business cards out along the interstate. He simply lived what he believed. He embodied what it means to be a disciple, to live a life fully devoted to Christ. And in doing so, he created a story that is now impacting the second, third, and soon to be fourth generations.

The Way Station

My (Bill's) dad was a strong Christian and a solid churchman. He did all the things you'd expect from a good churchman—attended, tithed, and served in leadership at the district and international levels of our denomination. One night he got a call from a woman who said her husband was out drinking. Dad went to the only bar in town to look for him. He didn't find him, but he did meet Nelly and her niece who ran the bar. From that point on, my dad started making a habit of going to the bar on Friday nights. He'd order his Diet Coke and talk to whoever showed up. He started getting a reputation as someone people could talk to. In fact, Nelly would tell her customers if they were hurting, "Oh, you've got to come in on Friday night and talk to 'Pastor' Jim. He's at the bar." This became my dad's ministry.

He later opened a place called The Way Station. Initially, this was a bar without the alcohol. The Way station grew into a compassionate ministry center that housed a food pantry, a clothing depot, classes for English as a second language, help for survivors of sexual abuse, Narcotics Anonymous, among other ministries.

Dad had found a whole other world of people, right in our community, that he didn't know existed. They didn't frequent the restaurants and events that we did. They were the people that had been overlooked or discarded by society. He wanted the Way Station to be part of the local church, but there were people he'd minister to that weren't comfortable being in a church. They were "the least of these," and Dad fell in love with them.

Dad understands what it means to be a missionary right where he is. He loves his local church and has always participated in it. But he also saw God open another way to reach people—a way that didn't require the leadership of clergy, just the "followership" of a disciple of Christ.

Are We Worthy?

Another reason we may not feel qualified to accept God's invitation to embark on his great adventure for our life is shame. We look back at the messes in our life and wonder how God could redeem them for something good. We look at the struggles we continue to slog through and assume God could never use us in our brokenness. When we do that, however, we are denying the very essence of God. Think of how absurd it sounds to say, "God, I know you can do all things, but not this." King David messed up royally (adultery and murder), and God still used him to lead his people. God even referred to David as a "man after his own heart."

Church leaders sometimes work so hard to model a good, Christ-like life that we create unrealistic expectations for what a Christian's life should look like. By presenting a polished outward appearance, we inadvertently convey that you have to have your act together in order to be a Christian. Messy people need not apply. Be open about your struggles and how God is working in your life. When we don't feel a sense of self-worth, we're afraid to be who we really are. We're afraid that without the costumes of wit and wisdom, comedy and cleverness, accomplishments and achievements, we'll be found out. And sometimes, we've been in the costumes so long we've forgotten what we look like naturally.

Shame is that voice that says, "I'm not good enough, or smart enough, or good-looking enough, or (you fill in the blank) enough." It creates a fear of disconnection. Shame says, "I am not worthy."

Shame takes its toll on us individually, and it has a negative impact on our relationships. When we can't be ourselves, it makes it difficult to have meaningful relationships with others. We need to be able to have compassion for ourselves in order to have compassion for others.

When we embrace the freedom to give up who we think we should be for who we really are, it leads to connection and community. Until we embrace our identity in Christ, we can't fully experience what it means to belong. The good news as Christ-followers is that, through grace, we do have a new identity. We are children of the King of the universe, heirs to heaven and earth. Sometimes we forget this, and we live (at least partially) with the sense that we're not good enough.

The fact is we weren't good enough, but Jesus was! By embracing what Jesus did on the cross and a new life in him, we gain our divine identity. Out of that reality, we can have healthy connections with God and others.

Chapter 3

The One Thing

We've witnessed a lot of change in the American church throughout our lifetimes—from traditional to contemporary worship style, seeker sensitive churches, women's movement, men's movement, small groups initiative, sports programming, megachurch, third place, multisite, video venue, just to name a few. Churches always seem to be looking for that next big thing, that elusive program, initiative, or technology to get them to the next level (usually related to attendance). Some are even quick to replicate programs and initiatives that worked somewhere else, with no regard to whether these changes would work in the context of their congregation.

After considering what we've learned from decades of serving churches, and the unique insights we've gained through Future Travelers, we've discovered there really is One Thing. Something so essential it ultimately overshadows every other initiative of the church. It's applicable across all demographics and denominations and is as relevant for churches a generation ago as it is today. The One Thing? Disciplemaking Disciples.

You probably didn't see any neon lights flash or hear bells and whistles when you read that. That's because the One Thing is deceptively simple, yet infinitely complex. It's not flashy because it's rooted in the grace and garbage of everyday life. It's messy. It's slow. There are a lot of setbacks. And sometimes the victories are unrecognizable without reflection. It can't be easily implemented as a program because it requires more descriptive thinking than the familiar prescriptive means of implementation. It demands that churches decentralize their leadership and, probably, abandon some programs and policies that people have grown accustomed to. Churches that begin to create a disciplemaking culture are even likely to lose people in the beginning.

So why on earth would any church make disciplemaking disciples their One Thing? Simply because it is the way of Jesus.

As Jesus was sent to us, he sends us out with the Great Commission—“(As you are going) make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28).

For those who will step out of comfort and security for this calling of Jesus, there will be great reward. Growing a church with a focus on discipleship is slow to start, but make no mistake, it carries the seeds of a movement like we have never experienced in our lifetime. It begins with a few disciples that create a few more disciples that create a few more disciples until the impact becomes exponential. This is what's behind the explosive growth we're seeing in the church in China and other places around the globe. I wonder where the U.S. church would be if ten years ago the majority of pastors had cut their sermon preparation time in half and invested their energy into making disciples,

one-on-one. The idea is simple in concept, more complex in application, and profound in implication.

Head, Heart, Hands

Disciples are people who are actively seeking to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. They are listening to what they believe God is telling them now and doing their best to apply these lessons to their personal lives. They exemplify a general spirit of repentance, and they're known as generous and merciful. They tend to have healthy relationships with others. There is a distinction in the way disciples love people that makes them less likely to be offended and more likely to embody a servant approach. They overflow with thankfulness and a general satisfaction with their lives. They are not perfect people, but they exude a love for Jesus.

When someone talks about a discipleship program, the first image that typically comes to mind is that of a classroom. The traditional approach to discipleship has been to meet regularly for a specified period of time to review planned material. There's nothing inherently wrong with dispensing important information and instruction, but it's only one of three facets of discipleship:

Head – What you're learning

Heart – How you think and feel

Hands – How you live your life

For discipleship to be effective, the learning has to move out of the classroom and be applied in daily life. Think in terms of apprenticeship. Apprentices apply what they learn in the classroom to gain competency in the real world. Classroom learning is a key part of the process, but it doesn't stop there. The master craftsman would observe the apprentice in action and guide his thinking and actions in real-time. They use actual experiences to shape what the apprentice learns, how he thinks and feels, and how he changes his actions in the future.

In the context of spiritual growth, the best lessons are learned in the course of life. If you're discipling someone, you're engaged in that person's life. As circumstances arise in either of your lives, they become opportunities to look at what the Gospel has to say in those settings. What are the appropriate attitudes and actions? What does God want to do in this situation? What would please God? The double blessing is that you can't disciple or apprentice someone without growing yourself.

ELMs

I have incredible respect for the sacrifices missionaries make to travel to remote places, often at great risk, to serve Jesus. But, as Charles Spurgeon said, "Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter."

Some of us will be drawn to a distant place to share the Good News of Jesus. The rest of us are called to be right where we are now. We are Everyday Life Missionaries

(ELMs) serving Jesus in our neighborhoods, at our kid's games and recitals, at work, at our favorite restaurant, with our hobbies. We're missionaries in our everyday lives.

Lou Limongi is an ELM. Lou came to faith a couple of years ago at the age of 60. He wasn't tepid about his new relationship with Jesus. He embraced his life with Jesus the same way he gives an all encompassing bear hug to his friends. Vocationally, Lou is an accomplished contractor. He's also a faithful partner with his local church. It was Lou's big heart, not any formal training, that led him to put his vocation to ministry use and help develop the Hope Center to minister to the disenfranchised of Warren, Ohio.

As ELMs we recognize that Jesus is a "sent" and "sending" God. He was sent to earth to pay the price to redeem and restore all those that receive him and believe in his name. Then he has sent us to serve his mission of salvation and restoration. We begin to see our location and vocation as a calling. They are the places where God has divinely appointed us to be his ambassadors in that part of the world. [Bill Easum](#), church planting consultant and co-leader of 21st Century Strategies, said, "If a church has a missions committee, it's failed to grasp the significance of what it means to be a church."

How would your perspective change if you began to see your neighborhood as your mission field? Would that change opportunities for conversation when you go out to get the mail? Would that encourage you to host that open house or block party that you considered some time ago? Would it help you be intentional about understanding what's going on in the lives of the people around you so that God could provide a divine touch on their lives through you?

You were never meant to be a spectator. God has designed a game plan, and you are a key player. Your role may be to start a ministry to the poor, teach English as a second language, tutor third graders, coach a team, hold neighborhood gatherings, or host community efforts. Your ministry might well be in secret comforting someone in prison or in hospice. It might be bringing sanity to the single mom at her wits' end, or providing company to a lonely neighbor, or encouraging a desperate coworker that is losing the will to go on.

Missionary or imposter – which are you?

Attracted → Connected → Committed → Discipled

Nearly every church will tell you that their goal is to make disciples, so why don't we see a movement of Christian disciples across our country? It's because we're emphasizing the wrong strategy.

Every church has four components to their strategy for engaging people with their church:

1) **Attracted** – Churches work hard to overcome the obstacles that have turned people off from believing in God and going to church. By creating worship experiences and

teaching that is contemporary and relevant, churches have learned how to attract people back to the church.

2) **Connected** – If people are to become part of a church, they need a social tie to keep them there. It could be friendships that predated their first interaction with the church, or ones developed through mission projects, special activities, programs, classes, small groups, or missional communities. Without social connections, people will not likely be around for long.

3) **Committed** – After people become connected, there is a chance they will become committed. The difference between connected and committed is, “I like what this church is doing” vs. “I will help this church accomplish what they are doing.”

4) **Discipled** – After we come to faith in Jesus, the goal is to progress in our walk with him. Discipled people are those who have moved from the milk of babies to the solid food of adults. We have the option to become disciples that seek to know, be, and do like Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. Discipled people have become Christ-centered and are in turn discipling others.

Most churches emphasize “Attracted” and “Connected.” These are the areas that get the focus and the biggest part of the budget. We make the funnel as wide as possible with all the attractational pull we can muster, then hope that the momentum pulls people through to become “Committed” and “Discipled.”

Instead, we need to shift our focus and our resources to developing people in the “Committed” and “Discipled” phases. The results may be harder to measure, but which is more important—a church attendance of 1,000 with 100 growing disciples, or a church of 500 with 300 growing disciples?

Converts vs. Disciples

Some have interpreted the Great Commission to mean “go and make converts.” We work on getting people just inside the fence, and then we move on. This shortchanges the Gospel and misses much of what was intended when Jesus told us to go and make disciples. The goal of faith is always to draw closer to Jesus. The point of conversion is critical, but it’s more helpful to think in terms of always drawing closer to the center (i.e. Jesus), rather than simply getting inside the fence.

God is restoring this world that he called “good” through us. When we create beauty, right injustice, enhance relationships, and seek God as he intersects the physical with the spiritual, we are serving as Jesus’ hands and feet.

Theologian N.T. Wright said it well in his book, *Echoes of a Voice*:

“It is a matter of glimpsing that in God’s new creation, of which Jesus’ resurrection is the start, all that was good in the original creation is reaffirmed. All that has corrupted and defaced it—including many things which are woven so tightly into the fabric of the world as we know it that we can’t imagine being without them—will be

done away. Learning to live as a Christian is learning to live as a renewed human being, anticipating the eventual new creation in and with a world which is still longing and groaning for that final redemption.”

Mentoring and discipling are ways we work to restore all that God called good at creation. It means mentoring everyone around us, including family, friends, neighbors, people in our church, merchants, waitresses, vendors, suppliers, and coworkers. To introduce everyone to Christ and imitate him to everyone we meet and know is the highest calling of our life. We have a great opportunity and responsibility to disciple those with whom God has given us influence.

Part II

Removing the Barriers

Chapter 4

Sunday to Monday

If you decided you wanted to get in good physical shape, you might hire a trainer. Let's say that trainer told you to meet him on Saturday where he would teach fitness techniques and proper nutrition. If, at the end of the session, the trainer said, "I'll see you next Saturday," that would be good, but completely inadequate. To really get in shape, you need to know how to adjust your lifestyle every day and at every meal.

Many Christians approach their spiritual life the same way. We rely on weekend services to provide all of the spiritual food and training we need until the next Sunday. But just like a once-a-week training session is inadequate for getting physically fit, so, too, is merely attending weekend worship services as a means for growing spiritually.

Please don't hear what we're not saying (as our friend, author [Reggie McNeal](#), would say). We're not saying don't go to weekend services! What we are saying is that there's more to a robust Christian life than merely going to church. Weekend services are important, but they're just one part of a spiritual life to be lived out seven days a week.

Willow Creek Revealed

For the past 30 years, evangelical churches have been using a "seeker sensitive" model to help people far from God find their way back to him and become fully devoted followers of Christ. Willow Creek, one of the largest megachurches in the U.S., famously utilized this model, which emphasized attendance at weekend worship services, participation in small groups and activities, and regular giving. Added together, these activities would result in spiritual growth—or so the thinking went.

But Willow Creek's own internal research, the REVEAL Study, proved this was not the case. Senior Pastor Bill Hybels commented, "...The disconnect between what we thought we were doing and what we were actually accomplishing was troubling and unacceptable."

The REVEAL Study was subsequently completed by more than another thousand churches. The results of this expanded research, outlined in the book *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth*, confirmed that attracting people to God can only bring them so far in their faith journey. In fact, the research showed that church activities can actually hinder deep spiritual growth by giving the impression that a life with Christ is primarily about doing rather than being.

The REVEAL Study exposed a pattern of growth among churchgoers. While spiritual growth is an infinitely complex process that's more akin to a matrix than a linear progression, the four groups identified in the REVEAL research were plotted along a spiritual continuum.

The first group, referred to as “Exploring Christ,” includes those who are not yet believers. Ironically, the longer people in this phase attend church without accepting Christ, the less likely they are ever to accept him as their Savior.

The second group, “Growing in Christ,” represents those who are young in their faith and, hopefully, growing spiritually. (Ten years of experience is more valuable than one year of experience ten times.)

The final two groups, “Close to Christ” and “Christ-centered,” are of greatest interest to us here. Both of these groups represent committed Christ-followers, but there is a significant difference.

To illustrate, a few years ago, I (Bill) attended a public high school graduation where the co-valedictorians both spoke openly about their faith in Jesus. For several weeks something troubled me about their commencement addresses. I finally realized what was bothering me. Both girls talked about heading out on *their* journey to do *their* thing, and God’s job was to come alongside them to serve them in that journey, as if he was a copilot instead of the captain.

I don’t share this to belittle these girls. They are light years ahead of where I was at age 18. But they illustrated for me the difference between Christians who are “Close to Christ”—those who are on their own journey—and “Christ-centered”—those who believe they are on *God’s* journey.

For Christ-centered believers, every day is a chance to live out his purposes, not our own. Willow Creek discovered that believers in this phase of spiritual growth have a missional mindset. They understand that all they’ve been given in time, treasure, and talents is meant to serve God and others. They proactively look for where God is at work in their world and where God wants them to connect with him.

Ironically, the REVEAL Study found that the church sometimes hinders Christ-centered believers from doing what they’re called by God to do. The creative, missional impulse of Christ-centered believers is too often short-circuited by the programs and structure of the church. They feel conflicted and, sometimes, constrained when the needs they feel led to address can’t be accomplished through an official program of the church.

So how does a church get out of the way and help move people along this continuum of faith? The authors of the REVEAL study took a closer look at churches that were top performers in terms of making disciples. Here’s what discipling churches do to foster spiritual growth in their people:

1) **Embed the Bible in Everything:** Don’t miss this: “Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture.” Make Scripture a central focus of your life and a biblical worldview the lens through which you view life.

2) **Create Ownership:** “Empower people to be the church; equip people to succeed; hold people accountable.” They must step up to the challenge and own the mission to which God is calling them.

3) **Pastor the Local Community:** Get hands-on in the work to serve the community. Cultivating relationships locally helps build stronger bonds between the church and its neighbors.

4) **Lead from a Christ-Centered Heart:** People are not looking for perfect leaders; they're looking for authentic leaders. They simply want a model of what it looks like to love Jesus more than anything else in the world.

What you measure improves

As we mentioned in Chapter 3, churches have historically measured how well they have attracted and connected people in their congregation. We suggest shifting gears and measuring the number of people who are “committed” and “discipled” as a way of knowing whether your church is functioning healthily. The old way of measuring the ABCs (Attendance, Buildings and Cash) alone doesn't capture the true impact churches make within communities and around the world. We need new metrics that shift the focus from internal numbers to discipleship development and external impact.

Lois Swagerty notes this shift in her Leadership Network article [“The New Metrics: How Do They Look in Your Church?”](#) Swagerty quotes Gary Dolan, who identifies two forms of measurement for the church: “...like a scientist—nickels and noses, or like an attorney—with a preponderance of evidence.”

[RiverTree Christian](#) Church, one of the original Future Traveler churches, is making great strides in initiating major missional efforts. They are, in a sense, “defunding Sunday” to shift more of their resources from the weekend event and in turn developing and facilitating missional communities. They are also decentralizing their leadership to develop the needed breadth of leadership. One approach they're using is called a "Huddle" (from Mike Breen's book [Building a Discipling Culture](#)) where individual leaders take responsibility for developing other leaders.

Quantifying a person's level of commitment and spiritual maturity represents a different metric for measuring a church's effectiveness in the area of discipling. Some churches collect stories instead of numbers to measure progress in this area. Another one of the Future Traveler churches, Community Christian Church in Chicago uses five questions, regarding spiritual formation to assess an individual's growth as a disciple:

- 1) How do you see God at work in your life?
- 2) What is God teaching you in his Word?
- 3) What conversations are you having with pre-Christian people?
- 4) What good can we do around here?
- 5) How can we help you in prayer?

Raising the bar

Churches celebrate when people show up four out of five Sundays, give 10 percent (although actually the typical member gives closer to 2 percent) of their income, and get involved in a mission project once or twice a year. This is the best they can hope for because that's where we've set the bar for discipleship.

And many of us are content with that level of contribution. If we can carve out this much even with a little sacrifice, we feel justified in using the rest of our time and money to satisfy personal desires. We live with the belief that I give God a portion (of my life, my time, my talents, my money) and the rest is mine to do with as I please.

But doesn't that fall short of what it means to be a disciple? Jesus is careful to tell us to count the cost of becoming a disciple (Luke 14) because the cost is so great. In verse 26, Jesus said we must, in a sense, "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life" to be a disciple.

In Mark 10, we learn about a godly young man who had kept all the commandments as he knew them. He knelt at the feet of Jesus to see if there was anything more he needed to do to receive eternal life. Verse 21 says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him" as he asked the young man to give up all his possessions for the poor. Jesus knew this would be the one thing keeping the young man from freedom. The rich, young man went away sad. He couldn't do it because he preferred the bondage of his possessions.

We may not struggle to give away possessions, but everyone has something they hold onto. Mark 10 shows us that all of our time, all of our money, all of our possessions, all of our desires, all of our being is meant to be used at the discretion and direction of the Holy Spirit to further the salvation and restoration Gospel of Jesus. Everything we have been entrusted with in this life is to be used for ministry.

Some Future Traveler churches are raising the bar on what it means to be a disciple. Austin Stone Church grew to more than 7,000 people in eight short years, yet their focus was on creating disciples to serve Austin. To become active in their ministry, they require people to sign and live by this 14-point partner agreement:

As a Partner at Austin Stone Church I Will:

Worship Christ

- Habitually spend time with Christ through the reading of Scripture and prayer
- Follow the example of Christ in my personal life
- Financially support the mission of the church, starting with a 10 percent tithe
- Be or have been baptized as a believer
- Participate in community with Austin Stone

Live in Community

- Actively pursue biblical community within Austin Stone
- Be diligent to preserve the unity of the spirit
- Not gossip, but instead use my words to give grace

Get Trained

- Serve the body of Austin Stone
- Get trained for ministry with the Austin Stone
- Not teach beliefs contrary to our Affirmation of Faith
- Build disciple relationships with other believers

Make Disciples

- Pursue intentional, transparent relationships with non-Christians
- Be involved in living out and sharing of the Gospel both locally and globally

The Stone has set a high bar compared to many other contemporary churches of today, yet more than 1,500 have signed up. There is little room for imposters here. And the more they raise the bar, the more people show up the next weekend.

If Austin Stone's results are any indicator, people want to be challenged. We don't just want to be attracted to something or someone. We want to commit to something bigger than us.

What would happen at your church if the bar was raised this high?

Measuring fruit

“Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing” (Ezekiel 47:12).

This verse from Ezekiel hints at the measurements vibrant churches will use in the future—figuratively speaking, the types and numbers of fruit trees, the amount of water that flows from the sanctuary, the nourishing, healing quality of food they provide. We're not likely to throw away the traditional forms of measurement anytime soon, but churches that are vital and are comprised of spiritually maturing individuals place a higher priority on metrics that measure commitment and discipleship. They are driven by how well they're impacting their communities. Being missional is more than mission trips and food drives for the homeless. It means taking ownership for tangible, positive results outside the church, investing in nurturing and growing the trees that ultimately bear fruit.

On a practical level, here are some ways churches may measure their fruit:

- The number of families led out of poverty
- The improved literacy rate of school kids tutored by church volunteers
- The number of mentors to teenagers of single parents
- The number of families in the church that adopt underprivileged kids in the community
- The number of people in the church (not on staff) that see themselves as full-time ELMs

- The number of micro loans provided by your church
- The number of non-religious community groups using the church facilities
- The number of projects the church is asked to be involved in by community leaders
- The number of former convicted felons placed in jobs by the church
- The reduction of domestic abuse incidents from the time the church became involved in supporting at-risk families
- The percentage of the church budget designated for those outside the church
- The ratio of people involved in ministry outside the church compared to people involved in ministry programs within the church

What matters most to your church? Use your imagination. What metric can you use to measure the way God is using you and your church to change the world?

Chapter 5

Paid to Play

I remember the story of a church member talking about Jesus with her neighbor. When the neighbor showed a desire to put his faith in Christ, the church member called on the pastor to close the deal. After all, that was “his job.”

Too often we see the work of the church as the responsibility of the pastor and paid staff. Isn't that why we hired them? We operate as if the pastoral staff does the real work of the church and our job is to simply support them with a little time and money. The clergy owns the mission, and laypeople are there just to help out where they can.

This misunderstanding has set up a sort of caste system in the church between clergy and laity, between paid staff and everyone else. This divide has stunted the growth of many believers and has caused some to abdicate their role in the mission of Jesus all together.

Again, don't hear what we're not saying. We're in favor of pastoral training, seminaries, and degrees in ministry. We don't mean to diminish the role of clergy and the intensive training they receive to help teach and train their congregations. We also believe there is a need for paid staff that is dedicated exclusively to the work of a local church.

What we are saying is that those of us who are non-ordained—the laity—are equally responsible for being fully engaged in the mission of God. Every believer should grow in the knowledge and application of God's Word in his or her life. This divide between those paid to play—clergy—and “non-professionals”—laity—has resulted in too many church members becoming consumers of religious goods and services rather than disciples engaged in taking the Gospel of Jesus to the world. This divide leaves many people under-challenged, under-utilized, and unaware of the true calling of God on their lives. A Masters in Divinity degree is great, but the only true qualification for service to God is a life committed to Jesus.

In his blog post, [“Killing the Clergy-Laity Caste System,”](#) Ed Stetzer, vice president of research and ministry development for LifeWay Christian Resources, and a church planting practitioner, says,

“The ministry assignment of the laypeople is not to simply ‘lay’ around and tell the called what they should be doing. Laypeople are not to be customers of religious goods and services served by the storekeeper clergy. We are all called although our current assignments may vary dramatically.

Jesus said to an ordinary group of people, ‘As the Father has sent Me, I also send you’ (John 20:21). These were not professionals, with the exception of professional fishermen and a professional tax collector. And if we hope to engage

and evangelize the world with the Gospel, we cannot possibly rely on professionals to do it.

Laypeople often think that this means their job is to pay, pray, get out of the way. To make sure we are not communicating a low, irresponsible view of laypeople one thing is critical. We must create an atmosphere of expectation.”

A new posture

The posture of many churches has been, “We can do it; you can help.” A better approach, to borrow a slogan from a popular do-it-yourself store, would be, “You can do it; we can help.” The role of full-time paid clergy should be to equip people to be missional—to carry out the mission of God.

To experience a movement of God, we need decentralized leadership involving many people in a high trust/low control environment. Missional entrepreneur Todd Wilson uses the analogy of the church as an aircraft carrier. The aircraft carrier’s role is forward deployment. Its success is measured by how well the individual planes accomplish their missions. Most of our churches, on the other hand, resemble cruise ships. That’s great for the people on board, but tragic for those that can’t make it to the ship. What difference would it make if a church’s success was based on how well they deployed believers into the world to be salt and light?

Every church needs leadership, but we need to reconsider our definition. We stymie the potential of the church when our definition of leadership is based on an office. In his book, *I Am a Follower*, Len Sweet turns our current leadership paradigm on its head so that we see the importance of followership. Leadership is made up of two facets: being and doing. The church’s approach has been to focus on the skills of leading, in other words, *doing*. The most important aspect of leadership for the church, however, is on the depth of followership, the *being*.

Seeing full-time paid staff as the entirety of leadership in the church short-changes the mission another way. Ephesians 4 says that the church has been given apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to equip, build up and achieve unity and maturity in the church so that we might attain “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” To expect a pastor to embody all five of these giftings is unrealistic.

Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim point out in their book, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church*, that we have come to value shepherds and teachers as the primary roles. The spiritual nurturing of shepherds and the wisdom of teachers are critical but incomplete without the missional vigor of the apostle, the call to faithfulness of the prophet, and the inspirational recruitment of the evangelist. The five-fold gifting of Ephesians 4 won’t be found in one person but rather in the totality of the church.

Full-time ministry for free

The artificial distinctions between clergy and laity have created a deep misunderstanding of what it means to be in full-time ministry—or rather, *who* is to be in

full-time ministry. The reality is we are all in full-time ministry; we just don't all draw a paycheck from the church. Historically, the only paradigm we have for being in full-time ministry is to leave our day jobs and go into church work.

But what if God wants us right where we are? We can be just as "called" in our vocation and location as anyone employed by a church. When we see ourselves in full-time ministry, our work, whatever it might be, becomes sacred. The places we live become our mission fields. There's certainly nothing wrong with being paid by a church, but you are no less in full-time ministry if your paycheck comes from somewhere other than a church.

Chapter 6

Secular to Sacred

I (Bill) love hiking and climbing in the mountains of the West. A couple of friends and I have been faithful to get to the mountains nearly every year (and sometimes more than once a year) for more than a decade and a half. When I get there, I can't wait to get above the tree line. It's not a particularly habitable place, but it does something to my spirit. Every time I'm there I feel a palpable, powerful connection with Jesus. For me, the granite above 10,000 feet is sacred space.

Ed and I have spent our entire careers developing facilities for churches and ministries. We spend our lives literally creating sacred space. We take this work seriously and believe wholeheartedly that facilities dedicated exclusively to ministry have a special place and purpose in the life of believers.

Yet sacred space is not limited to church-owned facilities. Someone led to Christ at Panera—sacred space? A discipleship opportunity at Starbucks—sacred space? A confession on the street—sacred space? A conversation about God at a Rush concert—sacred space? An encouraging word while picking up the mail—sacred space? Consoling the loss of a loved one in a living room—sacred space?

“Cogun is my church”

Occasionally, we use a local staffing company to provide temporary clerical and accounting help to cover when a team member goes on vacation or to help during peaks in workload. Deb Parish was one of our temporary workers. She did great work, so we were always pleased to have her back. It seemed like she enjoyed being around us too.

What I didn't know was that the people in the office had been showing the love of Jesus simply in the way they were interacting with Deb on a day-to-day basis. There was no overt emphasis to try to get her to come to church. There was just a sincere interest in Deb and her life.

Some time later, Deb's husband developed a serious brain aneurism. They went to the Cleveland Clinic, and while completing the requisite paperwork, the admitting nurse asked Deb, “Where is your church?” Deb didn't have a church background so she told them, “Cogun is my church.” Sacred space.

There's a tattoo parlor in Pittsburgh called In the Blood that is run by Christ-followers. The building was originally owned by a woman who was into sadomasochism, among other things. Unspeakable evil took place in the lower level. Now that space is used for Bible studies. Sacred space.

Paul Dazet, a pastor and good friend of mine, grew up with no church background. His brother (not a believer at the time) gave him a music CD not knowing it had Christian lyrics. He just liked the music. The Holy Spirit spoke to my friend Paul through that CD, and he pulled into a rest stop pleading for God, if he was real, to take the burden from his heart. God did. Sacred space.

A member of Paul's church came to faith while he was working at Burger King. At a point of despair in his life, Mike cried out to God to redeem and restore him—while he was in the middle of cleaning the women's restroom. God did, and his life was changed. Sacred space.

When we buy into a sacred-secular divide, we limit God. It's important to see every place and experience as potentially sacred because God is already there. As you begin to see your home, your place of work, your school, your neighborhood as sacred, it opens you up to connect with God where he's already at work.

Church in a coffeehouse

My wife and I (Bill) were travelling in rural South Carolina (Pickens County to be exact) on our way to our son's college baseball tournament. The rain delay on the final day gave me a chance to get some work done. We decided to give the local coffee shop [Main Street Deli and Coffeehouse](#) a chance.

What we didn't expect to find was a pastor from South Africa who had intentionally planted an incarnational church in a coffeehouse-deli that would rival anything you'd find in Seattle. The Christian atmosphere was subtle yet distinct, so we asked our server for more background. She led us to Pastor Ken Paynter. Pastor Ken and his wife, Mary, moved to the area after their son went to Clemson for his doctorate. They launched the [Bridge](#) in 2006, then purchased the Main Street Deli & Coffeehouse after it came on the market in late 2007. Their intention was to create a true "[third place](#)" that would engage the broader community in a positive atmosphere with cooking, conversation and, ultimately, a connection to Christ.

On any given day you'll find students (Clemson and Southern Wesleyan) and people from the community, including a Hindu couple. The Bridge provides Sunday Night Suppers for area college students, and you'll likely find Bible conversations on Wednesday and Thursday evenings. The church meets there formally on Sunday mornings. Sacred space.

Temporal but Sacred

We keep a large, framed picture of an old, boarded up church in our office. That may seem odd, especially since our passion is developing facilities for ministry. There's nothing unique or particularly appealing about the building. It's small and a fairly traditional design for the time. In fact, it's since been torn down. This particular building is where my grandfather accepted Christ during a midweek Methodist revival more than 80 years ago. He was in his mid-20s, and the transformation was dramatic. He left his job as a successful salesman to become a pastor at about 10 percent of the income he and his family had become accustomed to. He supplemented his income as a coal miner in southwest Pennsylvania and hunted some days to put meat on the table. The positive impact of his decision to follow Jesus has cascaded in the following decades through countless families throughout the Midwest, including ours.

We keep the picture of his church as a reminder that, until the Lord returns, all the facilities we design and build will eventually go away. Only the result of the ministry will remain forever.

While each one of us must make our own faith decisions, our family has benefited greatly growing up downstream from our grandfather's choice. The church building may be gone, but the results of the ministry that took place there continue to shape our family's history in a powerfully positive way.

Space is temporal but the sacred that happens in it is eternal.

Part III

Experiencing a Life Worth Living

Chapter 7

Finding God in Your World

A friend of ours once asked us, “Why is it easier for Christians to believe in the omnipresence of evil than it is the omnipresence of God?”

To reinforce his point, he noted how Christians tend to see evil everywhere in a world that often seems absent of God. He went on to describe how many Christians will talk of “taking God” to a dark area of a city or a remote area of the world. “Wouldn’t God already be there?” he asked.

Though our first reaction was to disagree with him, we had to admit that our language, and sometimes our practice, betrays our stated theology. The simple truth is that God is God. And as God, he is omnipresent, omniscient and fully sufficient within himself. He has the power to turn the universe in on itself from the furthest star at the end of the galaxies. And he could do it with a word. He is the creator of particles so small we have yet to discover them. He has been present before and throughout history. He knows when a child falls in Ohio, when a mother miscarries in California, when a husband buries his wife in India, when a family is butchered in Africa, when a child is sold on the streets of Indonesia. God is everywhere. And he is there with you now.

Were the loaves and fish necessary?

The writers of the Gospels tell about a time when Jesus and his disciples were followed by the multitudes to a remote place. As it was getting late, Jesus had compassion on the crowd and told his disciples to feed them. The disciples protested, complaining that even if they had enough money with them, it would cost more than a half year’s salary. We’re told that the crowd numbered about 5,000 men. Adding in the women and children that were likely there too, the crowd was probably closer to 15,000.

Jesus then asked them to gather what food they could find among the crowd. All they could scrounge up were five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus told them to divide the multitude into groups of fifties and hundreds, and then he looked to heaven and gave thanks. The disciples took the food broken by Jesus to the crowd and kept feeding them until everyone was full. Then they gathered what was left and filled 12 baskets.

Now, we’ve yet to perform our first miracle, so we’re not well versed in the rules of the supernatural. But I have to believe that if you can feed 15,000 people with five loaves and two fish and have more left over than you started with, you probably didn’t need the loaves and fish to begin with. Yet we see it over and over again throughout the Bible, and you may have examples in your own life. For some reason God—who is entirely capable of succeeding on his own—chooses to partner with us to do the amazing.

God is present and at work in your world right now. He desires deeply for you to understand where he is at work and where he wants you to join him in that work. You may feel like the most you have to offer is five loaves and two fish, but that’s exactly what he wants to use. More often than not, God uses the least likely, the least qualified to do the greatest work.

Once, after a long stretch away from home for work, I (Bill) was eager to get home and unwind. As I pulled into my driveway, I noticed my next door neighbor mowing the lawn. I waved and drove into the garage, ready to close the door behind me and enjoy some much-needed down-time.

For some reason though, instead of quickly putting the garage door down, I felt God prompting me to go next door and say hello. I was reluctant at first, but then I sensed the Holy Spirit asking, “When does missional theory become reality?”

I crossed our yards as he was emptying the clippings from his mower. We chatted for a few minutes, and then I invited him to get together some evening the following week. He agreed, and that became the first of occasional outings getting to know each other.

As it turns out, we had a connection as lifetime fans of the Cleveland Browns (hard to find many people that will admit to that). We met every other week or so talking about our hope for the Browns. Gradually our conversations drifted into other interests and concerns of our lives. A few months later (I think after my friend felt reassured that I wasn’t going to try to sell him Amway or something), he suggested we get our wives together and have dinner.

We’ve all become close friends since that first double-date. I know the struggles they face in their life, and they know ours. We’ve had a number of opportunities for God to use us to speak the Gospel into their lives. And they have been a blessing to us. We have shared some important, life-shaping experiences that never would have happened if I hadn’t listened to the Holy Spirit.

That encounter with my friend has changed the way I see our neighborhood. I now see it as a mission field, and I discovered that God was already at work there. It’s up to me to connect with God; it’s not up to me to be God. It’s a shift in seeing so that I understand my role in God’s mission and where he wants me to join him in that mission.

Finding our way

As we mentioned earlier, I (Bill) love the backcountry, especially the mountains. There is something about trekking in remote areas with magnificent scenery that takes my breath away—literally and figuratively. But roaming in the backcountry can be dangerous if you’re not familiar with route-finding. The path can become obscured over rock, glaciers, and other barren areas. To mark the way in those areas, hikers erect cairns—carefully piled rocks that form a marker. These markers have been used since ancient times to assist travelers or to signal special places.

The problem is, if you’re not familiar with spotting cairns, it’s easy to miss them and lose your way. Cairns are made from indigenous rocks, so they blend into the surroundings. It’s easy to walk right past one if you don’t know what you’re looking for. In some places you can get completely lost after missing just one cairn. But when you find one, you know it’s a cairn because it’s clearly something someone intentionally placed there.

I think that’s a little like what it is to follow God. He tends not to use neon signs or flashing lights. He has used writing on the wall in the past, and even a talking donkey, but most times His leading is much subtler. The signs are indigenous, so if you’re not paying attention, you can walk right past them, and even off a cliff.

Prayer—listening prayer—is one way we spot God’s cairns. Writing on the wall would make it easier, but it wouldn’t do anything for our faith. There are cairns all around us. Maybe we miss them because of lack of prayer, practice, or the perspective that comes from spending time reading the Bible. If you feel like you’re at a place where the path is obscured, look for the cairns.

God is passionate about working through you, so he will not hide himself. Ask him to show you where he is at work and where he wants you to join him. Be alert and aware, and ask the Holy Spirit to be your guide.

A portion of your ministry might be part of a formal effort organized through a specific church. And that’s good. But, when you start to see yourself in full-time ministry, you’ll find opportunities at work, in your neighborhood, next door, among your networks, with the parents of your kid’s friends, at the gym, at a restaurant, everywhere. Simply look for where God is already at work and join him full time in ministry. Look for the cairns.

Chapter 8

Building It in Community

One day I (Bill) was reading in Acts 18 when a passage jumped out at me. The Apostle Paul was struggling with the Jews in Corinth to the point where they became abusive. God spoke to Paul in a vision saying, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking; do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you...” (here’s the part that captured my attention) “...because I have many people in this city.”

Notice that he didn’t say, “You don’t have to be afraid because I’m going to protect you with my angels.” Or, “I have a supernatural, protective bubble around you so no one can touch you.” No, the reason God gave for not being afraid was “because I have many people in this city.”

Frankly, I think I’d prefer the angels or the supernatural protective bubble to needing to depend on the perpetual fallibility of people. We’ve already seen that, for some reason, God chooses to use our meager metaphoric five loaves and two fish to accomplish his miracles. Here we see that he chooses to use us to serve each other in significant ways.

The executive summary of the Bible

I have long thought of Matthew 22:37-40 as the executive summary of the Bible. Jesus is asked his opinion of the greatest commandment. He replies, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” He follows that with, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Then he punctuates it by saying, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” In other words, everything we consider to be part of the Bible that had been written at that time points to these two as the most important commandments.

That’s it. Love God. Love others. We were created to be in relationship with God and others. There is no higher purpose than serving God and serving each other.

Into community

I love the entrepreneurial sensibility that’s woven into our American culture. It has been a magnet and a beacon for people around the world for decades. And it’s largely responsible for seemingly impossible advances in science and industry. The “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality has been behind many a success story. But it has also given rise to the false notion of the self-made man. There is no such thing.

I’m not saying that our gifts and efforts don’t play a significant part in our success. But to give someone full credit for who they have become is, as a friend of mine says,

being born on third and thinking you hit a triple. If there were such a thing as a self-made man, he would be a sad man that you wouldn't want to emulate.

We are meant to live in fellowship with one another. We need each other. In fact, you might be surprised at how many “one another” verses there are in the New Testament. We are instructed to discuss with, serve, love, be devoted to, honor, live in harmony with, not pass judgment on, accept, instruct, greet, agree with, encourage, be humble with, be gentle with, be patient with, bear with, be kind and compassionate with, forgive, speak in psalms and songs to, submit to, teach, be like-minded with, be sympathetic with, show humility toward, have fellowship with and admonish and spur **one another** on toward love and good deeds.

To live in fellowship means to be part of a community, a tribe. Community is the venue for living out the “one another” verses. In community there is no idyllic paradise. It's a messy, cumbersome way of life that's both frustrating and fulfilling. We were born for community, so it's not surprising that that's where we find the real riches of life. Community spawns authentic relationships that provide a platform for accountability and encouragement.

Community also provides the best context for discipleship. As we said earlier, true discipleship moves us from the classroom to the living room, so to speak. Discipleship happens best in the flow of life as a process, not a program. Knowledge is an important part of discipleship, and it is best learned when we apply the Gospel to the trials and triumphs of life. Without a sense of community, discipleship lends itself to head knowledge, not heart transformation.

Intentionally Organic

I (Bill) have always struggled with the organic nature of authentic community. I know community is something that has to happen naturally and can't be forced. But in the past, if someone used the term “organic” to describe community, I squirmed. To me, organic meant *laissez faire*. It didn't line up with my action-oriented nature. You can't just sit there and hope something develops.

Later, I discovered you could be “intentionally organic.” It turns out that just like growing a garden, there are, in fact, steps we can take to encourage authentic community. For example, you wouldn't just sit on your front porch hoping for a garden to all of a sudden start to grow. Instead you would study your climate. How much rain normally falls in a year? How much sunshine? What grows well in that climate? How should it be planted? When? What grows well together? Then you need to tend the garden. Weed it. Water it. Cover it, if necessary. Even change the crop if the planned crop is not doing well.

Yet, even after all that work, you aren't the one that makes the plants grow. You can't even bring the rain or the sunshine. That's still up to God.

Building community is the same way. Our role is to be intentional, to take action to first understand what healthy community looks like, then to understand everything we can as “gardeners”—to create the contexts for healthy community to flourish. Communities that grow like this are often referred to as missional communities.

Community Christian Church again offers some practical advice, this time on being intentionally organic:

- B - Begin with prayer. We want you to ask, ‘God, how do you want me to bless the people in the places you’ve sent me to?’
- L - Listen. Don’t talk, but listen to people, their struggles, their pains, in the places God sent you.
- E - Eat. You can’t just check this off. It’s not quick. You have to have a meal with people or a cup of coffee. It builds relationships.
- S - Serve. If you listen with people and you eat with people, they will tell you how to love them, and you’ll know how to serve them.
- S - Story. When the time is right, now we talk and we share the story of how Jesus changed our life.

A church in the neighborhood

During a trip to New York City, I (Bill) had the opportunity to join [Trinity Grace Church](#) for one of their neighborhood church gatherings. By all appearances it was a normal, young, friendly, traditional church. They meet in a neo-Gothic sanctuary built in 1898, which they rent from the German Evangelical Lutherans. There were hymns, liturgical readings, prayer, offering and the celebration of communion. Pastor Jon Tyson delivered a message on sin, skillfully using his personal journey to show how his search for God brought him back to Jesus.

All sort of standard, until you look below the surface. Trinity Grace Church has adopted a parish model in which they serve the city through a network of neighborhood churches. Though the churches occasionally gather for citywide fellowship, the emphasis is on the neighborhoods because they believe “our lives are better when we spend time in and care about where we live.”

The neighborhood churches are each comprised of several missional communities (MCs). The MCs, made up of 15 to 40 people each, are broken down further into life groups “that together follow the core practices of the Christian life: reading and meditating on Scripture, praying for non-believers, and confessing our sins.”

Trinity Grace Church is more a church in the community than they are a church in the pew. The life groups are the fundamental expression of a church that is defined by what they do, not by where they meet. They are living out life together, day to day, supporting each other and bringing a Gospel of salvation, hope, grace, peace, and justice to a hurting part of the world. Their focus is on being the church in the communities where they live. And they are making a difference!

When we witness an authentic success story, our tendency is to replicate it with a prescriptive approach that mimics what's observed above the surface, like worship styles, gathering frequencies, group sizes, and service formats. But that's just taking a shot in the dark hoping to hit the target simply because we imitated the form.

Instead, we need to do the hard work of descriptive analysis to understand the heart changes that are critical to real discipleship. The reality is that Trinity Grace Church has worked to find the right rhythms and organization, and it's different for each one of their neighborhood churches. When you spot a success, it's likely the keys to that success will be found below the surface.

There are excellent authors including Alan Hirsch, Mike Breen, Hugh Halter, Matt Smay, Rob Wegner, Jeff Vanderstelt, and others who can provide insights to further understand missional communities. For the moment, let us make a distinction between traditional small groups and missional communities.

Small groups tend to be focused inward on the members. They do good work in the community, but it's usually short-lived since the primary focus is not the community. Traditional small groups dislike dividing to form another group.

Missional communities, on the other hand, are externally focused. They see themselves as missionaries called to a specific neighborhood, or school, or other group of people. Or they may be a collection of missionaries that serve several groups. Because missional communities are mission-focused, their goal is multiplication, not division. They continually work toward developing new missional communities.

Chapter 9

Reordering Your World

Like all of the great heroes of the Bible and in our world, we long to win the fight for love, courage, justice, or forgiveness. We desire David's courage while fighting Goliath, as well as his self-control in honoring King Saul, even when Saul was in pursuit of his life. We desire Joseph's perseverance during an unjust prison term, as well as the forgiveness he showed to his brothers. We desire Job's brokenness before God even after he lost everything. And, we desire Queen Esther's selflessness in risking a life of ease and honor to save her people.

We desire to live a great story. A life that wins the battle of the heart. A life that better equips the next generation to live their own unleashed life that in turn leaves their world better equipped. We desire to be part of a blessing to the third and fourth generations.

A Hinge Point

We live in a unique period of time for the church in the U.S. We no longer enjoy a culture where Christianity is in the mainstream. In Paul Elie's *New York Times* online book review, "[Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?](#)," he asks, "Where has the novel of belief gone?" "The obvious answer," he says, "is that it has gone where belief itself has gone. In America today, Christianity is highly visible in public life but marginal or of no consequence in a great many individual lives. For the first time in our history it is possible to speak of Christianity matter-of-factly as one religion among many; for the first time it is possible to leave it out of the conversation altogether. This development places the believer on a frontier again, at the beginning of a new adventure; it means that the Christian who was born here is a stranger in a strange land no less than the Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Soviet Jews and Spanish-speaking Catholics who have arrived from elsewhere."

In addition to being a post-Christian world, it is also postmodern, post-local, post-scale, post-Gutenberg, post-cold war. But it is also a "pre" world, without final definitions. This trend is creating an atmosphere where, as one songwriter described, "The only constant I am sure of is this accelerating rate of change." We are at a pivotal point for the church in America. A hinge point, so to speak. What we do in the next 20 years will set the trajectory for the U.S. church for decades to come.

We believe that we'll see real, biblical, first-century Christianity flourish in the days ahead. But it will require changes in our lives to make that difference. It requires that we become pilgrims and strangers here. We must live above the fray. We must see the world as God sees it. And we must reorder our world to do so.

Put off to put on

Proverbs 4:23 is a key verse for my (Ed's) family: "Keep your heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues of life" (KJV). At the core of an "unleashed" life, a life that matters, lies this battle of the heart. The battle of the heart can only be won when we're walking in the Spirit. The old heroes understood this, but our current culture has yet to learn this lesson. The average person spends two hours a day on their smartphone, but less than 10 minutes a day with God. Less than 5 percent of Christian couples in the U.S. pray together daily. Our days are consumed by the urgent, sucked back into the world with little time or energy to rise above it. Even though we know we should invest more in eternal issues, we're too exhausted to follow through.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he encourages them to "put off" and then "put on." If we desire to "put on" a more purposeful life, what will we "put off"? If we desire to seek God more intentionally, where will the energy and time come from? In America we've been taught that we can have it all, but it's not true. We can't be an A-plus businessperson, spouse, parent, sports enthusiast, and still have time to seek God and live his mission for us. We must "put off" and make honest, courageous choices.

In this world where we cram as much into our days as we can, the idea of intentionally saying "no" can seem scary—even risky. By saying no, we may miss out on some great experience, or rise up the ranks more slowly than we'd like.

And yet, the splinter in our mind tells us that something is off balance. We know intuitively that it's time to make a change. By living intentionally, even when that includes pursuing less of this life so that God can do more with us, we are taking a big risk.

As Christ-followers, we are called to give up *everything* for a relationship with Jesus. At least six times and in all four gospels, Jesus is recorded as saying: "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39. See also Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, Luke 17:33, and John 12:25).

Now that's a risk! Jesus cautions us to count the cost of becoming a disciple. It is not something to be entered into lightly. And yet some people give more thought to a two-year cell phone contract. For many their association with Christ is nothing more than hitting the "Like" button on Christianity's Facebook page.

The Time is Now

Being a missionary—being on mission—is something we're all called to every day of our lives. And it means doing it right where we are, day in and day out. It's time for us to get off the sidelines and reorder our lives around new priorities. As Francis Chan would say, it's time to take risks where, if God doesn't show up, we're in trouble.

We believe we live in the most important time in history for the U.S. church. What we do over the next two decades may have a greater impact on the future of the church

than ever. That makes it the most exciting time in American history to be a Christ-follower, an ELM, a disciple of Jesus.

Commit your life fully to the love and mission of Jesus and the things in this world will grow faintly dim. You'll not only find a peace that passes all understanding, but you'll weave a great story. And you'll have the adventure of a lifetime with God!

About the Authors

[Bill Couchenour](#) is married to Pam, and they have four adult children and two grandchildren. Since 1995 he has served as the CEO of [Cogun](#), a company committed exclusively to helping churches develop the right ministry space. He began his career with Cogun in 1982 when he launched the Florida District of Cogun. Bill has a business degree from Youngstown State University, and an MBA from The University of Tampa.

He has a fervent desire to help ministries improve their effectiveness at connecting their communities with Christ. Bill has served in various capacities for his local church and other organizations, including Youth for Christ, Heartland Christian School, and BeTheChangeProject. He also serves on the Leadership Team for Future Travelers.

Bill is the author of the book [Churches... Before You Build](#).

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[Ed Bahler](#) is the CEO of the [Aspen Group](#), a design/build firm specializing in the design and construction of church facilities. Aspen Group has offices in Chicago and Indianapolis with a focus on the Great Lakes region. Ed also has an engineering degree from Purdue University but more importantly has been married 34 years to Annette. They have seven kids and 14 grandkids.

Ed and Bill are the founding members of the [Cornerstone Knowledge Network](#) (CKN), which develops and disseminates meaningful knowledge that radically improves how facilities impact ministry. CKN research also reveals that effective ministry requires the intentional “Alignment” of:

- Evolving Culture
- Relevant Ministry
- Empowering Leadership
- Intentional Facilities

You can explore and help in developing this alignment insight by visiting the [CKN blog](#).
Follow Ed on Twitter: [@ebahler](#)

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