

The River Church

**UNLEASHING A CULTURE OF
MULTIPLICATION IN YOUR CHURCH**

LARRY WALKEMEYER

FOREWORD DAVE FERGUSON

EXPONENTIAL⁷

Exponential is a growing movement of activists committed to the multiplication of healthy new churches. Exponential Resources spotlights actionable principles, ideas, and solutions for the accelerated multiplication of healthy, reproducing faith communities. For more information, visit exponential.org.

The River Church: Unleashing a Culture of Multiplication in Your Church

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**God didn't
create you
just so you'd
be a "ministry
manager."**

**He made you to
be a Multiplier.**

If you're like us, Jesus' last words still ring in your ears: "Go into all the world ... make disciples ..." Those words sparked a multiplication movement 2000 years ago, and we're praying God will do it again — through leaders like you.

And we're here to help.

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ENDORSEMENTS

Larry Walkemeyer and I have co-labored for over a decade to champion church multiplication in hopes of seeing healthy church reproduction become a normative measure of success in the church as measured by at least 16% of churches reproducing. As the founding CEO of Exponential, I've seen thousands of church plants and know the leaders of the top church-planting churches. If I were a church planter or church leader looking for a coach to help me accelerate my effectiveness as a reproducing church, I'd look no further than Larry Walkemeyer. His book *The River Church: Unleashing a Culture of Multiplication in Your Church* is a fantastic place to start or enhance your journey of learning. Larry shares the detailed account and learnings from leading Light & Life Fellowship to become a reproducing church. I strongly encourage you to engage with Larry's story and learn from him.

Todd Wilson
Director, Multipliers
Founding CEO, Exponential

There's a lot of abstract thought and talk these days about creating a culture of multiplication in churches, but there are few voices who have the story of leading a river church over decades of ministry. Larry Walkemeyer is one of those few legacy voices that I continue to look up to. As you read this book, don't just look for fast-acting multiplication principles; take your time and investigate the heart of a leader who is obsessed with spreading the Good News of Jesus and whose multiplicative leadership continues to ripple throughout the world.

Dr. Ed Love
Executive Director of Church Multiplication and Discipleship
for The Wesleyan Church

Larry invites us to join the Spirit “where the river flows [and] everything will live” (Ezekiel 47:9). The book is more than a guide—it's an invitation to shift from incremental growth to exponential impact, as rivers transform isolated ponds into life-giving systems. Breaking internal barriers like fear, doubt, and comfort allows true multiplication. Realignment begins with bold prayers rooted in God's limitless power. Through actionable insights, this book inspires sustainable, reproducible multiplication where rivers of life flow freely, transforming individuals and communities. It's practical, moving, and will produce the fruit you long for.

Ralph Moore
Founder, Hope Chapel Movement

The River Church is a transformative guide for churches that long to move from a singular focus on addition to genuine Kingdom multiplication. Larry Walkemeyer lived the transition, and now we can learn from his experience. Through both inspiration and actionable strategies, Larry provides practical steps to foster disciple-making, cultural change, and effective leadership. This is essential reading for church leaders passionate about unleashing a culture of church multiplication.

Bill Couchenour
Deployment Director, Exponential

I've had the privilege of seeing firsthand how Larry's story captured in *The River Church* has transformed the lives of countless leaders. This story lingers with you—not just because it's authentic and compelling, but because the principles are undeniably powerful. Larry doesn't just share ideas; he offers a blueprint for meaningful, lasting impact in leadership and ministry. For any pastor or church leader passionate about multiplying disciples and advancing Jesus' mission, this book isn't just a recommendation—it's a necessity. The wisdom, insights, and strategies within these pages are not theoretical; they are real and actionable. If you're ready to unlock a new level of impact, *The River Church* is your guide.

Jason Stewart
Executive Director of Mobilization, Exponential

We're drowning in ideas from thought-leaders but starving for true wisdom from practitioner guides. If you're a church leader or planter, this is the type of book you've been hungry for—full of real wisdom, insight, warnings, and inspiration. It emerges from the trail-worn hands of a man whose life and character have been an example for so many of us to run toward.

Lucas Pulley
Executive Director, Underground Network

In the pages of this book Larry takes us on a journey. Not a journey of exploration, but one of transformation. He shares the transformative power of how each of us as disciples and leaders through the local church can shift from being a lake to a river, a gatherer to a sender, a leader to a launcher, from addition to multiplication, bringing life to all we and our churches touch.

He doesn't speak as a theorist but as a practitioner who has traversed the theories of a growing church and ministry philosophy to a biblical mandate and multiplying vision that will create Kingdom impact everywhere. With real-life examples, inspiring illustrations, and practical application, it will leave you equipped to live in such a way that your life will empower others to - let the river flow!

Michael Nortune
President, Open Bible Churches

Every so often, a book doesn't just inspire—it unleashes. *The River Church* calls leaders to break free from stagnant reservoirs of addition-focused ministry and embrace the Spirit's torrent of multiplication. Born of the wisdom of a seasoned practitioner and the urgency of a movement leader, this book is filled with stories, principles, and biblical insights that help burst the dams holding back disciples, leaders, and churches from multiplying in powerful, sustainable ways. It's a guide and a prophetic call to release the unstoppable force of God's Spirit. Read it, wrestle with it—and let the river flow.

Rob Wegner
Director, Kansas City Underground

Sharing his adventure of faith and ministry, Larry Walkemeyer invites us into a beautiful biblical motif of God's work for his people. With zeal for God's mission and a big dose of vulnerability, Larry provides bold counsel, practical wisdom, and pastoral insight. *The River Church* will help you confront the obstacles that stand in the way of Kingdom multiplication and may just transform the way you see and do ministry.

Rev. Michael Newman
President, Texas District of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod
Author, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church*

What an inspiring story of a leader and church courageously choosing to become a church that multiplies other churches, and the exceptional Kingdom impact and spiritual vitality that results. Larry Walkemeyer's account of responding to the Holy Spirit's prompting and overcoming the barriers to multiplication provides invaluable insights. If you aspire to see your church multiply, you need to read this book. If you are not motivated to see your church to multiply, you need to read this book.

Rev. Dr. Steve Cordle

**Director of Church Multiplication—The Global Methodist Church
Executive Director, The River Network International**

HOW REFRESHING! Perfectly woven true stories, tried-and-true principles, and the truths of Scripture move at a fast clip to paint an amazing picture of what Jesus is doing to build his Church through multiplication. The image of the River, flowing from the Holy of Holies in Ezekiel all the way to the streets of Long Beach and Compton, watered my thirsty soul and increased my thirst for more! Don't be fooled by the simplicity of the narrative. This powerful story has explosive potential!

Linda Adams

Bishop, Free Methodist Church of Canada

This story can impact your life and ministry. It is a story of leaders who jumped into God's river to be carried to places they couldn't anticipate. It is an inspiring story with practical lessons on how multiplication can happen through a local church—explaining tensions and principles we all can recognize. Through God's revelation, ministries and churches are multiplied into cities and nations in humbleness and weakness, depending on God's power and presence. Thanks, Deb and Larry, for telling us your story.

Øivind Augland

**Founder and CEO, Exponential Europe
Founder and CEO, M4 Europe**

I have one major regret in reading *The River Church*. I wish I had read it 30 years ago. My ministry would have been far more fruitful if I had grasped hold of and implemented the principles that Larry has written about.

The book is filled with Larry's wisdom and insights as he unpacks the story of how God has confronted him, changed his thinking, and used him to unleash waves of church planting out of Light & Life and the churches that have been planted from there.

The River Church has gone to the top of my list of books I want to recommend to exhort church planters, leaders of churches wishing to plant, and denominational and network leaders. It's an important book that I wish I had read 30 years ago.

Tim O'Neill
National Leader, Exponential Australia

The River Church is not a typical church leadership book that presents a model to be reproduced. Rather it is a testimony to the power of an approach to ministry rooted in the principle of multiplication. And what a testimony it is! With much-appreciated authenticity, Larry and Deb acknowledge both the internal and external challenges of moving from a lake to a river mindset, but then beautifully demonstrate what God can do when leaders are willing to face and overcome those challenges. Under their leadership, a small church in a declining neighborhood has become a powerhouse of leadership development and church planting.

Keith Cowart
Bishop, Free Methodist Church, USA

I have often thought of the river/lake metaphor as it relates to healthy vs. unhealthy missional churches. I, however, have never seen it unpacked so practically. Larry's amazing story is a compelling look at what should be intuitive to every pastor, yet is rarely implemented with success: how to courageously lead the church to biblical, missional, and reproductive health. His stories are real, his analogy perfect, and his honest humble style has created a downhill, pleasant, and educational read of a God story that inspires and teaches simultaneously. Grateful and honored to recommend to all church leaders.

Mark Bane
**Director, Evangelism and New Church Development for USA/
Canada Region—Church of the Nazarene**

Dr. Larry Walkemeyer is the real deal. In *The River Church*, he's not talking theoretically; he's lived it and has the scars and the Kingdom fruit to prove it! The principles he shares will help us to reclaim our call to missional discipleship that multiplies and LIVE ...The River life.

Dr. Larry Acosta

Executive Director, City to City Southern California

The church is meant to be unleashed, not contained. Walkemeyer's example of breaking free from the lake model in order to dive into the river is both invigorating and intimidating. This book will stretch your thinking beyond the common growth strategies and offer a new trajectory, a new scoreboard, and a new destination for your church—all essential to unleash a culture of multiplication through your life and ministry. The river is flowing ... dive in!

Rev. Dr. JR Rushik

Director, Church Development Network

Superintendent, Acts 12:24 Churches

Larry Walkemeyer has poured decades of wisdom and practice into *The River Church*, offering a blueprint for leaders ready to transition from addition-focused to multiplication-driven ministry. This book isn't just theory—it's a testimony of the transformative power of multiplication at Light & Life Christian Fellowship, a church that has planted 40+ churches nationally and started networks in five countries. I've had the privilege of watching Larry's leadership up close, and his profound insights on reproducing and multiplying churches are transformative. This is a must-read for every pastor who desires to lead a multiplying movement and make a lasting impact. Larry's experience and passion offer practical wisdom and inspiration for leaders at any stage of ministry.

Obe Arellano

Founder & CEO, Exponential Español

Words are powerful and have weight in and of themselves. However, words that are lived out, incarnated, have an extraordinary capacity to encourage and release the God-given potential and capacity in the life of a saint or church. Dr. Walkemeyer is a skilled leader with profound passion that is centered in and around the hope of Christ. He bleeds the possibility and hope of more disciples being formed, leaders being developed, and movements born as rivers spring up all over the landscape of our world. This book is a gem, a story, a guide and reminder of what happens when saints convene around the throne of God in humility and desperation for his healing and freeing presence to impact our communities in and through the lives of people who live in the river, flowing in the direction of the Almighty, casting seeds of life everywhere they go, and being the ubiquitous church anywhere, everywhere, all the time.

Mike Chong Perkinson

**Superintendent, PCJC Network of the Free Methodist Church, USA
Co-Founder, The Praxis Center for Church Development
President of Church & Ministry, Trivium Institute of Leader
Development**

You are about to embark on a journey that walks you through an amazing true story of a church that helped transform the spiritual landscape of a culturally complex, postmodern beach city in California. Better yet, it also provides a very clear road map and proven biblically based strategies to impact your community and beyond. If it worked in Long Beach, it can work anywhere. This story is inspiring, practical, and continues to impact that very same beach community to this very day. EVERY pastor and church leader needs to read this book and apply its content. Buy an additional copy for a colleague. I only wish Larry would have written it before I suffered the wounds and battle scars of contemporary ministry!

Jason Garcia

CEO, Leadership Architects

With insight hard-won on the mission field of North Long Beach, Larry lays out the pathway God took him down over decades to not just grow but multiply churches at Light & Life. In these pages you'll discover how a leader who's committed to seeing the Kingdom of God multiply more than the Kingdom of one's castle can see Jesus do truly greater things. This book is for every leader who senses that there's more to ministry than growing their thing large. It's possible to multiply God's thing and see the river produce life wherever it flows. You'll never look at ministry or Ezekiel 47 the same again!

Eric Creekmore

Executive Director, Association of Hill Country Churches

Every congregation should be actively answering the question: how will we multiply our church? *The River Church* is the perfect book to help your team start that conversation or develop a clear plan to become a river church! It is a must read for every church leader who is sensing a call to reproduce.

Tom Planck

Director of Multiplication, Indiana Ministries of the Church of God

What bold changes might God ask you to make, from building “your” church to truly seeking God’s Kingdom? That was the choice that faced Larry Walkemeyer—and his story will challenge you to make the right choice too. I’ve come to know Larry as a man of joy-filled inspiration, vivid imagery, godly humility, compassionate guidance, and replicable principles. This book shares these things and more, as he tells the unique story of Light & Life. Larry is honest about obstacles and sacrifices you might face, but he focuses on Kingdom fruit and greater joy you might experience as you become a “river church.” With Larry’s help, you too can step into God’s bigger vision for his church, and equip God’s everyday people for their role in his mission and ministry.

Ben Connelly

Servant Leadership Team, Salt & Light Community

Director, The Equipping Group & Plant Fort Worth

The story told in *The River Church* is inspiring and practical. Over a decade ago I visited Light & Life looking for a healthy, missional church to join as a newlywed. Pastor Larry saw my God-given potential, modeled fruitful ministry, opened doors of opportunity, and empowered me to live a life of multiplication. As the co-lead pastor of that River Church, we continue to witness this powerful truth of multiplication at work in and through us; “where the river flows, everything indeed lives!”

Joel Silva

Co-Lead Pastor, Light & Life Christian Fellowship

Long Beach, CA

The River Church is a refreshing and powerful vision for what the church can be—dynamic, Spirit-led, and constantly flowing toward God’s mission. Larry Walkemeyer weaves biblical wisdom with real-world experience, challenging us to move beyond stagnant models and embrace a church that is alive and multiplying. This book will inspire and equip anyone longing to see their church become a movement of God’s love in their community and beyond.

Peyton Jones

Author, Church Plantology and Discipology

CEO, New Breed Training

The Apostle John uses the word *sent* 61 times in the fourth Gospel. As I read *The River Church*, I had to keep a running list of “Sent Lessons.” Pastor Larry Walkemeyer writes with clarity, conviction, and spiritual authority. He is a dear “Friends on Mission” who calls us to follow the model of the river. This book is a must-read for church planters, mission leaders, and all who operate in the spiritual gift of apostleship!

Rev. Dr. John Teter

Pastor, Holy Faith Fellowship, Compton CA

Author, 1-1-1 *The Finishing Well Newsletter*

I am deeply grateful for Larry’s transparency, humility, faith, and wisdom woven throughout this book. The Ezekiel 47 vision that God imparted to Larry and Deb in 1998 remains a prophetic word for the Church today. I encourage you to read each chapter with an open heart, listening for what the Holy Spirit may be asking of you—and then respond with a willing, obedient *yes*. Larry’s story is a powerful testimony of what God can do through a church that dares to shift paradigms, confront fears, navigate tensions, and pray like never before. May every church embrace this vision and run with it!

Christina Lowery

Associate National Director of Church Health, Vineyard USA

It’s one thing to read a story and another to live it. I was birthed in the River and have grown with it. It still baffles me that this small church, with 39 parking spaces, continues to impact from Long Beach to the ends of the earth. Now, pastoring Light & Life, I can truly say that the River is wider and deeper than it’s ever been. From headhunters in Indonesia to the Remote Islands of the Philippines, to a women’s prison in Guatemala, to Haitian Refugees in the Dominican Republic, many tributaries draw their spiritual lineage to the River Church. I couldn’t agree more with Dr. Larry Walkemeyer’s conclusion to the book, “The River Wins!”

Pastor Sean Fenner

Co-Lead Pastor, Light & Life Christian Fellowship

Long Beach, CA

Contents

	Foreword	01
	Introduction: The Culture vs. the River	05
1	Facing the Pond: Stopping the Drought of Subtraction	11
2	Growing the Lake: The Beauty and Danger of Addition	21
3	The River Revelation: The Greater Beauty of Multiplication	35
4	Busting Personal Dams: Overcoming Your Inner Obstacles	47
5	Busting External Dams: Overcoming Your Church’s Obstacles	65
6	River Prayers: The Power of Prayer to Launch a River	91
7	River Culture: Keys to Shifting Your Culture	105
8	River Rationale: Seven “Whys” for River Ministry	135
9	River Leaders: Traits of Multiplication Leaders	153
10	River Wisdom: 10 Lessons from 25 Years on the River	183
	Conclusion: The River Wins!.	205

Foreword

There are defining moments in the life of every church when God calls his people to reimagine what it means to live on mission. When churches follow God's call, it becomes an inflection point where change happens and mission flourishes. When churches ignore this call, rather than being in the flow of God's Spirit, they find themselves stagnating without direction. I've experienced what it is like to be a part of a church that is in the flow of God's mission. Larry has experienced it as well. *The River Church* comes from that experience. This book is Larry's reflections on leading a church through that defining moment and how God used that church in amazing ways to create movement.

What sets *The River Church* apart is both the clarity of its metaphor and the boldness of its challenge. Larry paints a compelling picture of the profound shift needed for churches to move from being lakes—stagnant, self-contained, and

inward-focused—to becoming rivers—dynamic, flowing, and life-giving. This is about more than strategy; it’s a call to align our hearts with the heartbeat of God and to take seriously the mission of Jesus to multiply disciples, leaders, and churches.

At Exponential, we often talk about the power of multiplication and the urgency behind our 16% Mission—the goal of seeing the percentage of multiplying churches in North America rise from less than 4% a decade ago, to 7% as of the publishing of this writing, to 16% in the coming years. This isn’t just a statistic; it’s a Kingdom imperative. We believe that for the Church to truly advance the Jesus mission, we must embrace the mindset and practices of multiplication. *The River Church* speaks directly to this vision. It provides a model that is rooted in Scripture, shaped by the Spirit, and proven through real-world application.

What I love about this book is how deeply personal and practical it is. Larry doesn’t shy away from the hard truths—he addresses the personal challenges of dying to self and the cultural shifts needed in our churches to embrace multiplication. But he also gives us hope. This book isn’t just about pointing out what needs to change; it equips us with the tools and inspiration to make those changes. Larry’s words remind us that God’s mission is unstoppable, and when we trust in his provision and guidance, our churches can become powerful conduits for his Kingdom.

On a personal note, Larry’s journey has been a constant source of encouragement and conviction for me as a leader. I count Larry, and his wife, Deb, as dear “friends on mission” to my wife, Sue, and me. His life and leadership embody what it means to be a Multiplier. He doesn’t just talk about making

disciples—he’s done it. He doesn’t just theorize about church planting—he’s lived it. And his work through Light & Life Church, Exponential, and the Free Methodist denomination is a testament to the kind of transformation that happens when a leader is fully surrendered to God’s multiplying work.

If you’re holding this book in your hands, I want to challenge you to cherish it, read it, apply it, and share it. The River of God is already flowing. The Spirit’s wild, untamed power is moving. Will you step in? Whether you’re leading a local church, dreaming of planting one, or simply longing to make an impact for the Kingdom, *The River Church* is a challenge to every leader who wants to step into that flow and become a river rather than a lake.

Let’s be a church that flows like a river, carrying life, hope, and the love of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Dave Ferguson

Exponential CEO

Lead Pastor, Community Christian Church

Introduction: The Culture vs. the River

I was standing in the river in Borneo. On the bank stood a sacrificial altar built by the Dayak tribe to a ruling spiritual entity known as “The Jubata of the River.” The Jubata is a powerful spiritual being among the Dayak people, infamously known as former headhunters. As I stood there, I sensed a strong spiritual attack as several tribal members stepped into the river to be baptized. Demonic powers were angry.

Local Christian leaders had deliberately chosen this spot, thinking it the perfect place to declare the victory of Jesus over Jubata’s demonic power. Shouts of “Jesus is Lord!” rang out, and voices joined to sing “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” over and over again. The new converts’ lives were forever changed.

That day in the river was significant, as those being baptized would go on to be disciples who make disciples. Some would become leaders who raised up leaders. A few would be called to plant churches in tough places.

That experience stands as a vivid illustration of the truth I have given my life for: “Where the river flows everything will live” (Ezekiel 47:9).

I get it. My river story is far removed from your ministry context. The truths and principles, however, that changed a small village can transform your ministry and church, regardless of your setting, size, history, or obstacles. Rivers find a way around barriers.

I was standing in a backyard swimming pool. The gods of Long Beach were watching—and they were angry. I’d been invited to help a new church plant pastor as he was baptizing gang members, college students, business leaders, and retirees. Not long before, we had launched a new church after shifting the culture of our church from an addition-focused ministry to a multiplication-focused culture. We titled that new culture “A River Church,” and the results were already being unleashed.

Your life, ministry, and church can become a River, flowing out to bring the living water to dry, desert places—purposefully and powerfully changing the landscape around you. I passionately believe this because I know the call, promise, and power of the Spirit. I’ve watched Rivers start in all types of lives and churches and in the face of all kinds of “Jubatas.”

Great churches unleash multiplication. The size of their gathering does not determine the size of their Kingdom impact. Instead their investment in making disciples who make disciples, raising up leaders who raise up leaders, and sending these disciples and leaders to start new churches determines their Kingdom greatness.

Jesus promised that he would build his Church if we would make disciples and send workers into the harvest field—in other words, if we would follow his ministry example. Yet less than

5% of American churches have a “disciple-making culture.”¹
Only 7% have started or helped start a new church.²

I propose that these two statistics are largely responsible for the decline of the church in the United States. The prevailing church culture here has majored in the minors. Attendance, fundraising, pulpit communication, facility development, quality of music on stage, felt-need programming, branding, organizational leadership, volunteer training—these can all be good things that God can use.

It’s just that they’re minor, not major. Yet they usually squeeze out the major activities Jesus modeled and called his church to: prayer, disciple-making, equipping, and sending. These are “River” moves, and when they are not being prioritized and practiced, the “Jubatas” in our land grow stronger.

Understand this: addition is good—really good. Addition and multiplication are not competitive but complementary. Addition, however, must serve multiplication if we want to reach the harvest Jesus said is ripe. Healthy things grow, but the mark of maturity in nature is reproduction not ongoing growth.

Acts 9:31 describes the culture of the early church this way: “And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied” (ESV). I call this the “Power Triangle.”

They took a posture. “Walking in the fear of the Lord” describes a reverence for God and his Word that leads to a holiness of life.

They received a power. “In the comfort [presence, companionship] of the Holy Spirit” emphasizes a dependency upon the Spirit’s empowerment.

They pursued a plan. And “the church multiplied” because they planted new churches that started new churches.

This culture of the Power Triangle unleashed a river that changed the world. We need River churches today more than ever.

I want to share an amazing true story filled with principles applicable to every Christian leader. It’s the account of a church that was a tiny pond that became a large lake that became a deep River. If you want to exponentially unleash more Kingdom impact through your life and/or your church, the truths contained in these pages are invaluable.

Our church only has 39 parking spaces. It’s in an urban area known for gangs, prostitution, poverty, gun violence, and low-income housing. Yet over the last 25 years, Light & Life Christian Fellowship in North Long Beach, California, has planted 40+ churches nationally, started church planting networks in five different countries, and sent over 100 disciples into vocational ministry. Many of these churches, networks, and ministries are reproducing, multiplying their Kingdom impact with thousands of believers tracing their spiritual heritage to Light & Life.

I wrote some of this story in 2014 as a small ebook for Exponential that we entitled *Flow—Unleashing a River of Multiplication in Your Church, City, and World*. Several thousand downloads later, the metaphor of moving from a lake to a river has become a common expression among churches who desire to transition from addition to multiplication. In 2024, I sensed the Spirit nudging me to update and expand the book. God has done so much more at Light & Life throughout that decade, teaching me vital new lessons I want to share with you.

During that time, after leading our church for 31 years, my wife, Deb, and I turned that role over to two of our “sons in the faith” (Sean Fenner and Joel Silva). Three years into their leadership, the River is flowing even stronger. Deb and I continue, at their invitation, as global pastors.

In addition, since 2017 I have served as the Director of Equipping and Spiritual Engagement with Exponential. This has given me the opportunity to learn from thought leaders, pastors, and denominational leaders across America. Friends like Bill Couchenour, Dave Ferguson, Todd Wilson, Ralph Moore, Alan Hirsch, Peyton Jones, Rob Wegner, and many others have deeply shaped my thinking. Accordingly, I have written a significantly expanded version of the original book with keys that can help your church grow and multiply.

I have incorporated many of Exponential’s multiplication frameworks and principles, using our church story to explain and illustrate these truths. My passion is to help churches transition from addition-focused to addition-friendly but multiplication-focused churches.

My prayer is that this story of God’s power and faithfulness will inspire, equip, and move you to step into the “river” that is over your head. Surrender. Submerge yourself in the flow of God’s Spirit. Go all the way under. It’s the only way to defeat the “Jubatas” and unleash a culture of multiplication.

1

Facing the Pond: Stopping the Drought of Subtraction

I counted again. Only 39 parking spots?! That's all!? I was standing in the postage-stamp-sized parking lot of Light & Life Church in North Long Beach, California. I was the new pastor, and I was "seeing the pond."

It was 1991, and I had just read one of the leading church-growth books of the era, which declared that to grow your church, convenient and surplus parking is essential. I quickly did the math of 2.5 people per car, then cringed at the thought of only 100 people coming to our church. My dream of becoming a megachurch pastor was shattering on the rocks of our urban reality. How could God grow a church like ours?

The nearly 40-year-old church was made up of a handful of faithful white people in a neighborhood that had transitioned to an ethnically diverse, low-income area. Gangs were rampant, violence was common, drugs were sold like candy, homelessness was prevalent, and prostitutes worked the corners.

It was just the kind of place Jesus wanted his Church to be. But it wasn't really the place I wanted to be.

I was a Kansas farm boy, raised in the wheat fields outside my almost all-white country high school. As captain of the football team, homecoming king, National Honor Society representative, and president of Fellowship of Christian Athletes, I expected to do something great for God with my life. This struggling little church was surely not it.

Had I made a mistake? Most “successful” pastors would shake their heads at the ministry choice I had made. A month earlier, I had been serving as associate pastor of a large, wealthy, suburban church in Southern California. And when the pastor who planted that church suddenly felt called elsewhere, they wanted the 33-year-old associate (me) to take the lead role. The board would help my wife and me buy a new house, paying us a generous salary so we could build the megachurch of my dreams. The deal was so good that I thought we didn't even really need to pray about it!

Led by Calling?

Natural-minded reasoning is not the same as Kingdom calling. This was the lesson I was about to learn.

The small, struggling Light & Life church in Long Beach was also looking for a pastor. Their lay-leader was a young man named Don McLain, and he was auditing a seminary class that I was taking for my Masters of Divinity. We became classroom buddies, and he very quickly popped the question on his mind: “Will you come be our pastor?” I had an

immediate response for him: “No, thank you,” while thinking to myself, “Is he crazy? Heck no!” But Don was ready with his follow-up question: “Will you pray about it?”

I wanted to say *no* to his second question. It’s a dangerous question to answer *yes* to. Why? Because it might lead you into something risky, uncomfortable, and illogical. Too many pastors have followed their logic into assignments that the Spirit never called them to. I was coming close to making that mistake. Instead I offered a dismissive, “Okay, I’ll pray about it.”

But instead of praying, I procrastinated. We had four weeks to make a final decision, and my prayers were already focused on how I would build my current church once I became the new leader. Deb was picking out curtains for our new suburban house. With a week to go, I became convicted about how little I had asked God about his opinion. So late one night on my commute home from seminary class with the Christian radio station playing, I prayed, “Lord, I really do want to ask you about your will in this matter. What do **YOU** want me to do?”

Immediately, Steven Curtis Chapman’s song came on: “We will abandon it all, for the sake of the call. No other reason at all but the sake of the call. Wholly devoted to live and to die for the sake of the call.” As the song played, the voice of the Lord filled my car. I can only describe it as inaudible but louder and clearer than if spoken: “Larry, I want you to go to the little place.” I started ugly crying and replied, “Lord, I will never say no to you if you make it clear, and you’ve made it very clear. But Lord, you have to talk to my wife!”

Ten minutes later, I pulled up to the garage door of our townhouse, and Deb met me at the door. I saw she had been weeping. I jumped out of the car and asked, “Honey, what’s wrong?” She cautiously but with certainty replied, “Larry, you aren’t going to believe this, but I was praying this evening about our future, and God wants us to go to Long Beach!” I pulled her in for a hug and said, “Honey, let me tell you what happened on the way home!”

A few days later, we met with the superintendent who oversaw Light & Life, and he asked, “Are you sure about this? I have much better churches I can send you to. We are ready to nail the coffin shut on the Long Beach church.” We boldly answered, “We’ve heard from the Lord. We are called to Long Beach.”

Two weeks later, I stood in the tiny parking lot, hearing gunshots and praying, “We’re at the ‘little place’ for sure, and the only reason we are here is because you called. And we will lay down our lives for these people and this place.” There were only two times over the next 31 years that I ever seriously thought about leaving “the little place.”

Many pastors never experience a depth of calling that compels them to devote themselves fully to a people, place, and mission regardless of the obstacles or outcomes. They are in it to succeed, to climb the ecclesial ladder, to further their career, to raise their paycheck, to please their people, to gain status or significance. But the storms of ministry are certain to test a leader’s calling. Christ and his calling are the only rock-solid foundations in ministry. All other ground is sinking sand.

Brutal Facts, Unwavering Hope

In his classic book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins shares a key trait of a Level 5 leader, a leader who can lead an organization forward in the face of challenging times: “Level 5 leaders embrace the brutal facts while maintaining unwavering hope that they will prevail in the end.”³

If I was going to lead the necessary charge for change, I had to honestly face and embrace all the brutal facts that were holding the church back. I call that **FACING THE POND**. A “pond” because we were a small congregation of believers who had the Living Water, but we were slowly drying up, evaporating in the desert climate of our local culture. At the same time, I had to cast a vision with enough faith that we could overcome and become a great church. We would have to face the facts but also face forward in faith.

The wonderful, loving people of Light & Life welcomed us with a huge balloon arch on the last Sunday of June 1991. I preached my first sermon as a lead pastor, and the response was enthusiastic. I thought, “We are on our way!”

The next Sunday, half of them didn’t show back up. A fourth of those *never* showed back up. Another fourth would leave as we started making radical changes to the church. In that season, like most pastors do, I started to claim John 15:1-2 and assure the old-timers that “Jesus promised he would prune the branches so they bear more fruit.”

People leave churches for good reasons and bad reasons. A good reason is when the Gospel isn’t being shared, the

authority of the Word is no longer taught, the mission isn't clear and urgent, the pastor is building their own platform instead of the church's, or the priesthood of all believers isn't being demonstrated.

Bad reasons for leaving the church have to do with a person's preferences not being met. The pastor preaches too long, the band is too loud, the new colors of the sanctuary are ugly, a newcomer is sitting in "my" seat, etc. We heard them all. One family left because their deceased family member had purchased a pew with their name plate on it, and by replacing the repellent old orange pews with new chairs, we had "desecrated" their family's honor. No matter the reason for leaving, with each one I felt deeper rejection.

Change Is the Door to Your Future

Most churches need deep change. I chuckle at the truth in the saying "No one likes change except a wet baby!" Most people hate change. Churches are made up of people, so "Houston, we have a problem." As Dr. Bob Logan, a well-known church consultant, once told me, "If the horse you are riding on dies, dismount!" Changing what always needs to be changing while never changing what must never change is one key to healthy church growth.

Most churches in subtraction mode have started prioritizing the comfort and preferences of the members over the mission to reach lost people. Like the words of a note someone taped to the front door of a church building that had closed down: "Out of business. Forgot what business they were in."

Most churches are unwilling to face the pond. They refuse to acknowledge that their way of doing church is perfectly designed to get the results they are experiencing. For example, when I came to Light & Life it had more committees than members. Courage to shift a church's existing culture is a first step to stop subtraction.

In culture creation, I think it is important to pair Jesus' words on pruning in John 15:1-2 with his parable in Luke 13:6-9. In Luke's passage the gardener says, "Give me one more year to cultivate it and fertilize it and see if it won't start bearing fruit." Church leaders often give up too soon and often fail to fertilize the tree we are pruning.

The job of the pastor is to fertilize while the pruning is taking place. To grow a church, you don't need to completely close the back door. It's not even wise to run after every person who threatens to leave or hasn't been for a few weeks. But to grow a church your front door must be bigger than your back door.

So while I held the hands of many of the dear saints who were walking out of Light & Life, I spent much more time and energy opening my hands to invite people into the family and welcoming those who were walking in. The old-timers who stayed were excited about the new additions. Gradually, the subtraction was being offset by newcomers.

The Pain and Opportunity of a Riot

The excitement at Light & Life began to snowball ... until the fires happened. The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 came to Long Beach. Violence filled our streets. Over 150 buildings were set

on fire, including one next to our church. I wanted to flee—but not because of fear. I felt deep compassion for our people and our neighborhood. I wanted to run because I felt horribly misplaced, like I was the worst pastor possible for the current needs and challenges in our church and community. I was a rural boy from Kansas. I had sung “The Farmer in the Dell” but had never heard of “The Farmer in the Hood.” These people needed a different leader. I began to think that I had heard God wrong.

In our 10-month growth spurt, we had two or three new non-white families join our small church. I went to one of them and confessed my feelings. I said, “I just don’t understand this community.” They said, “Pastor, you are right. You don’t understand us, but you love us. And if you keep loving us, you will come to understand us. Please don’t leave. God has you here.” Deb and I recommitted ourselves to the call.

With God, the extremity becomes the opportunity. Too often pastors get overcome by the calamity that happens, whether it’s a natural disaster, a pandemic, a local tragedy, an economic catastrophe, or even just a key family or two leaving. But often these are the very opportunities God will use to open doors for the Gospel. A church must hand out water bottles with one hand and God’s truth with the other.

Although there was a bit more “white flight” after the riots, our church pressed into multiethnic ministry initiatives with a new zeal. We wanted to be a reconciling force in our racially divided neighborhood. We might just be a small pond in the community, but we could carry Living Water to where it was needed. We refused to withdraw and dry up. Subtraction would not be our destiny.

We started “prayer-walking” the streets of our area. There was one prayer that I insisted we pray over and over as we walked: “Lord, help our church look like our neighborhood.” We prayed this on Sundays as we gathered and on Tuesdays as we prayer-walked.

I taught on spiritual warfare and breaking down strongholds through intercession. We prayer-walked slowly enough and spread out enough to meet our neighbors. As we did, we told them what we were doing and asked two questions: “Is there anything we can pray for you about?” and “Is there anything we can do to serve you or our community?”

The neighbors didn’t say much at first. There was suspicion. Religious people had knocked on their door before but never with a genuine, “We’re here to serve you” motive. Our consistency began to build trust. As my wife, Deb, who is a marriage and family therapist, states often, “Trust is built on consistent positive behavior over time.”

Pastors frequently fail to see how easily our neighbors see our ulterior motives. Our neighbors may not be able to always articulate what’s off-putting to them, but they can smell the difference between authentic agape and utilitarian “love.”

God honored our stumbling but sincere efforts, and the church stopped subtracting and started adding.

2

Growing the Lake: The Beauty and Danger of Addition

Leaders often ask me, “What changes did you make that caused the dramatic turn-around your church experienced? How did you move from a church of ‘subtraction’ to a church of ‘addition’?” Using my metaphor, their question becomes “How did you grow a pond into a lake?”

I start with the answer that I am most certain of: “It sure wasn’t me!” That’s not humility speaking; it’s honesty. I am not contradicting John Maxwell’s famous quote, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” Leadership matters ... a lot! It’s just that in Christian leadership you must make John 15:5 (“Apart from me you can do nothing”) the foundation.

It is also true that Jesus alone is not enough. Jesus plus a great leader does not equal God’s movement. Jesus didn’t say, “It takes a village,” but he did say, “It takes a body ... the body of Christ.” We underestimate the essentiality of this. Deeply consider Ephesians 4:16: “From him the whole body, joined

and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Growth depends on body parts doing their part. He ordered his mission in a way that the united gifts of believers in a local church are essential for advancing his Kingdom.

This supernatural work of the Spirit began before I arrived at Light & Life. The believers at Light & Life were getting desperate and prayerful—a dynamite combination in which God delights to manifest himself.

I heard well-known pastor and author John Tyson state that after closely studying the great revivals of the last 2,000 years, the one common element they all shared was a desperation for God.⁴ Desperation that provokes radical prayer is magnetic to the Spirit of God. As Tyson declared emphatically, “God shows up where he is wanted.”

Significant change doesn’t happen until the pain of staying the same becomes bad enough or until the size of the reward gets big enough. Some people of Light & Life were starting to have their hearts broken for lost people in the neighborhood and their own fruitlessness as a church. They were also getting a vision that their church could go from surviving to thriving. They were desperate for God’s change in their little pond. The culture of the church was shifting.

Growing your church should be a passionate pursuit for every church leader. That turn-around starts with spiritual passion that leads to a culture change. It also demands some definitive actions, crucial changes in how you are doing things. Using our story, I want to offer you seven vital changes that I believe may work in your context as well.

Seven Key Changes That Grew Our Pond

1. We dramatically increased our prayer and worship.

We implemented various ways to increase the collective prayer life of the church. As stated previously, prayer-walking was introduced and was practiced regularly. Getting our people in the streets that they drove on but never walked on changed their perspective of their neighbors. Also, the idea of believing in prayer enough to walk a mile or two doing it stretched their faith.

We initiated prayer time during service, and people praying down front during our slower worship time became habitual. People receiving personal prayer at the cross during worship happened at every service. We told stories of the answers to these prayers.

We had various prayer chains, or prayer conference calls (yes, that was a real thing before Zoom). We had the 168 Prayer Team, where our people would sign up for 1 to 4 prayer hours per week. Someone was praying every hour of the 168 hours in the week. Deb and I each took a couple of hours in the middle of the night. (True confession: I sometimes slept on my knees during my hour.)

We also doubled our worship time during service. We were not “seeker” driven, but we were “seeker” aware. We would explain what we were doing and why we were doing it, and then just go for it. With worship lasting 30 minutes or more of service, we knew that unbelievers would encounter the manifest presence of God and be drawn by it.

One Sunday, a known gang member who had never been in

a Protestant church walked up to me on the patio following service. He was a bit agitated at me. He said, “Hey man, what did you do to me in there?” I replied, “I don’t know. What happened to you?” He paused then hesitantly responded, “I felt something weird, then I cried—and I never cry. What was that?” I answered, “Friend, that was the Spirit of God, who loves you and was touching your heart.” Spirit-filled worship can break open hard hearts even if the mind doesn’t understand it.

We also changed the worship vibe from somber to celebration. People have tough lives with too much bad news, too many heavy realities that press down on them all week long. We wanted them to think of church as a place of joy, laughter, energy, a life-giving place. The first 15 minutes of worship were songs of praise, victory, joy, promise, hope, and faith! Our jazz-driven worship band was a key part of this change.

2. We preached the Word with authority and applicability.

When Jesus preached, the people “listened to him with great delight” (Mark 12:37 NLT). Plus they were “amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority” (Matthew 7:28-29). I often ask myself, “Do I teach like Jesus? Am I teaching amazing truths with the authority of Jesus in a way that people enjoy? Will this make them think, make them laugh, and make them choose?”

We were determined to teach the Word like it was the Word of God, not self-help literature you could treat like a cafeteria food line, choosing only what looked good to you. Our sermons weren’t seeker-directed. They equipped believers.

Messages were a spiritual word but also an applicable word. They addressed how the truths of heaven could transform your travels on earth. We told real stories of real people, especially stories of our people who had a testimony.

We also, however, preached for commitment and recommitment to Christ. We expected unbelievers to show up. The Gospel found its way into every message regardless of passage or topic. People who brought unsaved friends knew they would hear the salvation message and have a chance to make a decision for Christ.

3. We majored in small groups for connection, care, and leadership development.

Not long after arriving at Light & Life, I read a book by Dale Galloway entitled *20/20 Vision*, based on Acts 20:20. It seemed to me that a couple of sacred cows needed to be sacrificed. Adult Sunday School was poorly attended, as was Sunday evening service. After some prayer and conversations, I cast a vision to replace them with home-based small groups. Our primary motivation was to create a more relational church by moving a spiritual delivery system away from the church and into homes or “third spaces.”

We identified 10 people who might be able to host a group. Eight of them agreed, and we trained them on what to do. Our first evening of small groups was twice as large as Sunday evening service had ever been! These small groups provided genuine connecting points for the newcomers who attended Sunday morning services. They also created a layer of care that had not been present previously. The previous pastor was expected to run with a tissue to every physical, emotional, or

spiritual snuffle. Now the small group leaders were tasked with first-line care. This shift provided me with more time to work on strategy and leadership development. Small groups also became the place where leaders could taste the joy of frontline ministry. The training we provided for small group leaders was key to raising up the various leaders we would need as the church grew.

We taught about the priesthood of all believers. Then we empowered our trained small group leaders to perform baptisms of new believers who were finding Christ in their groups. We then told these God-stories on Sunday mornings and introduced the new converts. Those who grumbled about losing their Sunday evening service soon found that they were sidelined by the positive press of what God was up to in small groups.

The buzz that happens when people get to do the real stuff of ministry is amazing. Most churches train volunteers to hand out bulletins, but Jesus trained unschooled followers to cast out demons. And we wonder why our church folks are bored.

4. We simplified the church governance structure.

Whoever joked that “a camel is a horse designed by committee” must have sat through too many wasteful board meetings that created a political compromise but not a ministry solution. There were too many useless or overlapping committees when I came to Light & Life. I counted 14 committees in our small church. People gauged their church status by how many committees they served on.

So we started roasting some sacred cow committees. Some howled, but several thanked me. They were tired of

meaningless church work. We then structured the church around simple governance. We went down to one board and renamed it the “Leadership Council.” If you were on the board, you had to be leading a ministry. The Leadership Council was not to direct the church but to advise the pastor and oversee the deployment and integrity of the finances and facilities.

5. We made people-loving paramount.

I had been active in the Jesus People movement in the 1970s. Of course, let’s be honest, my farm town in Kansas was a long way from the ground zero of Southern California. One of the most popular Jesus songs of that movement proclaimed that “they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” That deeply marked me.

As I started pastoring for the first time, I thought that love should be the defining mark of our church. We very quickly adopted a motto and put it everywhere: “The People-Loving Place.” In such a diverse area as ours, we wanted everyone who walked onto campus to feel God’s love and ours. We made an informal rule that the first 7 minutes after service were dedicated to loving people you didn’t know.

I think pastors need to remember this: “They may forget what you said—but they will never forget how you made them feel” (Carl W. Buehner).⁵ How can we leave people feeling loved, even when we’ve just told them the truth about their sin? We worked on this, and not just in a shallow, wave the “You are loved” sign kind of way (although I like those signs and gestures if there’s substance and sacrifice behind them).

Danny was a homeless man who attended every Sunday. He needed the love of Jesus, but he also needed new teeth very badly. So some of our people put the money together, set it up, and helped Danny get new teeth. He flashed his new smile for a few years at everyone who walked through our doors and told them the story. He eventually moved to Austin, where he leads a ministry for homeless men. That's people showing love, not just saying it.

6. We majored in leadership, recruitment, and development.

In the 1990s, “leadership” was becoming the buzzword of the church. John C. Maxwell's first book on leadership, *Developing the Leader Within You*, was published in 1993. I knew that if we wanted to grow our church, we had to identify and equip leaders.

The illustration I used frequently was the rice, the salad plate, and the dinner plate. If a sack of rice is being poured onto a salad plate, the rice pile will reach about 3 inches in height. No matter how much rice you pour onto the plate, your pile will not get taller. Why? Because it falls off the edges of the plate. The only way to increase the height of your rice pile is to get a bigger plate, like a dinner plate. Now as the rice is poured onto the plate, you can more than double the height of your pile on the plate.

Leadership is the plate. It's the base that allows people who are coming into the church to connect to the church. Multiple leaders means multiple attachment points. To increase retention, increase the number and quality of leaders.

We created a leadership structure that applied to every small group and ministry area. It was a progressive structure. Tier 1 was for attendees or members. Tier 2 was for assistant leaders.

Tier 3 was for leaders. Tier 4 was for captains (who oversaw 3–5 leaders). Tier 5 was for coaches (overseeing 5–10 leaders). Tier 6 was for staff members (overseeing 4–6 coaches). We trained our leaders to “own their group or ministry team” in terms of care, skill development, prayer, spiritual growth, and accountability. We increased the size of our “plate,” and the church grew.

7. We invested in our worship music and the arts.

We made a conscious choice to invest in the best possible worship band we could afford. Great music attracts people. Our worship leaders, Craig and Mary Durst, were professional jazz musicians on the Los Angeles scene. They were soon bringing their musician friends to help out. Our worship was A+ quality, especially for our size of church. Every Sunday we would provide a couple of minutes for one or more band members to really demonstrate their musical prowess. People loved it.

We also infused drama, dance, and various forms of art into our services. Five to seven minutes were given to some kind of creative expression that would serve the message of the day. We would occasionally give whole Sundays to some ministry through the arts. Our Gospel Comedy Slam Sundays were an annual treat that people enthusiastically invited their friends to.

Musicians and artists were drawn to our church because of our quality and openness to getting them onto the platform to share their gifts. Artists attract artists, and we sought to find meaningful ministry outlets for each of them.

Our pond expanded into a lake. These fundamental changes and many others were like various streams emptying into our small pond. More and more people were coming—

and staying! We were doing all we could to keep them, to stop any “evaporation.”

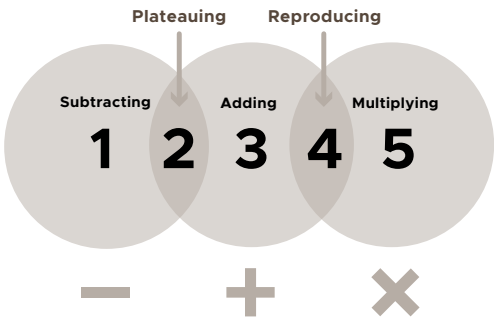
For the first seven years we were knocking out walls, building a balcony, and adding worship services. Additional worship services were the primary way to address our shortage of parking. It was working! Our church was adding people almost every weekend. My dream of a megachurch was now in the realm of possibility!

But was that God’s dream or mine? Was a bigger and bigger church the bullseye?

Discovering 5 Levels Of Church Multiplication

Exponential introduced the “5 Levels of Church Multiplication” in 2015. I wish I had known about it in 1991. I like to think I would have structured our church differently, developed a distinct scoreboard, or pursued a different goal.

When I first learned the language of 5 Levels of Church Multiplication, I knew I had an effective tool to help me look back on our church’s history and look forward to our church’s preferred future. I have now taught the 5 Levels of Church Multiplication across the nation. In an abbreviated summary, the 5 Levels are as follows:



Level 1: SUBTRACTING

Churches are characterized by subtraction, scarcity, and survival. They experience some combination of declining attendance, staffing, income, and conversions. Without a turnaround, Level 1 churches eventually close.

Level 2: PLATEAUIING

Churches are plateaued and looking for the next catalyst to spark a season of growth. These churches experience some combination of flat attendance, staffing, income, and conversions. These churches may see temporary ups and downs, but their overall trend is flat.

Level 3: ADDING

Level 3 churches are characterized by addition, growth, and expansion of impact. They have a strong growth culture with some combination of increasing attendance, staffing, income, and baptisms. Leadership development and conquering the next growth barriers are often key priorities in these churches.

Level 4: REPRODUCING

Level 4 churches are characterized by the value and priority they place on starting new churches—they have a strong programmatic emphasis on it. They see their fruit as more than the apples on their own tree, but as the other trees they plant in the orchard—or the new orchards they establish. These churches continually feel the tension pulling them toward investing in addition at their own church on the one hand, and the Kingdom expansion of new churches on the other.

Level 5: MULTIPLYING

Level 5 churches are characterized by multiplying, releasing and sending everyday missionaries and church planters.

Multiplication is so deeply embedded in the DNA of these churches that they would need a strategy to stop multiplication. You could remove the primary leader without impacting the multiplication mission. These churches plant churches that plant churches to at least the fourth generation on more than one strand, resulting in hundreds of churches in their multiplication family.

Light & Life had suffered through seasons of subtraction (Level 1), but mostly over her first 37 years she had been plateaued (Level 2)—a “gain a few, lose a few” church, as usual. Only on three or four occasions had it been growing (Level 3) for a short season of time.

The Plaque or the Idol?

When I became pastor, Level 3 was the Holy Grail, the trophy, the winner’s circle. When Level 3 started happening and kept happening over the first few years, I was giddy. I felt good about our church, good about my career, good about myself. The offers to speak on bigger platforms, the invitations to write articles, the increasing number of leaders who called to ask, “How are you doing it?” These were all ego-strokers for me. It was magnetic when the desire to see more people reached for Christ could intersect with my desire for more back-patting for my pride.

Then it happened. We won the plaque for “The Fastest Growing Church in the Nation” for our denomination. I held the plaque up in each of our services that Sunday, and there was a standing ovation for God but also for ourselves (and let’s be honest ... it was an ego trip for me). I crowed, “Way to go, Church! And we are going to win it again next year!”

Everyone cheered.

The honeymoon of the “successful, attractional church” was at full-moon phase. We were the flavor of the month. We had added, were adding, and would add more. We were the poster child. But have you ever seen a grown-up poster child? They can sometimes get ugly.

At 800 we got ugly. Our space was overloaded. Our parking was dismal. We were running golf carts around the neighborhood to pick up people. Our volunteers were overworked. Four services were exhausting us. Our innovative Saturday night service launched and then crashed (to this date no church has succeeded with a Saturday evening service in our urban setting). We needed a new place, a bigger building so we could add a lot more people to our flock. We all prayed the Prayer of Jabez: “Enlarge our territory” so we could move the church to a “safer” area with much more parking and seating.

The less-visible side of our “ugliness” was the personal spiritual growth and ministry development of our people—or lack thereof. The level of maturation and discipleship that we had seen in our younger days had been diminished by our increased attention on attendance, services, and programs. It was just easier for people to slide into spectatorship than into discipleship. Contribution was slowly being replaced by consumerism.

But I was mostly blind to the ugliness. I saw our growth as God’s message to grow bigger, to double down on Level 3 thinking. My answer to any of our shortcomings was a new location, more people, more money, and better leaders. I failed to see I had unintentionally carved a “Jubata,” the acceptable idol of big.

3

The River Revelation: The Greater Beauty of Multiplication

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.” (Revelation 22:1)

Building a bigger lake would be expensive. How much would it cost to relocate our church? This was my first burning question. The second was, “Where can we get \$12 million in a hurry?” Being in such an economically depressed community, our annual budget was still well under \$1 million.

In 1998, \$12 million was the equivalent of \$24 million in 2025. Those dollars would not be going directly to ministry either. They would be dollars for buildings, for permits, for street work, for air conditioning, for comfortable seats, for state-of-the-art sound systems, for the latest in big-screen projection. This bothered me, but if you wanted to reach the masses, you had to “show me the money.” In my thinking, dollars equaled souls.

Adding to the critical significance of the moment was that the new millennium was about to dawn upon us. Y2K was coming. How would we advance the church in the first decade of the 21st century? Deb and I were living most of our forties during the next decade. What did we want ministry to look like in our forties? I was convinced that bigger was better for Jesus. In my opinion, a larger Level 3 church was God's will for us.

A New Paradigm Revealed in Ezekiel 47

My wife, however, was not as convinced. She felt that we had just assumed the future without getting on our faces before God. We hadn't fasted and prayed about his will for us as a couple and us as a church. Deb lovingly but strongly suggested we go away for a week and seek God's mind on the matter. I wasn't certain it was essential, but I knew it couldn't hurt. I also knew from experience that Deb had an inside track with the Holy Spirit.

We flew to Florida with a determination to get away to hear from God. It wasn't Elijah's cave, but it was a quiet beach. Listening for God's direction in a week of solitude is no joke. We prayed together. We prayed alone. We searched God's Word. We fasted. We discussed the past, present, and future. We applied the Wesleyan quadrilateral of *Scripture*, *Reason*, *Tradition*, and *Experience* to our questions.

One afternoon as we were spending a couple of hours apart to individually pray for God's revelation and direction, the Spirit led us to the same passage and captivated our hearts with it: Ezekiel 47:1-12. (This passage is so rich and so pivotal to

our story that I include it here and invite you to read it slowly, prayerfully, seeking to picture what this vision is describing.)

The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side.

As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. He asked me, “Son of man, do you see this?”

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.

Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea. But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. 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.”

Here, Ezekiel is shown the temple in all its glory, but this time his vision is not about the size of the temple or what’s inside its walls. Instead it is a vision of what was streaming out of the temple.

Ezekiel saw a trickle of water flowing eastward out of the gate facing east. This was a small rivulet, insignificant. But past 1,700 feet, and with no other tributaries feeding it, the trickle defied logic and grew ankle-deep—still just a shallow brook to be stepped across. But as the water ran another 1,700 feet, it miraculously grew to knee-deep, a small stream to wade across. Ezekiel was led another third of a mile, and now, without any additional sources besides the temple, the stream has grown to waist-deep. It’s a large stream or a small river you can carefully maneuver through.

At 1.3 miles from the temple, this water flow has become a mighty, uncrossable river that was over Ezekiel’s head. He was led back to the bank of the river and saw multitudes of fruit-bearing trees. The river from the temple had caused the desert to bloom.

The impact of the temple river is summarized in the dynamic phrase in verse 9: “So where the river flows everything will live.”

Trading In Our Lake

As each of us prayed over this passage, the Spirit was revealing a paradigm-shaking truth to us about our church, Light & Life. When we came back together to discuss what the Lord was saying, we almost simultaneously exclaimed, “River!”

As Deb and I shared our thoughts, it dawned us: we had built a LAKE church, not a RIVER church. We had never heard of this metaphor before. We were sure many others had received this same revelation, but we had never read or heard about it. It was not learned from someone else but revealed by the Spirit through God’s Word.

As we meditated on this, we saw that our lake church was one where people flowed INTO one place, gave to one budget, to build one vision—the pastor’s. We did everything we could to keep everyone in the lake so the lake could grow bigger and bigger. Everything flowed into the temple, and the temple grew bigger.

We had an approach known as “We can build it, you can help.” To be honest, that could have been translated, “I’ve got a great vision. Would you please attend, volunteer, and tithe to make it a reality?” It was good, but it was not great. It was not best.

Instead, the Spirit was calling us to flow OUTWARD and become a River church. People would come into our “temple” but then flow out of the “temple” to bring living water to all kinds of dead, dry places. Our temple might not get any bigger, but the Kingdom could grow exponentially.

Our scorecard had to change. Bigger attendance was not better—more disciples was better. The measurement becomes

about “flow rate” instead of “volume contained,” about “gallons per minute” instead of “gallons retained.” We could produce all kinds of fruit (Ezekiel 47:7, 12) if we were willing to focus on flowing more than growing,

Specifically (for us) we felt this meant “Stay where you are, and stop worrying about growing your numbers. Instead, from those already there, begin to send people out to start new churches, thus making room for more people to fill their place.”

This Lake to River imagery burst forth in our minds. It was exhilarating to think of disciples flowing out to plant churches, lead Kingdom ministries, serve in tough places, and spread the life-giving water of Jesus.

This new vision did have a bit of a backstory. I had recently been troubled after listening to a megachurch pastor report on the several million dollars they were spending just to deal with an environmental “bird problem” in their relocation effort. I had done the math in our own context. To relocate in our general area to a facility that could support the next 20 years of growth would cost between \$12 to \$15 million in 1998.

I began to ponder what could be accomplished if, instead of investing those huge dollars in buildings to add, we invested them in people so we could multiply. What would the Kingdom impact be if we focused on raising up and releasing pastors, leaders, and workers to start new churches? Could our ministry dollars have more impact spent differently? Perhaps this was in my spirit as I read Ezekiel 47 that day.

Lakes Vs. Rivers—Your Choice

God had been so very good to us to grow our pond into a large lake. The lake was not bad—it was beautiful. Now, however, he was calling us to leave the comfort of our lake for the adventure of the River. Lakes and rivers are connected yet quite different.

Lakes are more predictable than rivers. They are more stable, safer, and calmer than rivers. Lakes are well-defined with nearly unchangeable shapes. Rivers bend, curve, widen, narrow, change elevation, and have scary rapids. We didn't want church as usual. We wanted to live on the edge of full surrender to wherever the Spirit led, even if we had white knuckles in the whitewater.

Lakes gather. Rivers give. Lakes collect but rivers dispense. *Distributaries* is a word I had forgotten from my high school geography class. Distributaries are smaller branches of a river that launch off from the main river channel and flow away from it to bring water and life to a greater diversity of places. The Amazon, Mississippi, Nile, Mekong, Yangtze, Volga, and other mighty rivers have a multitude of distributaries. Our vision was that disciples would be sent to start their own branch of the River, a divine distributary.

Lakes are stationary. Rivers move. Lakes must be traveled to. Rivers are mobile, traveling to new places to bring fresh water. We wanted our church to go to where the thirsty people lived.

Lakes have no destination. Rivers are always moving toward a goal. Rivers carry a vision—to bring life-giving

water to as many as possible, flowing with purpose until they pour themselves into the sea. Their aim isn't to grow larger but to extend their reach, making a greater impact along the way. We knew River thinking would require us to "Kingdomize" our vision. Our "flow rate" instead of our "grow rate" would have to become our new destination.

Lakes are shaped by the surrounding geography. Rivers often change the landscape by carving new paths.

Deb and I saw ways we had moved from contextualization to a bit of compromise with the culture, meaning that to grow our lake we tried to fit in a little too much with the world around us. Rivers cut new channels, change topography. We wanted to be culture-creators wherever God sent us.

Lakes grow shallower. Rivers go deeper. Lakes accumulate sediment at the bottom of their basins, gradually becoming shallower and holding less water over time. Rivers, on the other hand, often cut a deeper channel. They transport their sediment to the sea. Viewing sediment as a metaphor for our church's complacency, comfort, or rigid traditions, we realized that if we didn't keep moving outward, we would prioritize safety over making a meaningful impact.

Lakes are peaceful. Rivers are powerful. Rivers can generate energy as water moves through simple water wheels or complicated turbines (as in hydroelectric dams). Lakes have inherent power, but only if they release the river inside them. We had been using our growth to add to our seating capacity instead of our *sending* capacity. We now wanted to use our Lake to unleash the River. We would seek to keep adding people to the church but with the goal of deploying more workers into the harvest field instead of growing our church size.

Indeed, lakes and rivers are connected yet distinct. Deb and I reflected with gratitude on the Lake that God had built while our hearts began to beat faster as we envisioned the River he could birth!

Pictures from the River

As Deb and I delved into the text of Ezekiel 47, more analogies formed in our minds:

Life to the Arabah: We saw our neighborhood and ministry area as the Arabah. *Arabah* in Ezekiel 47:8 is describing an area that is dry, infertile, desert, lifeless, death-producing. Compton, home of the Bloods and the Crips, was about five minutes from our church. The street one block from our church averaged two to three murders a year, and there were several “food deserts” nearby. Fatherlessness was epidemic in our neighborhood. A pornographic film company was a three-minute walk from our office. It was the Arabah—but the River could bring it life.

Fishermen and Waffles: Ezekiel 47:10 tells how the prophet saw fishermen and women on the sides of the river casting their nets and catching many different kinds of fish. We had been calling everyone to come to the temple and volunteer to build our programs. New churches came and went in our city, and they all had the same message: “Come and see our church. We are here waiting to bless you with our music, our sermons, and our kids ministry.” But what if we sent out fishers of people who would cast the net of the Gospel in their apartments and in their neighborhoods and start churches in their city council district?

Years later, I came across Reggie McNeal's statement: "Your community is not a pancake but a waffle."⁶ A pancake is flat, allowing syrup to spread evenly, while a waffle has distinct pockets where the syrup collects. Our ministry areas consist of a collection of diverse groups of people with unique needs. Not everyone will be reached by the same type of church. I now believe the key to impacting the most people isn't having the biggest bottle of "Jesus syrup," pouring it in the center and hoping it reaches everyone. Instead, it's about sending disciples into the pockets of our cities, bringing the beauty of Jesus directly to them.

The Long Game Wins: Another truth was evident to us from the text. Ezekiel's vision emphasized that this life-giving river began as a trickle. It was a hike of 1,700 feet before it was ankle-deep. A full mile and a quarter had to be traveled before it was a mighty river with banks bursting full of fruit trees.

This fact underlined that our River would not be a glorious opening of the dam so that a mighty River sprang forth immediately. It would be a small release requiring time to grow into a River. It would mean large paradigm shifts with little apparent impact at first. But the words of the Lord to Zerubbabal encouraged us: "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin" (Zechariah 4:10 NLT).

Most leaders want fast instead of best. I know I did. Lakes are faster to build than Rivers. Addition is faster than multiplication at first. Attracting attendees is faster than equipping and sending disciples. But Jesus chose "the long game" of multiplication because it wins the most in the end.

The River revelation was a life-changing inflection point for Deb and me. But revelation carries requirements with it. I had a Lake mindset with a new River vision. The Lord had much shaping of my mind and heart to do before we could let the River flow. There were some dams in my heart that needed to be busted up.

4

Busting Personal Dams: Overcoming Your Inner Obstacles

Dams are used to create reservoirs or lakes. We once owned a piece of property on Lake Roosevelt. The lake is actually a reservoir created by Grand Coulee Dam. Without the dam, the mighty Columbia River would have rolled forward unhindered. But the dam stopped it and backed it up. The dam had to be opened up for life-giving water to flow into the dry lands of eastern Washington. Huge orchards of fruit trees were made possible when the lake was unleashed.

After the initial excitement of the “River revelation,” I was accosted by the “dam realization.” The cost of releasing the River began to dawn on me. I had many dams that would need to be dismantled. My enthusiasm for the River was colliding with the Jubatas (idols) and broken places of my heart.

Some of those dams were immediately apparent to me. Others would not be revealed until the River was underway. Many of them would be internal, requiring personal deliverance

and growth. Others would be external, requiring wise and courageous leadership to help our church bust dams down. But early on I received a word from the Lord, “Don’t let the dams delay the dream. Deal with dams, or you will destroy the dream.” I was committed to “dam busting.”

Church leaders usually start culture building in the wrong place, asking “How do I change my church?” The right question is, “What does God want to change in my heart?” Without this deep personal transformation you will not have the spirit or stamina to lead cultural change.

The Hero’s Dam

We all have some dams in our lives and ministries that are holding back the River. As I explain several of my internal dams, I encourage you to read this chapter prayerfully, asking the Spirit to reveal your own dams.

Back at our prayer retreat in Florida, Deb and I spent the next couple of days discussing what a radical River shift would mean for us personally and as a church. I began to realize one of my primary internal obstacles to the River would be my deep desire to be the hero.

It may have started as a young boy when my daddy was dying of cancer. I wanted to come to the rescue, to save the day, to stop my mom’s tears. It may have arisen later, when our family consisted of my mom and my older sister and me. I was “the man” of the house but still “a boy” in my heart.

Whatever generated this heroic quest, it was the type of desire that more frequently led to pride instead of nobility.

I wanted to be applauded and lauded as the rescuer, as the center of the story.

As I progressed in ministry I continued to look for bigger opportunities to be a greater hero. In the church growth movement I discovered the perfect environment for my hero's quest. I do not pin the blame on the attractional church. Its motives (to reach more of the lost) were noble even when some leaders' methods were not. (I recall a pastor in our area whose "new car giveaway" at Easter drew over two thousand people, but his personality-based congregation folded not long afterward. I am ashamed to admit that I had thought about how we could do the same thing.) If our church grew, I would be a hero. The bigger it grew, the bigger hero I would be.

As explained previously, a shocking thing happened on my hero's journey—God called me to leave a large suburban church that wanted me to move from associate pastor to lead pastor. He called me to love and lead a small group of people called Light & Life in a place that only had 39 parking spaces. We grew, and I was their hero. But I lived in an increasing fear, knowing our growth was going to plateau and start to decline unless we moved. Would I lose my hero's cape? I lived with this looming internal battle on the horizon.

When that battle day arrived, I had options. A few different churches (one with more than 1,000 parking spaces) wanted me to lead them. I seriously considered it. It would afford me the notoriety and paycheck I desired. Or I could lead Light & Life into a costly relocation project that would possibly allow us to add another thousand or two to our flock.

With the “River revelation” I was now presented with another more unusual option; however, it would require me to place my hero cape on the altar. This route was to transition to being less “leader” and more “launcher.” I could begin to employ my leadership gifts and my love for Light & Life in an effort to launch new churches from Light & Life. Our church might not grow larger, but the Kingdom would.

Trading in Your Scoreboard

My primary internal battleground was a matter of the skewed scoreboard I had embraced. I had come by this scoreboard honestly. I had learned it from the prevailing model of the American church, denominational reports, and casual conversations at pastor’s conferences: “How’s ministry going?” (which actually meant, “How many did you have last Sunday?”).

Scoreboards are those internal metrics we use to measure what “winning” looks like. The predominant church scoreboard tallies points for larger attendance, increased notoriety, bigger budgets, professed conversions, and more buildings. But what if our scorecards don’t match God’s?

Imagine watching an NBA basketball game, but unknown to you the NBA has drastically changed the rules. Now, in addition to field goals being worth two or three points, every assist (a pass that empowers someone else to score) is worth four points. The game would be totally altered. The celebrity shooter would no longer dominate teams, but the effective play-makers and passers would be of even greater value to the team. High scorers could be those who never even made a shot. Team play would rise to a whole new level. The scores of NBA games could hit over 250 points.

I believe God scores the assists the highest. He's searching for "passers" even more than "shooters." He's looking for leaders who are more concerned about who they can launch than how many they can lead. For too long the scoreboard has been skewed, and leaders like myself haven't played up to our Kingdom potential. The scoreboard, however, is shifting from addition to multiplication.

In my own journey it has been a radical shift to transition my internal scoreboard from "size" to "impact." This shift is ongoing because my ego has a tendency toward perpetual resurrection. My struggle is exacerbated by the modern church culture. For decades the Christian scoreboard has tallied attendance numbers as the criteria for "Most Valuable Player" in the wide world of church. Scant attention has been given to how those numbers arrived, or what those numbers did upon arrival; it was sufficient that they were present in the building.

Many pastors feel left behind when they consider the Christian scoreboard. With nearly 80% of churches in America either plateauing or declining in attendance, the challenge is no longer about growth or multiplication—it's about survival! Their fight is not so much for addition but against subtraction. Many avoid looking at the scoreboard altogether because it only adds to their discouragement; it feels like they can never score.

Other pastors are "shooting," feeling the thrill of watching two or even three points added to the scoreboard. They are closely watching the leading scorers—those star players whose statistics are steadily rising. They are watching their videos, studying their moves, and listening to their advice about how to make more baskets. Addition is the king of the game.

But there are more and more pastors who want to change the game, adjust the rules, overhaul the scoreboard. They want to start scoring “assists,” learning how to move to multiplication by empowering others to score. They realize the church in the United States is losing the game because we are playing for “addition” instead of “multiplication.”

A New Kind of Hero: the Hero Maker

My friends Dave Ferguson and Warren Bird penned a pivotal book in 2018 entitled *Hero Maker—5 Essential Practices for Leaders to Multiply Leaders*. The premise of the book is that we need to stop trying to be the heroes of our church and instead focus our leadership efforts on making heroes out of others. When we seek to identify, call out, encourage, empower, and platform the gifts of those around us, we end up multiplying our impact. Instead of gathering people around our gifts, we help create multiple points of Kingdom-building ministry. The question is, “How much of a Hero Maker are you?”

In my basketball analogy here, the book is calling us to focus on improving our “assist making” more than “shot making.” When we study Jesus’ ministry, we see the bulk of his time and attention was dedicated to “passing the ball” to those who would “take the shot” (but also pass the ball) after he was gone.

My Exponential book from 2023, *The Empowerment Factor*, emphasizes that this is a primary ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Helper. We are empowered by the Spirit for the purpose of empowering those around us.

Global expert on Gospel movements, Steve Addison, has observed multiplication leaders around the world. He is also a

keen historian on multiplication movements. Consequently, we should seriously consider this quote from his book *The Rise and Fall of Movements*: “Wesley was a great evangelist and pioneer, but that didn’t make him a movement leader. He was a movement leader because his focus was not on himself but on developing others who owned the Methodist cause.”⁷

Did the Church in Your City Grow?

It’s not about me or my church but about the cause, about the Kingdom. For years I had quoted Jesus to reassure myself that my local church was going to grow, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18 KJV). Someone stuck a pin in my balloon, however, when they pointed out that this is a promise to “*His* church” not “*my* church,” to the universal Church not my local church, to the “big C” church not to my “little c” church. Jesus is far more concerned about the growth of the global Church than he is with whether you hit your 10% attendance goals this year.

What if the question that mattered most to me was, “Did the Church in my city grow this year? How did I help that happen?” When we start focusing on how we can “assist” the “big C” church in growing this year, we have crossed over to true Kingdom thinking. We score points by helping other churches start and expand.

Acts 2:47 says, “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” That’s good! But then the believers had a tendency to want to stay in the comfort of the Jerusalem church. So the Lord allowed persecution to come to the church. Acts 8:1 says, “On that day a great persecution broke out

against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” That’s bad! But Acts 8:4 says, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” That’s great! When addition gave way to multiplication, the movement began to spread.

Every pastor has to break down the scoreboard dam that has been erected. If we settle for the “good” of addition, we will miss the “great” of multiplication. We will prioritize our reputation, our new buildings, our church’s biblical knowledge, our church savings account, our user friendliness, our squeaky clean systems, and our committed staff over equipping workers to go harvest.

The scoreboard must be overhauled to tally actual Kingdom impact, to show how much community transformation is happening, to show how much transmission of the Gospel is occurring, to record how many workers are actually being sent into harvest. Even if the Christian media fails to recalibrate their scoreboard, we must ask for this renovation of heart in ourselves. This dam must be broken down if we want to move the Kingdom forward.

The Verse That Kills Me

Back to our River story. The River vision would radically rearrange my version of winning. I was deeply struggling to surrender my scoreboard. Was I willing to die to my hero paradigm?

The Lord in his kindness helped me with a verse about himself. John 12:24 says, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat

falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” I knew the exegesis of this verse pointed to Jesus’ crucifixion and the life that would flow from it. But the verses that follow (vv. 25-26) declare that we are to follow Jesus’ example of dying to self to extend his Kingdom. Consequently, John 12:24 also applies to me (and to you).

I felt the Spirit speaking to me about my addiction to attention and my affair with “addition only” ministry. If I would seek to be buried, become unseen rather than celebrated, and die to my ego, then the seed would multiply and the fruit that could be produced was huge. The Greek word translated “many” in verse 24 can also be translated as “much,” “large,” “great,” or “abundant.”

It made me immediately think of the saying “The fruit of an apple seed is not an apple but an orchard.” I wanted a bigger apple, but God desired an orchard. The seed, however, has to be buried and die, or it will rot on the shelf. I solemnly declared this would be the direction of my life. “You must die to multiply” became a rhyming mantra I repeated constantly.

I don’t know about your flesh, but mine has a way of resurrecting daily. That’s why Jesus admonished us to “take up [your] cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). This ongoing crucifixion of self would be paramount to breaking down my internal dams.

Several years after the River started, I started saying everywhere I teach, “You must die to multiply.” The double meaning was intentional. Multiplication must be a passionate conviction, not just a preference. Also you must be crucified daily or you will be pulled back to the siren call of “addition only” ministry.

Call Me “Mr. Much-Afraid”

As I was seeking to surrender to what the River would cost me, I asked the Lord to reveal what dams were blocking the flow of his Spirit in my life. One of the spiritual classics I had read, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hunnard, spoke deeply to me during this time. The story relates the journey of the main character, named “Much-Afraid,” as she struggles with fear, doubt, and insecurity. She journeys to the High Places by battling enemies named “Pride” and “Bitterness” and by learning to embrace her companions “Sorrow” and “Suffering.”

The question over and over in Much-Afraid’s epic quest is whether she will allow her fears or her obedience to direct her path. The shepherd imparts this wisdom to her: “Whenever you are willing to obey me, Much-Afraid, and to follow the path of my choice, you will always be able to hear and recognize my voice.”⁸

You could have named me “Much-Afraid” as the Spirit revealed my various anxieties.

To understand and appreciate some of my apprehensions, you need to know a bit of the backstory.

Our ministry setting is urban Long Beach. There are two million people within a 25-minute drive from our church. This fact shaped our church planting model. In our primary model, we raise up church planters from our staff or congregation. We then publicly name them in front of our church, give the planters preaching/leading opportunities, and invite all our people to ask God whether they are being called to go with this new plant. On “Church Planting Sunday” we send out the

planter and team. We never know for sure who or how many would come forward on this important day to be prayed over and sent out.

There wasn't a set strategy and recruitment that was carefully paced to ensure it all worked. It was a "pray and obey" approach with all kinds of ambiguity and uncertainty baked in. This unscripted approach undoubtedly fed my fears.

Following are some of the fears I faced as I wrestled with making a full commitment of moving from the Lake to the River:

The fear of failure. What if we give away leaders, people, and money, but the projects fail? We were winning at addition, so why risk losing at multiplication? What if church planting damaged our mother church? Could we recover?

It feels good to look like a "winner," to be admired for visible accomplishments. It feels bad to see your team go from the NBA championship to the basement of the league. Using the current church world scoreboard, "assists" are politely applauded, but they gain no points on the board. So if your team starts practicing "assists" more than shots, you are going to look crazy.

But as mentioned, God counts "assists." Empowering others to start new churches or ministries is huge on the Kingdom scoreboard.

I had to ask myself who I was competing against. Other pastors? Other churches? The Lord spoke to me through Galatians 6:4: "Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else."

C.S. Lewis drove the point home when he wrote, “It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.”⁹ I was being called to die to competition and live to obedience.

The fear of conflict. I had taught our church to “add, add, add.” They were all-in for addition. Now I was going to be teaching them to “send, send, send.” Addition is easy to love. Multiplication has to grow on you. Saying “Welcome” is much easier than saying “Goodbye.”

To move us forward in multiplication would undoubtedly create significant pushback, or even division, that could be avoided. Everyone had seen addition and loved it. No one had seen multiplication. We fear what is new and what we don’t understand. Approximately 95% of American churches don’t multiply, so our people hadn’t seen it happen. We were three-point shooters—don’t make us pass the ball.

To make matters worse, I battle people-pleasing and am a conflict-avoider. I delay or detour around confrontation whenever possible. I was the kid who refused to fight and ran away when a fight broke out. I knew I would be asking to rumble with this new vision. I was fearful of dealing with the pushback and fallout.

The Spirit kept asking me, “Who are you going to seek to please?” Proverbs 29:25 kept ringing in my heart, “Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the LORD means safety.” Carey Nieuwhof said it well: “Being inoffensive ultimately makes you ineffective.”¹⁰ “Focus on who you want to reach, not who you want to keep. If you focus on the

10% of people who don't like the change, you will lose the thousands of people you can reach by making the change.”¹¹

The fear of discomfort. Growing a church can be hard work, but multiplying a church can be even harder work. There are human and spiritual forces that resist the turning of the multiplication flywheel. I had a comfortable routine in place. I had staff I could delegate the less-pleasant parts of ministry to. I knew that if we began to “send,” the ups and downs of giving away staff, leaders, and workers would increase my workload. Would I settle for fishing from the shore of the lake, or was I willing to dig ditches to get the River flowing?

Honestly, I was thinking of how to make ministry easier, not asking for harder. I was battling complacency. But hard work (which is different from “overworked”) was a prime way that Paul commended himself as the “real deal” to the church of Corinth (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). Winkie Pratney had my number when he wrote, “Many say they can’t get God’s guidance, when they really mean they wish He would show them an easier way.”¹²

The fear of rejection. Our primary model of planting churches within close range would mean people would have annual or semi-annual opportunities for allegiances to transfer from the “sending pastor” to the “planting pastor.” This kind of emotional exchange would call for deep personal security.

Insecurity is a form of fear. I was facing my own inner fears of rejection. Was I secure enough in God and in my own identity to face what would feel like a form of abandonment? If a large group of people or certain people left with the planting pastor, would I sink into the “What’s wrong with me?” pit of despair.

At Light & Life, on Church Planting Sunday—when we call the planting pastor, and those committed to go with him or her come forward—I hold my breath. I am never sure who is going to come to the platform. On several occasions I’ve watched different friends and leaders who I thought would never leave me walk forward, declaring their commitment to partner with the new plant. Inside, I shout, “OUCH!” Outside, I smile and say, “Praise the Lord!” It’s hard for it not to feel personal.

The Lord, however, continues to deepen my identity, security, and worth in my sonship rather than my circumstances. The more I center myself in his love, the more free I find myself to release those close to me to his greater Kingdom purposes. My friends’ loyalty to Jesus and his call must always trump their loyalty to me as their pastor.

The fear of loss of control. Multiplication is an empowerment of others, a divesting of the direct management of leaders and people. It is much like a parent who launches a child and must endure the pain of their poor choices and joy of their good ones. Would I trust God enough to hand over large groups of people to novice shepherds? I exercised no control over who leaves on the mission. Key volunteers, leaders, and even staff may feel called to go on the planting team, and I pledged not to interfere.

This is one key distinction between satellite campuses and church plants. In most satellites the lead pastor maintains a significant level of control, and the sites become an overflow room of addition. But in church plants, the lead pastor empowers the planting pastor to follow the Holy Spirit’s leading as they build their church and then choose to plant

more churches. The control is relinquished. I discovered I really liked being THE leader, and I feared handing that off to the inexperience of others.

Jesus entrusted his disciples with authority before they were fully ready for it (Luke 10). Would I do the same with our leaders? Would I open my hands freely and trust the Holy Spirit to continue to guide our leaders into truth and maturity? Would I shift from influencing through relationships and not an authority position?

Martin Luther reflected on his life and leadership then stated, “I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God’s hands, that I still possess.”¹³ I was determined to trust God with what belonged to him anyway.

The fear of financial hardship. I have to confess, one reason I wanted to grow a large church is I knew that Bigger church = Bigger paycheck. It had proven true. Although our church was in a lower-economic area, my salary had increased to where I felt financially adequate.

If we invited people to take their tithes and offerings and go with church planters, it could threaten my paycheck. We, indeed, have watched as much as 25% of our monthly income be launched to a new church on one Sunday. Anticipating this possible reality made me want to grab my wallet and run.

So I had to stop and ask whether 2 Corinthians 9:8 just applies to addition models, or whether its promise is also true for multiplication models: “And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

I had believed the truth of this verse for a Lake church, but could I believe it for a River church? Dallas Willard's words convicted me: "We don't believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true."¹⁴ I determined I would personally live by the promise I had taught our church: "You can't outgive God!"

The fear of change. My farmer stepdad used to say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it because your fixin' might break it." What we were doing was working well ... but as I've said, "good" is often the enemy of "great." It is scary to change something that seems "good enough." You want to canonize it then zealously protect it. That is what churches do over and over—usually to their demise.

I have always agreed with the cartoon that says, "On the tombstone of every dead church is the epitaph: *We've never done it that way before.*" The church in the United States is trying harder at the ministry models that worked well yesterday—but they are not working well today, and they certainly won't work tomorrow.

When Barna tells us that "the share of practicing Christians (in the U.S.) has nearly dropped in half since 2000,"¹⁵ we must realize that we cannot just tweak our addition models. We must have a ministry paradigm shift back to first-century multiplication principles.

What turned the tide for me on this fear of change was becoming deeply convinced that multiplication was God's plan and Jesus' model for his church. The question was no longer "What works?" but "What is obedience?"

The Bottom Line of My Internal Fears

My biggest internal dam to the River was ego, or what Paul and James call “selfish ambition” (Galatians 5:20; Philippians 2:3; James 3:14-15). I was discovering in my heart the ugliness of selfish ambition. I had too much pride or ego. Too much of my ambition was directed toward building my church instead of his Kingdom.

Kingdom ambition is quite different from selfish ambition. James 3:13 tells us that the wise person shows Kingdom ambition by “their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” Then verses 14-15 contrast that with “selfish ambition in your hearts” and identify it as “earthly” and “unspiritual.”

Crucifying selfish ambition to be consumed by Kingdom ambition became my spiritual quest. Again, the Holy Spirit helped me over and over, underlining the verse I quoted previously—a key to wisdom that leads to multiplication, John 12:24: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

Dead men have no fears.

5

Busting External Dams: Overcoming Your Church's Obstacles

Moses used his staff to bring a River from a rock. Similarly, today God is seeking to use his Word through his leaders to release Rivers from Christ, the Living Rock. But there are forces, concerns, questions, and tensions conspiring to keep the River in the rock.

Rivers can be dammed to create lakes. Streams can be obstructed to create pools. Trickles can be blocked to become puddles. The American church landscape is defined by a few lakes, many pools, and multitudes of shrinking puddles but very few Rivers. Churches of all sizes can prioritize addition so highly that they become blind to the greater vision of multiplication. Only about 7% of churches in the United States are giving any attention at all to the River of multiplication.

There are real and justifiable reasons for this behavior in churches. Tensions between prioritizing addition or

multiplication exist. The internal dams described in the previous chapter conspire with the external dams of this chapter. Unless these pressures are identified and wisely confronted, they can perpetually block any church's quest to move ahead to multiplication.

In elementary school I was the addition whiz kid. Put me at the chalkboard against anyone, except Jackie Williams, and I would take my team to glory. Consequently everyone figured I would ace multiplication. They were wrong. Addition was straightforward. Multiplication was more involved, complicated by the need to memorize tables. I wanted to stay in the glory days of "addition only," but if I was to reach my true potential, it would require confronting my blocks to learning. I had a choice of stubbornly clinging to addition and rejecting multiplication or using addition to learn the new language of multiplication. Churches today face the same choice.

At Light & Life we faced many competing tensions that tried to trap us in addition. These were obstacles in our organization that had to be confronted. By sharing several of the pressures we faced in our River journey, I hope to normalize and neutralize some of these dissuading tensions. Each of the potential dams I delineate below is powerful enough to stop the flow of the River if not handled with faith and conviction.

Tension #1: The "Kingdom Math" Tension Addition (Grow Attendance) vs. Multiplication (Start New Places of Growth)

As we introduced the idea of giving away staff, leaders, and workers to multiply churches, there was an immediate

push back when people realized this might hinder our quest of growing our attendance. We were winning awards for addition; what would we win for multiplication? I had preached “church addition” for almost a decade, and suddenly I had switched sermons.

Addition brings glory to God and to us; multiplication requires humility lived out. Multiplication demonstrates an “it’s not about us” dimension to ministry. It builds a different organizational scoreboard—one that lights up when new leaders are sent out more than when new consumers come in. The multiplication scoreboard is exponentially bigger because it is recording “Kingdom points” instead of “local church points.” The glory of the local church gets lost in the glory of the Kingdom. Our message of “dying to self” had to extend to “dying to church glory” if we were to resurrect into a River church.

One of the convictions that helped us blow up the “addition dam” was seeing the amazing potential that existed in multiplication. The math is incredible! If we planted a church every two years and those daughters planted a church every two years and those planted a church every two years and this pattern went on for 20 years, there would be a total of 1,024 churches at the end of just 20 years.

Yes, that is math theory, but it is also the Kingdom possibility that exists when you apply multiplication to church planting. Addition cannot come close. This excited us to become a sending church.

Tension #2: The “Build It and They Will Come” Tension

Facility Acquisition (Expansion, Remodel, Relocation) vs. Facility Sacrifice

Some voices in our church were anxious to relocate to a better part of the city; others wanted a space for our kids that didn't smell 50 years old; others just wanted stage lighting that wasn't residential track lighting. “Addition” could make these happen, but “multiplication” would threaten them.

If we really embraced this “River vision,” it would delay facility improvements, leaving us with worn carpets and overworked air conditioning. The dollars potentially slated for these items would be spent on church planting and also given away in the form of tithers leaving to pioneer new churches. Pursuing multiplication meant facility sacrifice, literally denying some comfort to us to launch something new for God.

One of our concerns was the economic status we would be able to attract to our church if we didn't improve the aesthetics of our building. The urban poor might not be bothered, but the middle-class folks in our area were used to “higher quality” than we could offer them. We needed these upwardly mobile members to help fund our multiplication vision.

As we prayed we felt the Spirit strongly saying, “Prioritize my priorities, and I will provide.” Now, 25 years later, we can emphatically say that it's not about the building. It's about the people, the disciples, the leaders. Still, God has miraculously provided. We are in the same sanctuary, but we have new carpet, stage lights, air conditioning, and a whole new community center building ... just no more parking!

Tension #3: The “Almighty Dollar” Tension Financial Security vs. Financial Sacrifice

It is my experience that Christians love spiritual priorities until they are translated into dollar signs. There is a preprogrammed worldly attitude against investing generously in something largely intangible yet spiritual.

Financial investment in church planting can feel like buying a lifeboat for people trapped on a remote island. It's a need, but someone else can send a rescue boat. You are helping rescue people on your island by building a cruise ship and inviting them to come aboard. Why prioritize finances toward people you will never see, especially if they live within driving distance of your cruise ship?

As we moved toward multiplication, we faced the expected financial interrogation. Business people on our board wanted to know, “What’s our ROI (return on investment) going to be?” Accountants questioned, “How will this impact our savings, our investments, and our contingency funds?” Staff members gingerly asked, “How will this impact what I have to spend on my ministry?” Some of the money people argued, “We don’t have the margin we need yet to invest in church planting. When we get X number of dollars in savings, then I will vote for this!”

The reality is that God is bigger than the X. God is not limited to our savings account. Jesus taught us to lay our treasures up above—not on earth. He wasn’t denigrating savings accounts, but he was establishing priorities. Our security is not in a bigger X number of dollars but in the ability of God and in his promises to those who follow his Kingdom priorities. We can trust “the Almighty” or “the dollar,” but not both.

It is easy for wisdom and faith to seem competitive. There is a worldly kind of wisdom that protects the bottom line yet hinders Kingdom expansion. As mentioned earlier, James warns us of a “wisdom” born from “selfish ambition” but then reminds us of another kind of wisdom that bears good fruit because it comes from above (James 3:13-17). Our board struggled but embraced the wisdom born of faith. God has proven to us that he has a different kind of math that often does not make sense in the natural world.

One year when the River was young, we launched a large group of tithers to plant. This resulted in the mother church being \$30,000 in the red—a significant amount for us at the time. Deb and I had taken salary cuts to keep the River flowing. One Sunday afternoon I was standing in the water baptizing people literally thinking, “I wonder how much they can give, Lord? This one is unemployed; this one is a college student; this one works at McDonalds; this one is homeless. They’re not going to help!”

Suddenly I sensed clearly the rebuke of the Lord: “Larry, stop grumbling and doubting. DO YOU THINK YOU CAN OUTGIVE ME? Keep being generous, take care of the poor, and I will take care of you.” I repented and baptized the rest of the new converts with a different mindset. Three months later, we miraculously ended that year exactly \$30,000 in the black with no one to thank but God. From then on we have had this mantra as a church: “You can’t outgive God!”

Tension #4: The “Recliner and a Remote” Tension Attractional vs. Activational

One of our key givers confronted me in the parking lot about the quality of her son’s new children’s ministry teacher. “If you hadn’t sent Mrs. Jones out with that last church plant, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now! I expect the best for Bobby, and he’s not getting it now!” My assurances to her of training the new teacher into excellence did little to assuage her anger.

This was a prime example of a barrier I failed to consider as we moved into multiplication. It was the tension of leading believers away from the ministry cuisine that tends to satisfy their consumerist taste buds.

Attractional priorities in church ministry look for activities and qualities that reinforce attachment to the local church.

Activational priorities, conversely, challenge believers to do what is difficult—to eschew growing too attached to the amenities of the mother church and instead to actively live sacrificially for the sake of the mission.

We started emphasizing at membership class that we were an unusual church on a unique mission that required everyone to be active and sacrificial. We were honest and said the “comfortable” churches were down the street. If you wanted a church that came with a “recliner and a remote,” you would need to look elsewhere. Our rate of new members decreased while our *quality* of members improved.

One of the key reasons church attendance in America is in decline is because we treat attendees as consumers to be

served instead of soldiers to be equipped. They think church exists to make them feel good, instead of to prepare them for the battle mission. We have made spectators who attend instead of disciples who minister.

During World War II, many church bells stopped ringing because they were taken down and melted into metal that would be used for the war effort. The bells that had grown comfortable ringing once a week to attract people to church were now being actively used daily to take the war to the enemy. Our churches can major in attraction or activation, but only the latter will win the war.

Tension #5: The “Empty Seats” Tension Filling Our Church vs. Starting a New Church

“We will plant when we become a Level 3 church.” This statement or something similar is a huge barrier to multiplication. The truth is, Level 1 and Level 2 churches can plant churches. In fact, it’s sometimes easier to plant before you create the momentum of addition. I’ve observed this in multiple churches.

Also, deciding to plant a new church can be one of the best ways to revitalize a church by kickstarting its external focus. I have seen churches that eventually died live on through their legacy because they gave birth before they died.

Churches that delay church planting until they reach a certain size seldom end up planting. They want to get comfortable before they take the risk. This almost happened to us at Light & Life.

In the same year that we introduced the River Church vision, we built our balcony. It had been an empty, unusable space since 1976, but thanks to a generous donor, we received the funds to build stairs and support structures, transforming it into a functional area. When completed, the balcony increased our 300-person sanctuary by an impressive 180 seats (though it did not add to our 39 parking spaces). Zoning would have stopped us except for a city official who was able to get the original plans grandfathered in. Since the balcony was an afterthought, the views of the stage were far from ideal. Nevertheless, we were excited to start filling it up.

This blessing gave rise to one of our challenges to multiplication. A few vocal folks began to say, “Let’s fill up the balcony before we do this church planting thing. Why start something new if what we’ve got is not full?” Their point sounded reasonable and also tugged on my ego. To be transparent, that argument may have captured me if we would have had more parking.

On the contrary, that point actually benefited us in the long run. After reflecting on God’s Word and my renewed convictions about multiplication, I addressed the question directly and shifted the conversation from a situational issue to one of principle. I explained that multiplication isn’t about how many empty seats you have in the building; it’s about the needs of the harvest and the most effective way to reach the lost. Planting new churches has been proven to be the most successful method of reaching the most lost people. This is what matters to God, and therefore, it must matter most to us—whether the church is full or half empty.

Tension #6: The “Hallmark” Tension Staffing Mother vs. Staffing Plants

Karin was a firecracker. She could draw on her experience of headlining the Comedy Club to make you laugh or on her profoundly deep spiritual insight to make you cry. Everyone loved Karin. “Pastor of Assimilation” could not have been a better fit for Karin.

Then the “River bug” bit Karin. She and her gifted husband, Jim, felt called to plant a new church, and I started back-pedaling. Yes, I believed in the vision, but we needed to pace ourselves, ease into it, take care of “mom” along the way. We could find other people to plant. Just don’t take Karin and Jim.

Then the principle of Deuteronomy 15:18 got under my skin: “Do not consider it a hardship to set your servant free. ... And the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.” This verse and a little slogan from Hallmark cards summarized what God wanted my attitude to be.

When C.E. Goodman, a Hallmark executive, jotted down the phrase “When you care enough to send the very best” on a 3 x 5 card in 1944, he was seeking to capture the essence of Hallmark cards. It is also the essence of the heart of God as demonstrated in Christ. This concept captured the heart God was trying to form in me. Karin and Jim would be sent.

This pivotal decision began to create a culture where the expectation was that every pastor would be released if called to planting. No pastor would be pressured to plant but would be supported if they chose to. Each staff hire was also viewed as a potential church planter. Stability and longevity were no

longer the goals we were striving for on our pastoral team. Obedience to the call mattered more than disruption and inconvenience to the team. Recruiting and training new staff became a yearly reality due to our multiplication vision.

Tension #7: The “Deep Bench” Tension Leadership Retention vs. Leadership Release

Related closely to the above tension of staff release was the challenge of leadership release. One key to a winning church is to get excellent volunteer leaders and then hang onto them as long as you can. But what happens when you are sending out leaders nearly as quickly as you are raising them up?

In 2014 Germany won the World Cup. There was a consensus that the most obvious piece of German brilliance was the depth of the team. The team ran 23 men deep. They had purposefully refused to build around one star player and instead gone for full team strength. No one person was the hero. The team was talented top to bottom.

This is the kind of church the Spirit is seeking to build—one in which there is no celebrity but everyone is a contributor. When a player is traded to a new team or a player falls on the field, there is another ready to take their place. The Church of Jesus has been hobbled by an overemphasis on a few highly gifted leaders. The priority has been on promoting the “gifted” ones, resulting in a neglect of building a deeper bench.

At first glance, giving away leaders in the River model might seem counterproductive to building a strong bench. However, the opposite proved true for us. A culture of multiplication

pushes everyone either to step up or step out. Members who might have remained passive observers are noticed and encouraged to get in the game. Each time a new team goes out to plant, new opportunities arise, calling others to roles they never imagined. It's true that the bench doesn't stay deep for long, but there's never any doubt that it will fill up again quickly. When you create a culture that consistently makes room for new leaders, they multiply rapidly, and releasing them becomes far less daunting.

Tension #8: The “Marching Parade” Tension Relational Stability vs. Relational Transience

A pastor friend was commenting on the new mobility in society and how it was impacting church ministry. His statement was, “I feel like I am preaching to a parade.” Parades make for great viewing but bad living. Communities grow strong on the basis of stability. The small town in Kansas where I was raised has several families in which three generations live within five miles of each other. Relationships have history, memories, and stories binding them together.

Healthy churches foster authentic relationships that reach beneath the superficiality of modern-day living. Lakes can get quite deep; Rivers not so much. So what happens when the church is built around a priority of flowing instead of staying?

One particular new church we started disrupted an entire social network when a few in the network stayed and the remainder went with the plant about 15 minutes away. They had sat together in church for years, and now they were scattered. When I asked them how this impacted their

friendships, they said, “Pastor, we are closer than ever. Our relationship is grounded in Christ, not in the church we attend. We are cheering for each other’s churches.”

Many church planting scenarios are different from Light & Life’s primary planting model. Often the commitment to go plant does indeed impact the intimacy of friendships. Thankfully, with our technology and transportation options, we are not left in the Acts 20 scenario: Paul and his Ephesians friends weeping together as he tells them he will never see them again. I am struck by the phrase “and they accompanied him to the ship” (Acts 20:38). Through tears they shipped him off to God’s mission. This kind of sacrifice is rare these days, but this same heart is necessary for the sake of the Gospel.

Preaching to the parade is far different than sending missionary teams out to plant. While friendships centered in church life are good, friendships centered in Christ and the mission are even better—that banner never changes, and it helps change the world.

Tension #9: The “Messy Room” Tension Systems Optimized vs. Systems Distributed

Multiplication is usually messy. Our oldest daughter is a creator, a relater, a lover, and an adventurer. She attended Azusa Pacific University and blessed so many people that they voted her Homecoming Queen and Senior Chapel Speaker. But she’s messy. It used to drive her mother and me crazy. A mentor finally helped me realize I had to “major in the majors and minor in the minors.” Releasing my expectations for “A-level” organization was liberating for me and for my daughter.

Established churches generally have multiple systems operating—outreach, discipleship, worship, financial, assimilation, youth, children, seniors, ushers, greeters, communication, hospitality, maintenance, small groups, etc. Designing and refining these systems to work efficiently is an ongoing and daunting task. But when you inject the disruption of sending out staff, leaders, and workers, your systems can end up looking like my daughter’s room. Just when you get a ministry or system working well, some key leaders march out the door on a mission for Jesus, and it gets messy again. This can become tiring.

I have discovered that I must slide my tolerance marker over away from “systems optimized” to “systems distributed.” It seems more advantageous for the Kingdom to have B-quality systems replicated in multiple places than to keep everyone home working to achieve A-quality systems.

Efficiency in the details must always serve effectiveness in the mission. Church consultants would probably chide our church for the disarray of our systems but might applaud us for our impact. Tom Peters, author of several business classics, captures my emphasis here: “Instead of looking for things that have gone wrong in your organization and trying to fix them ... look for things that went right and try to build on them.”¹⁶

Tension #10: The “Young Mother” Tension Mother’s Maturity vs. Baby’s Birth

Deb was 26 years old when our daughter was born. Now, 27 is about the average age of first-time mothers. When Deb gave birth, the average was 21. That number continues to

move upward in our culture today. What is the optimal age for a woman to give birth? Of course the answer depends on a variety of factors.

I've had couples often tell me, "We are planning on having kids, but we are going to wait until we can afford it." I understand that, but I often counter by asking, "How will you know when you're there? Do you think Junior will know how much money you have in the bank?"

How mature, healthy, and financially secure does a church need to be before they give birth? These are questions that must be addressed prayerfully and thoughtfully, but also boldly. Certainly if a mother has COVID-19 it's not the time to get pregnant. I have confronted churches whose desire to reproduce would have only spread their disease.

Oppositely, most churches are waiting too long to give birth. "When we have 300. When we have financial margin. When our discipleship process is fully developed. When we get the building built or paid off. THEN we will plant." They fail to see that reproduction can be a means to maturity.

There is nothing like becoming a parent to make you ready to be a parent. The most effective personal evangelists are usually not those who are fully trained and matured but those who are newly saved. The same is true for multiplication. The younger and fresher a church is, the more apt it is to start another church. As churches age they tend to become more adverse to the adventures of multiplication.

At times I felt at Light & Life we needed to slow down on multiplication so we could deepen ourselves spiritually. Each

time I followed that impulse, it led me to some ambiguous means of trying to define maturity.

I am certainly an advocate of spiritual disciplines, having studied them carefully as a corrective to my type A personality. But as I have researched Jesus and his multiplication mission, I have come to the firm conclusion that Jesus didn't wait until his disciples matured to send them out. They were formed on the job, not in the classroom. Private spiritual disciplines were blended with active public ministry. Jesus shaped them as they traveled on the mission.

Likewise, spiritual maturity individually and collectively develops most rapidly when living on the bold edge of mission. Launching new churches keeps us frequenting our prayer closets. The setbacks are humbling and drive us to find satisfaction in Christ and not in "success." The advances are humbling, causing us to admit that Christ made up for our weakness and immaturity.

Our adult daughters hike and ski with us. Their passions and interests inform us and help keep us young. Their questions and stories mature us. We are very thankful we didn't wait until we were 40 to give birth. Usually there is never a better time than "now" to give birth to a new church.

Tension #11: The "Coasting" Tension Senior Leader Coasting vs. Senior Leader Climbing

I wish I could say, "The older I get, the bolder I get." That's just not always true. Instead, as I age there is a growing temptation to coast, kick back, play it safe, and risk less. While risking less may be wise financial planning for 65-year-olds,

it's not smart Kingdom living. The temptation to "coast" is present regardless of age. We want to pursue ministry models that generate results with less and less energy. I've met pastors who are always looking to coast.

We have a vacation/rental home at Silver Star Ski Resort. Approximately 4,000 feet below and 13 miles away is the town of Vernon, B.C. One adventurous day, several years ago, I determined I would ride my very ordinary mountain bike from Vernon to our house. I thought, "I'm in shape, this will be fun." I started the climb up, and it was brutal. Thankfully, there were occasional flat or slight downhill spots where I could coast for a moment. I kept thinking, "I don't have to be doing this. I could turn around any time I want and simply coast back into town."

After three hours of painful pedaling, I arrived at the top. The last quarter mile was a downhill coast into the ski village. As I coasted that short stretch home, I raised my hands in the air and prayed, "God, this is the life and ministry I want. I'm not looking to build the type of church that will allow me to coast. I want to choose to climb, to ascend. Give me momentary breathers, but don't let me turn around and coast! There's time for that in heaven!"

The temptation to coast is always present for multiplication leaders. "We have planted enough. Sent out enough. Given enough. Let's take life easy for a season. Let's just add instead of multiply. Let's coast." Our Light & Life experience has been one where as soon as we are recovering from our last plant and thinking of kicking our feet up for a spell, God opens another door of invitation to multiply. Someone

recently said to me, “Aren’t we ever going to get past this church planting phase?” I quickly retorted, “I hope not!”

John Maxwell has a saying, “Speed of the leader, speed of the team.”¹⁷ This maxim is most true as it relates to church reproduction. This tension is internal to each pastor’s heart, but the results are external in the priorities and production of the team.

Tension #12: The “My Turf” Tension Proximity Protection vs. Proximity Evangelism

The young pastor was nearing tears as he described how his megachurch pastor, who he had served alongside loyally, had refused to bless or support his new church plant in any way. The pastor’s reason for rejecting the new plant? The plant site was a little less than 30 minutes away from the location of his megachurch. His pastor had discouragingly talked of “market saturation,” “brand purity,” “sheep stealing,” and “divided loyalties.”

In my effort to comfort my young friend, I sought to balance my love for that megachurch pastor with my anger for such unfounded territorialism. I knew that nearly a million unreached people resided between the megachurch and site of the plant.

One of the real tensions that will arise for many churches that multiply by sending out pastors, leaders, and workers is the question of proximity. How close is too close? Won’t it become a competition to reach the same people if we let them plant too close? Shouldn’t we only plant where there is not another Light & Life nearby already? What if people like the new

pastor and church more than they like the mother church and start leaving?

The answers to these questions are contingent on the size of the ministry area and the model of church planting you employ. If you are in Mayberry (population 1,200 in the Andy Griffith era) and are set on building a megachurch there, then yes, starting three more of your brand of churches in Mayberry may not be a priority. The fact is, however, there are few Mayberrys these days, and multiplication models are not looking to build megachurches.

The answer to these questions depends even more fundamentally on the “fishing pool” you are focusing on. At Light & Life we actively help our church planters recruit “launch team members” from our church. I tell them, “No one is off limits for recruiting; just let me know which leaders are going so we can fill the holes.” BUT once they have their “launch team,” then the “fishing pool” is the unchurched, not our church.

Jesus said, “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:38). Most U.S. harvest fields are urban areas with density numbers that can support many churches within walking distance of one another. With 10,000 people per square mile in our city, we could start 10 churches that average 300 in attendance and still only be reaching 30% of the population within walking distance of our church.

Territorialism is most frequently driven by ego, fear, and competition for Christians. If our focus is on those without Christ instead of those without our brand, then it’s difficult

to start churches too close together. We have started several churches within 10-minute drives from the mother church. They are each reaching lost people we weren't reaching.

Tension #13: The “Backyard First” Tension Missional Focus vs. Multiplication Focus

My wife, Dr. Deb, is the one who influenced me toward the “missional church.” Her doctoral work at Fuller Seminary included a reading list that encompassed all the seminal works on the subject. Every new read for her became, in her opinion, a “must” read for me. Soon I discovered a tension arose in our discussion. Deb wondered aloud, “Don’t we need to focus on the needs of the neighborhood where God has placed us before we address the need for churches in other neighborhoods?” I pushed back: “I agree with you, IF you change the word *before* to *as*. If we wait to plant until we meet enough needs in our backyard, we will be on hold forever.” She agreed—but not everyone else did.

The missional nature of the church is undeniable. We are saved to serve, to demonstrate the tangible Kingdom, to be salt and light where God has placed us. However, when that becomes an argument against the multiplication of churches, we have overthrown our point. Do we care for the poor or evangelize the lost? Do we plant community gardens or plant churches? The answer is “Yes.” As soon as the missional and multiplication become competitive, we have misunderstood the nature of both. They are synergetic, not disintegrated.

Along the route of multiplication we became convicted that our missional DNA was not as strong as God intended it to

be. We had been somewhat blind to the blood (yes, blood) in our own backyard. The answer, however, was not to shut down multiplication but to prioritize the missional nature of the churches we started. The mother church began to model a new level of missional service. Service projects, community engagement, partnerships with community organizations, our Light & Life Community Center, our community gardens, our community theater for underserved youth, and much more came to life in our efforts to serve.

Dr. Deb would go on to plant the first community garden in Compton, California, in one of the most needy and notorious parts of the city. She gardened with the prostitutes, civic leaders, drug dealers, church members, gang members, homeless people, welfare moms, and high school students. She was “straight into Compton” (movie reference for the uninitiated). A few years later we helped plant an amazing church in Compton not far from the garden.

Our new church plants now occasionally arise out of acts of service to the neighborhoods they are starting in. Missional is serving multiplication. We are still learning how to deepen the missional DNA in our church culture, but it is now a non-negotiable. We have found that the more churches we plant the wider this missional DNA can spread.

Tension #14: The “Some Haven’t Heard Once” Tension

Missions Focus vs. Multiplication Focus

In the 1970s, environmental groups launched the phrase, “Think global, act local” to encourage creation care. The

church had previously had a mindset of “Pray global, act local.” Global actions were generally limited to raising money for missionaries in faraway places. Then the world became, as Thomas Friedman labeled it, “flat.” With the ease of global communication and travel, the people who seemed so distant were now our neighbors. Bob Roberts wrote effectively on the power of “glocal” churches.

Nevertheless, for those raised on old time missions conventions and the missionary slideshow, the idea of investing in multiplication became competitive to the “foreign mission field.” We were asked, “Why should we start new churches to tell people about Jesus when there are already numerous ways for Americans to hear the Gospel? Most have heard it multiple times. Instead we need to focus on taking the Gospel to those who have never heard it for the first time!”

The answer to this tension has already been given to us in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” There is no escaping the responsibility to take the Gospel to unreached and under-reached people. Yet the order of priority is to start in Jerusalem. As new Spirit-empowered churches start in our own Jerusalem, they set their sights on the “ends of the earth.” Each new church has the potential and call to become a mission-sending station.

During our phase of concentrating on church growth, Light & Life was dismal in our impact in world missions. Our navel-gazing focus on “addition” kept our eyes close to home. As we began to plant churches and give away generously, it also impacted how we prioritized missions. Generosity through

multiplication inspired generosity in missions. We began to explore how our local church planting could translate into global church planting. Multiplication did not reduce missions; it released missions to an unprecedented level. We now have four international church planting partnerships with networks in the Philippines, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and Central America.

Tension #15: The “Bigger Lake or Wider River” Tension

New Campus (Multisite) vs. New Plant (Multiplication)

We never thought we would do it. We seemed destined to abide in our church building with 39 parking spaces. Then the unforeseen occurred—a church six minutes away from us went bankrupt. Their property went into foreclosure and was headed to become apartments. This church’s neighborhood was distinct from ours and in desperate need.

Finding a space in our built-out urban city where you can gather 200 people for church is like finding gold. Conditional Use Permits are nearly extinct. Consequently, with our denomination’s support, we purchased the property for use as a satellite campus. It had a whopping 23 parking spaces and 350 seats.

One primary concern for us was how this would affect church planting and impact the “River Church” model. Were we regressing into a “Lake” mentality? I immediately reassured our church that we were not stopping the River—we were simply widening it. The 70-seat chapel on the new property

was set aside as space to be used for gathering “launch teams” and holding “pre-launch worship services.” Even before we held the official grand opening of the new campus, we had launched another church plant, primarily made up of those who had gathered at the new campus.

The question of this tension between multisite and multiplication depends on what model of multisite is being implemented and what the “end game” is. If the satellite campus is an “overflow room” to expand the reach of one gifted pastor, then it is an “addition” model (a bigger Lake). If, however, it is 1) a means to leverage the strengths of a mother church in a new location 2) with the goal of raising up a new pastoral leader and having the campus become independent of the mother 3) with the authority to plant churches where and when it feels led, then it is a multiplication model (a wider River).

This launch and release version of satellite campus planting can actually widen the River, increasing multiplication. Although that was our plan, it ended up not working that way for us. It consumed much more time, energy, money, and leadership than we anticipated. After four years we sold it at a steep discount to one of our daughter churches that was growing and badly needed space. It was a Kingdom win but a tough loss for us at Light & Life. We refocused on our planting from one campus and have seen much fruit.

Cutting the Cords

Light & Life loves to throw festivals for our underprivileged neighbors. One of my favorite “blow up” features at these festivals is one in which you put on a harness and then run as

far as you can as a bungee cord tries to pull you back. When you stop running you get snapped back to the start. The teenage guys especially enjoy this one. Whoever gets the furthest gets the bragging rights. I often wanted to sneak in and cut the cord just when someone has stretched it as far as they can.

I visualize this cord-stretching game when I think of the tensions holding churches back from multiplication. The prevailing model of church has created various cords that are always trying to pull us back to a Lake mentality.

In Exponential's 5 Levels of Church Multiplication framework, we picture these tensions as a magnet in the middle of Level 3. This magnetic force (or bungee cord) pulls us to Level 3, away from Levels 4 and 5. The good news is that the Holy Spirit has a big pair of scissors, and he's happy to use them when we invite him to. Through the Spirit's power, we can overcome the tensions.

6

River Prayers: The Power of Prayer to Launch a River

Once upon a time—like April, 1991—there was a small group of church folk who were desperately seeking to break the drought of conversions their church had been experiencing. They were tired of just going through the church motions. With no pastor, if something didn't happen soon, their church doors would close.

One brave young leader, Don McLain, took it on himself to organize a special prayer gathering and recruited almost all the few remaining adults to attend. He gathered them down front at the altar of their small sanctuary. He passionately exclaimed, “We are going to pray like we have never prayed before. We are going to stay on our knees and beg God to help us reach someone, anyone for Christ!”

They prayed, “God, we repent! We’ve been trying to save our church, but you want us to save souls. Oh, Lord, use us to save souls!” They kept praying longer than any of them could remember praying before.

Suddenly the back doors of the church opened, and a big man started walking down the middle aisle toward them. He had a menacing gaze, and they were startled.

Don spoke up in a trembling voice, “Can we help you?” The big man stared at them for a moment and then asked in a gruff voice, “Is this a church?” Don replied, “Yes it is. You are welcome here. Can we help you?” The big man hesitated again then began to choke up as he asked, “Can you tell me how to get saved? I need Jesus!” That night Tony Cook, a hardened truck driver, gave his life to Christ.

Tony explained to the group how he had been driving by in his truck and saw the church sign. Instantly, he felt compelled to stop his truck. He parked on a side street and sensed he had to come inside that church building. He’d never been in a church before.

Two months later, Deb and I came to that church as pastors. I started passionately preaching the Gospel, and almost every Sunday for the next 30 years someone walked down that same exact aisle and surrendered their life to Jesus.

The Real Start of Our River ... and Yours

In a very real sense, the River didn’t start with Deb and me. It started before we arrived. It started with the tears that were shed over those who were lost. The power of extraordinary prayer by ordinary people cannot be overstated. It can unleash a River!

Eight years later when God called us to stay in our small location and launch the River, I told the Lord, “I have no clue as to how to do this!” I felt the Lord reply with a question,

“Do you know how to pray? Start there. Pray then obey.”

So after returning from Florida with Ezekiel 47’s River flowing in my vision, I began to share some biblical teaching on church planting, multiplication, and what we felt the Lord had called us to. I also confessed to the church, “I don’t know how to turn this vision into reality, but the Lord has called us to pray then obey.”

We asked the question, “What would it look like to employ radical prayer for the sake of the River vision?” We sensed the Lord directing us to do a 40-day fast to kick off our new vision and culture change. If this vision was from God and had the Kingdom potential we thought it may have, then the evil one was going to powerfully wage war against it. His strongholds and attacks could only be overcome through earnest prayer.

We asked everyone in the church to fast something significant for 40 days. Many fasted a meal a day, or all food every other day, or television, or an hour of sleep. A few of us fasted all food except clear liquids. The time we gained from fasting was to be spent praying. At least 90% of the church participated. We held special prayer gatherings during those 40 days.

For me, it was tough not eating at all for 40 days. I was not overweight, but I lost 40 pounds in 40 days. I could smell a french fry from 40 yards away. Communion is served weekly at our services, and I would go through the line twice at all three services!

But as the church prayed and watched their pastor shrink, their faith grew. They knew we were serious about this calling from God. Something was happening in the spiritual realm, and a new culture was being birthed in the natural realm of our church.

Adventures in River Praying

We also did unusual prayer events. On a few occasions the pastors chose to lock ourselves in the sanctuary for 24 hours straight to fast and pray. We invited the church to join us for an hour or all 24 hours. Many did, and miracles happened.

One night at 2 a.m. about 30 of us were praying in the church, and a man who looked like a bodyguard of some kind walked in and came right up to my face. He sternly said, “My boss needs to see you for a few minutes in his car. Now!” I came out to a black stretch limo, and the massive messenger commanded, “Get in the back!” I thought, “Lord, I’m coming home.”

Inside the limo sat a gangsta rap producer who was not happy with me or our church. He menacingly asked, “What’s up with you and my woman?!” I replied, “I am sorry; I don’t know who you are talking about.” “Shakeena,” he replied. “It’s 2 a.m., and she is in there with you. You better start talking fast.” I started talking real fast. “Oh, Shakeena! Yes, I know her. She just committed her life to Jesus a few weeks ago, and she’s here for an all-night prayer meeting.”

Over the next few minutes I shared a brief overview of the Gospel. He was interested, asked a couple of questions, then he asked his bodyguard what he saw when he went in to get me. By that time, Shakeena had come out, saw what was happening, and quickly exclaimed, “Pastor, I better go now, but that prayer time was great! Thank you.” Shakeena ended up getting baptized, and she lost her boyfriend for the sake of Jesus.

We also did an unusual prayer ride on bicycles around the perimeter of Long Beach. I thought we would have

20–30 people show up for the 36-mile ride around the city boundaries. Instead almost 100 took on the prayer challenge. It was a powerful day that people still talk about. It tore down strongholds and impacted our culture. One brother, Bryan Laney, did the ride every Saturday for the next 15 years, peddling and praying his way around our city!

We did prayer gatherings on Signal Hill, an elevated park where you can see all nine city councils. North, South, East, and West were being claimed for the King. We prayer-walked neighborhoods we were considering planting in. We reignited our 168 Prayer Team so every hour of the week was covered in prayer. God heard us and responded, and we excitedly told stories of answered prayers.

The Air Movements Breathe

We were discovering what so many around the world already know: “Prayer is the air multiplication breathes!” The most common denominator of current global gospel movements is extraordinary levels of fasting and prayer. At Light & Life we knew a River could not be unleashed in our strength or strategy—“‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6).

Paul wrote words essential for a River of multiplication—“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ” (Colossians 4:2-3). Paul was inviting his readers into the power he knew that devoted prayer would have. Paul believed that “Devoted prayer = Open doors.” Do we believe this?

That is exactly what you see as you look at the New Testament record:

- Jesus started his ministry only after devoting 40 days to prayer.
- Jesus called his disciples after devoting a night to prayer.
- Jesus went to the cross after devoting himself to a late-night prayer meeting.
- The first church started as they were devoting themselves to prayer.
- In Acts 2 the first church was defined as “devoting themselves to prayer.”
- Acts 4 says that when the first church met resistance, they devoted themselves to more prayer.
- In Acts 6 the apostles raised up the first deacons so they could keep devoting themselves to prayer.
- When the first church planters from Antioch were called and sent, Acts 13 tells us that it happened because the people of the Antioch church were devoting themselves to fasting and prayer.

The list goes on, and this is why Paul pleaded for the church to devote themselves to prayer for him—so doors would open for the Gospel!

Prayer is the air multiplication breathes. Prayer is not just preparation for the work; it is the most *important* work ... but not the only work! Prayer won't work if we won't work ... but prayer invites the work that only God can do.

Steve Addison in his book *Movements That Change the World* says the number-one trait of movements is “white-hot faith.”¹⁸ Addison writes of St. Patrick and the great movement of God in Ireland: “The love and fear of God grew in him. Patrick recalled how he learned to pray continually as he worked. At night he stayed out in the forests and on the mountains to pray. He would rise before dawn to pray in the icy coldness of the Irish winter. This was no burden to him but a delight because the Spirit was burning in him.”¹⁹

Note it wasn’t Patrick’s model, or his charisma, or his strategy—it was a white-hot faith demonstrated by praying in the Spirit with all kinds of prayer on all occasions (Ephesians 6:18).

Pray Then Obey ... Even When It’s Scary

One exceptional answer to prayer along our church-planting journey happened in a startling way. Long Beach has the largest population of Cambodians of any city in the United States. We wanted to reach out to them with a church plant but weren’t sure how. So we prayed.

After a few months, I happened to be driving a woman who was homeless to the Motel 6 a few blocks north of our church. As I drove I noticed a circle of about 20 Cambodian young adults gathered in a circle on the side of the street. As I drove by I remembered hearing that the night before, a Cambodian gang member had been shot and killed at that spot. I said a prayer as I drove by and sensed the Spirit saying, “You need to stop.” In a polite way, I silently replied, “Are you crazy?” I drove on, but internally I bargained with the Lord, “If they are still there after getting this woman situated at the motel, I will consider stopping.”

I took my time at the motel. As I drove back to the church, sure enough the circle was still there, and the urging of the Lord was strong. So I parked on a side street, prayed a brief prayer for protection, and slowly walked up and stood silently on the outside of their circle. I received some looks that said, “Man, are you crazy?!” but they went on talking about their deceased friend without saying a word to me. As I listened I looked carefully at their faces and began to experience some of their pain, grief, and frustration. All I could do was inaudibly pray for them. After a few minutes I felt the burden lift, and I turned and drove back to the church.

I asked the Lord, “What was that about? I didn’t talk to one person.” I thought that was the last of it. However, the next Sunday, I had just started preaching when three of those Cambodian gang members walked in and sat in the back row of the church. They sat there listening intently. At the invitation to receive Christ as their Savior, all three of them came striding forward, and I prayed with them.

Two weeks later a young, gifted Cambodian couple, Panya and Kreng, came to me and said, “Pastor, we feel like God wants us to plant a church in Long Beach to reach our Cambodian people.” A new church was born not long after.

Believe for the Miraculous

We watched God do uncommon miracles among us as the River started flowing. One of the most outstanding miracles was Deb’s cancer healing. It was so dramatic the entire faith level of our church rose significantly.

On April 13, just four days before her 49th birthday, Deb was diagnosed with an extremely rare cancer that had proved fatal to all those who contracted it. Her diagnosis was so clear that the sample of the cancer they took from her uterus was sent to the National Cancer Institute as a textbook example of this unique cancer.

A renowned gynecological oncologist scheduled surgery for six days later. We were shocked but determined to pray and believe God for a miracle. We held a special prayer service at church and activated friends around the world to fast and pray for healing.

On the day of surgery, her surgeon told me again how serious her condition was. After a three-hour surgery the surgeon came out to talk with me. “I can’t understand this or explain this. We took nine different body parts out of your wife, and we could not find any cancer. Now we will run pathology examinations and undoubtedly find it there, but this is inexplicable.” (He didn’t like the word *miraculous*!) The next day, he came back and exclaimed with a befuddled look, “Well, we ran pathology tests three times and can’t find one single trace of cancer. I guess that’s what all that praying was about.”

News of Deb’s healing spread like wildfire through the church and even the community. People began to purposefully come to our church to receive prayer for healing. Some of them received supernatural healing. Our church plants began to prioritize praying for the sick as one tool of evangelism and building the church. (Think Luke 10:9; 9:2; Matthew 10:8; Mark 6:13.) We taught that for those who know Jesus, the prayer of faith will heal the sick. Sometimes that healing will be immediately, sometimes gradually, and sometimes eventually in his presence.

As disciples our responsibility is to pray boldly, expectantly, and earnestly. God's responsibility is to manifest his power when and how he chooses. Scripture makes it clear that our prayers influence God's response, but also that God is sovereign. Most believers err on the side of praying with too little authority and boldness or with too little respect for God's sovereignty. Jesus modeled a prayer life of both sides.

Praying in the Flow of the Holy Spirit

“River praying” is praying in the flow of the Holy Spirit. Just as the River's source is the Holy of Holies in the temple, so our prayers are to be “sourced” by the Spirit of God. This is especially true when our intercessions are for the advancement of the church. Romans 8:26 underlines both our ignorance and our adequacy in prayer: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

Do you ever feel like you don't exactly know what you need to pray for in a situation? The salient question is not, “Do you have the right words?” but “Do you have the right heart?” If your true desire is to be used by God to advance his Kingdom, then the “Spirit helps us in our weakness” and “the Spirit himself intercedes for us.” Many times I have just pointed my heart and mind toward a ministry need or a spiritual obstacle and groaned, “Oh Lord ... Oh Lord ... help, Lord, help ... Oh Jesus, Oh Jesus, intervene ...”. I sense the Spirit praying through me even though I don't have the words. Some type of answer always seems to come to these kinds of prayers.

River praying is like praying “orchestra prayers.” An oboe can’t play a symphony. Neither can a violin or even a piano. It takes an orchestra to play a symphony. In a similar manner, the River is always connected to the temple (representing the people of God). Our prayers are most effective when joined in communion with the prayers (or at least the spiritual awareness) of other believers. Thus Jesus taught us to pray in unity and unselfishness, using plural pronouns: “Our Father,” “Give us this day,” “Forgive us,” “Lead us,” “Deliver us.” The River would lose its power if it sought to flow disconnected from the rest of the temple.

River prayer is praying with tenacity, resolve, and perseverance—just like the mighty River in Ezekiel 47 that starts as a trickle yet just keeps going, refusing to be stopped. As it goes, it grows. There is a determination to keep flowing regardless of size or obstacle.

River praying is praying with a vision, a future, a destination, an imagination for what God can do in the driest of places. Ezekiel’s river turned deserts into orchards. It made dead things come alive! It changed salt water into sparkling fresh water. It caused fish of all kinds to thrive and feasting to commence (Ezekiel 47:9-12). We need praying that prays with that kind of faith and fervency!

As the great preacher, Samuel Chadwick said, “The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.”²⁰

Learn to Snorkel

Perhaps our biggest challenge in the American church is we don't know how to snorkel. What do I mean? Two years ago I had a very vivid dream. I was in the ocean in about eight feet of water, and I was collecting shells. I would take a big breath and then dive down, hurriedly look for shells, scoop them up, put them in my bag, working as hard as I could until I was forced back to the surface to gasp for air. I would inhale deeply and then head back down to look for more lost shells. It was hard, tiring work.

But then something peculiar happened as I surfaced one time—a long, eight-foot snorkel fell out of the sky beside me. I heard a voice say, “As you work in the water below, I want you to breathe the air from above.” I stuck the mouthpiece of the snorkel in my mouth then dove down, and it transformed everything. I was *in* the water but not *of* the water. I was working on the ocean floor but drawing my breath and life from a different realm. I was able to slow my work pace down, be more attentive, and experience more pleasure in the search—and I found far more lost shells than I could ever imagine.

Prayer is the snorkel God has provided for us. Prayer is the air that multiplication breathes. The question is, are we living lives that actually obey God's command to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)? An ongoing conversation with God that permeates and transforms your daily living—this is the privilege and power available to every Christ follower. It is what makes the River flow.

7

River Culture: Keys to Shifting Your Culture

When God called us to launch the River vision, I did not realize he was calling us to overhaul the culture of our church. I was still a younger leader, 41 years old, and Peter Drucker had not even made the now-famous statement attributed to him: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

I didn’t have a strategy, but I knew we had a culture shaped around addition not multiplication, a culture that prioritized “staying” above “sending.” Our culture shouted, “Grow the lake!” “Keep everyone here!” “Build the pastor’s vision!” “Volunteer in the church!” “Run our great programs!” “Feed the machine so the machine can grow!”

I had never read a book on changing culture. I felt clueless on what to do to bring cultural change. So honestly, I had to just follow the “Pray then obey” model I believed in so strongly.

What I will share in this chapter on culture change is not based on some superb strategy I implemented. These are lessons in retrospect, looking back and trying to understand which of the actions we took in nearly blind obedience actually helped us shift our culture. The keys in this chapter are how you can radically transform the culture of your church from a Lake to a River.

What Is Culture Really?

The first step was for us to try and understand our current culture and what had created it. As much success as we were having as a church, we began to see obstacles to multiplication that we had unintentionally created. We had to see and understand our culture. Max Depree, extraordinary former CEO of Herman Miller and leadership author, hit the bullseye when he stated, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.”²¹

Fish don’t know they are in water. Why? Because water is the only culture they have ever known. It’s the same reason why church people don’t know their bathrooms smell, that their music is outdated, that the sermons are boring, that they aren’t actually very friendly (especially to newcomers), or that they just don’t seem all that excited about church. Why? It’s the only culture they have ever known.

We went on a quest to understand our church’s culture. Over time we realized that culture is multifaceted:

Culture is your church’s atmosphere. It’s the way we do things around here. It is the ambiance of your gatherings.

Culture is the commitment of the people in your group/church to a shared doctrine, purpose, mission, vision, and mindset.

Culture is largely formed by how people communicate and form relationships. Think of your high school. Who talked to who, who was in, who was cool, who was uncool and left out? How did the “buzz” get communicated through the student population? This was the cultural lifeblood of your school. It’s the same with churches.

Culture is largely driven by leadership ... by who they are, how they act, what they teach, what they expect. Who has the power in the group? Who are the key influencers? The formal and informal leaders?

Culture is value-driven. Those values can’t just be stated; they must be incarnated. They must be practiced visibly. Almost every company has values painted on the wall, but if they aren’t clearly seen in everyday life, they aren’t worth the paint. They have no power. The infamous Enron, perpetrator of one of the largest scandals in corporate history, had the values of *integrity*, *respect*, and *communication* on their walls. But in the halls they were lying, stealing, and manipulating for personal gain.

Culture is the stories of the tribe. Our stories shape us. They carry our values to newcomers. They reinforce our values to old-timers. They say, “Be like this. Do this.” Stories communicate our identity. Think of the Old Testament feasts. They were storytelling events that shaped, celebrated, and preserved culture.

Culture is the rewards you hand out. When I was a young leader, the best old leader I knew asked, “May I give you one piece of leadership wisdom?” I replied, “Absolutely, I need all the help I can get!” He replied, “Okay, here it is: What gets rewarded gets repeated.” He explained, “Define what behavior you need to see more of from people, find where it’s already happening, and then reward it generously. Soon you will build the culture you want.”

Instilling a New Culture

We didn’t begin to know these truths about culture when we came back to start the River. We would learn them along the way. As we learned them, we sought to leverage them toward more of a pervasive mindset of multiplication, or as we would say, a “River Culture.” Following are some of the keys we discovered about culture.

Values Create Culture

My definition of *values* is “the prioritized beliefs that shape your decisions, actions, and relationships.” If you are going to change culture, you must do an analysis of the culture you now have and what values have given rise to it.

This is challenging because you are the fish in the water. This is where outside investigators and consultants can help—like the “mystery guests” we would get to come to our church and then tell us what we did well or poorly. We didn’t know our bathrooms smelled that bad or that our announcements were that corny. That was just us.

While you are learning about your current culture, you must be crystal clear about the culture you want to build. This can't start with vision. Leaders who try to build culture from vision are getting the proverbial cart before the horse. "If our vision is this, then our values must be these." Wrong. Culture creation must begin with values. They are the WHY of the WHAT you want to see built.

One of the top ten Ted Talks is Simon Sinek's "Start with Why." I encourage you to watch it. The question of why is the driver of truly great churches. Regardless of size, your church can have a deep, passionate, consuming why. These are the beliefs we prioritize. These are the values that will give rise to our vision. They will give shape to our culture. (In the next chapter I give Light & Life's eight big WHYS for multiplication.)

What do you value most? These value statements flow directly from the Word of God via the Spirit of God applied uniquely to your church. As you read Scripture and seek God's heart, you and your team can begin to craft your key values. (These are not your doctrines, as I hope those are already defined.) But based on those doctrines and God's Word, what are 4–8 values you hold most dear and want most passionately to see manifest in the culture of your church?

The Scriptural, Culture-Shaping Values of Light & Life

Once you have those values developed, you must teach them clearly, thoroughly, creatively, accurately from God's Word. Rally your people around the truth of God's Word using your values as the expression of that truth.

At Light & Life, we identified two key passages that would be our church's defining passages for how we do ministry.

The first was Ezekiel 47:1-9. We would refuse to be a Lake church who collected people, building a bigger and bigger (temple) church. Instead, we would be a River church who empowered and equipped people and sent them into the ministries God was calling them to, especially planting new churches. We sought to break our old culture of seeing addition as winning and to create a new culture that saw multiplication as winning. We taught this value of "sending" and "multiplying" from Genesis to Revelation.

When our people heard the phrase *River church*, they knew what it meant and how highly we valued it. It created a sticky word picture.

The second was Matthew 9:35-38. It is a summary of Jesus' ministry. We wanted to do ministry like Jesus did ministry, to value what he valued.

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

From this passage we elevated and emphasized four action words to guide us:

Reach, Teach, Mend, Send.

Jesus went to where the people were. We would be a REACHING people. (9:35a)

Jesus proclaimed and taught Kingdom truth. We would be a TEACHING people. (9:35b)

Jesus healed hurting people. We would be a MENDING people. (9:35c-36)

Jesus sent workers into the harvest field. We would be a SENDING people. (9:37-38)

We taught this passage inside and out. We preached an annual series around each of these four simple truths and kept saying, “Let’s do what Jesus did!” (It’s hard for me not to break into sermonic writing on each of these points even now!)

We captured the seminal values of our church with these two passages.

Who are we? A River Church.

What do we do? Reach, Teach, Mend, Send!

Why? Because that’s what Jesus did!

From Values to a Culture-Defining Mission Statement

These values gave rise to a highly transferable, memorable, four-big-words mission statement: Light & Life will REACH, TEACH, MEND, and SEND.

I have read a hundred books on vision and mission, each with a different definition of those terms. Some describe mission as vision, others define vision more like mission, and some say the mission is the vision. Part of the problem is that mission and vision are closely integrated and significantly overlap. What's the difference? Does it matter?

I'm not an expert, but how I distinguish the two seems to have worked for many people:

Mission is your cause, and people can SAY IT.

Vision is your picture of the future, and people can SEE IT.

If your people don't know the cause they are giving their lives for, it's not compelling. If they can't succinctly SAY IT, then it's not on the tip of the tongue or the front of their minds—or they each have their own version of the mission statement, and it is not unifying to the church.

After we launched our new mission statement we put it everywhere—T-shirts, mugs, decals, posters, worship slides, banners, bumper stickers. Someone may have suggested we could even have toilet paper imprinted with it.

We spoke of it all the time. It found its way into at least 75% of our sermons. We turned it into almost a cheer. (Pastor: “What's our mission!?” People: “Reach, Teach, Mend, Send!”) Our worship leader even wrote a cool, catchy song incorporating it: “Reach, Teach, Mend, Send ... Go out and do it again!” We sang it often and for years.

The bottom line is that if you have been at our church for six weeks, you can say our mission statement, which captures our

key values. There were a few more important words in the full version of the mission statement. These words were still simple but helped clarify the four main words further. We taught the additional words because they were important, but we never expected our people to remember the “in-between” words. Here’s the full version:

Light & Life will **REACH** unchurched people, **TEACH** believers to fully love Jesus, **MEND** broken lives, and **SEND** disciples into ministry.

Each of the additional words carried important meaning for us.

“**REACH** unchurched people” pointed out that our target was not the church—or even only unbelievers. We believe every person needs a healthy, biblical family called a church. If they aren’t active in one, then we want to reach them; they are “sheep without a shepherd.”

“**TEACH** believers to fully love Jesus” names our priority of teaching believers to actually obey the first and greatest commandment: loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Our teaching has a goal of life transformation, not information transmission.

“**MEND** broken lives” speaks of both individual and community healing. We wanted to emphasize that Jesus came for the sick, wounded, and hurting. We are all broken in ways that we need Jesus to heal. Our church was on a mission to bring his healing to individuals in our community and the community itself—to break cycles of poverty, to address injustice, to push back darkness, to be peacemakers in the midst of gangs and violence.

“SEND disciples into ministry” says that our reaching, teaching, and mending have a clear direction: to become a disciple who goes out on ministry, who is passionate about the harvest, who says, “Here I am Lord, send me!” Whether they flow out with one of our church plants or stay at the mother church, our people need to be “about the Father’s business,” getting outside the church to reach the lost and unchurched. Then they start the cycle of Reach, Teach, Mend, and Send with someone new.

Paint a Compelling Vision

If a mission statement captures an inspirational cause that your people can clearly understand and easily proclaim, if they can SAY IT, then a vision statement is an “architectural rendering” so clear that your people can SEE IT.

It’s not the blueprint, because that is the “how to build it” picture. Instead it is the “architectural rendering” or “architectural visualization” that captures the emotion of the future building. For me, Bill Hybels’ simple definition captures the true essence of vision: “Vision is a picture of the future that produces passion.”

Vision is not a repeated mantra but an artistic, emotive description of what the eye of faith is seeing ahead. It is the “Wouldn’t it be amazing if God built this _____?” People use their own words and emotions to communicate the vision. It’s not that different pictures are being presented as the vision, but that people seeing the vision are experiencing it and expressing it in their own unique ways.

Our Light & Life mission statement flowed out of our values and would be slow to change. (It has remained the same for 26 years now!) But our vision would be one possible picture of what that mission would build. Our vision would, consequently, be more fluid, more open to change, and more artistic/visual.

For example: As we prayed about becoming a River church who sent people to plant churches, our first passion was for our own city, Long Beach. We were on the very North and East boundaries of Long Beach. We could see the River flowing South and West into the rest of our city. We were in City Council District 9. What would it look like to plant a Light & Life in each of the other eight City Council Districts? How amazing would that be? If we did that, 100% of the 500,000 Long Beach residents would be within a five-minute drive of a Light & Life. Half of them would be within walking distance. We could impact our entire city!

But how long would it take to plant eight more Light & Lifes? We reasoned, “Well, we don’t know anything about church planting, so there is going to be a bit of a learning curve here. Then raising up church planters will take a bit of time and training. So since the year is 1999, how about calling it Mission 2010?” It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, so we went with that vision. Eight new churches, one in each of the other city council districts by the year 2010 ... Mission 2010.

So we began to paint that picture for our congregation. I remember that we had a special night to cast this vision to our people. In preparation for the vision night, I drove to each of the eight City Council Districts and took photos of the needy in those districts. Then I put them in a slide show and

illustrated how much the Gospel and healthy churches were needed in each district. I interspersed these with the joyful, worshiping, praying, hugging, laughing, serving photos of our Light & Life people. I asked, “Can you picture a great Light & Life church in each of those districts? Church, with the help of God, we can do this by 2010! Are you with us?” They were! They could see it. They could describe it to their family, their friends, their small groups, their neighbors.

Our church’s culture was shifting through values, mission, and vision.

Praying a New Culture into Reality

From those values rooted in Scripture we could begin to build a vision, but there was a prior step that would be a constant culture-shaping priority: prayer. Without a doubt, our most impactful cultural move was becoming radical about prayer. This is why the previous chapter is all about prayer. God responds to urgent prayers of faith.

God started moving to change our culture based upon our pleas for him to do so. I can’t overstate the essentiality of what happened in the invisible, spiritual realm. It is unquantifiable and immeasurable. John Wesley, stressing the vitality of prayer, stated that “God does nothing except in answer to prayer.”²²

Prayer binds the enemy, who wages war to keep us from making the maximum Kingdom impact. If he can’t stop us, the devil will let us settle comfortably into second-best. This is when good becomes the enemy of great. We were a blessed church but in danger of being held back from God’s best blessings and a greater Kingdom impact through

multiplication. How directly do you address the works of darkness with the power of prayer?

Extraordinary prayer for the River to start was one way of demonstrating to our people that we were serious about this new direction. The 40-day fast, mentioned earlier, broke spiritual strongholds of lethargy, consumerism, comfort-seeking, selfishness, pride, and unbelief. Prayer revealed our collective sins of self-reliance, superiority, self-reliance, comparison, and judgmentalism—and we repented of them.

Prayer awakened our church's imagination to the greater things God could do. We asked God to open our eyes to our true potential in him, and we began to see what could happen in 10 years if we started planting churches.

Prayer unifies us when it is mission-focused. Prayer is powerful when it is spiritual engagement in a certain direction flowing from Scripture-derived values. We prayed out our values and asked God to give us HIS vision and HIS provision.

Our prayers were “Jericho prayers,” praying like the walls would fall down and the Kingdom of God would break through. They were “Kingdom come” prayers that had us binding our hearts and voices together crying out to God for his visitation. Calling people to pray together for the mission opened up our hearts to a new culture in our church.

Culture Is Caught

God's highest value is loving us. The proof is that he sent his only begotten Son as a sacrifice to rescue us. Jesus is the expression of God's value, and he is the very image of God because he is God.

The incarnation is God's great culture-producing action. God didn't just send us a letter or a book to learn from; he sent us an example to imitate. Jesus said, "It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters" (Matthew 10:25). He came as teacher and Lord, so we would "be like" him. John writes, "In this world we are like Jesus" (1 John 4:17).

Jesus emanated a culture-producing impact. He had a certain vibe, an ambiance to his life and ministry, a set of values demonstrated so tangibly that they soaked into the lives of his followers. Yes, they heard his teaching but, more importantly, they watched his living. It changed them.

These truths demonstrate the inescapable reality that "people teach what they know, but they reproduce who they are."²³ Discipleship is more caught than taught. Culture is the same way. Culture is primarily learned through imitation. Our example is what gives credibility to our exhortations. The old poem is still relevant today: "I'd rather see a sermon, than hear one any day. I'd rather someone walk with me, than merely point the way."

As we sought to change our culture, I was hearing from the Spirit and other leaders, "If you want to change a culture, people have to see you personally pay the price in the direction of that change."

Our First Light & Life Church Plant

With that as a backdrop, I started asking the Lord, "Who should be our first church planter?" Shockingly, I kept hearing

a nudge from the Spirit saying, “What about you?” I smugly explained to the Lord that I was preaching three services on Sunday mornings, as if he wasn’t aware. To which I sensed the Lord reply, “What are you doing on Sunday evening?” I answered, “Well I’m going to Blockbuster (if you are under 40, that was a video store), renting two movies, and vegging.” The Spirit was persistent, “How about it then? After all, since you want to help plant a bunch of churches, it might be good if you plant one yourself.”

I relented and responded to the Lord, “Okay, I will ask Deb and my teenage daughter their thoughts about this.” I thought this was my “out” with God. Surprisingly, Deb and Lindsey said, “That’s a great idea. We should do it!” For the past seven years we had rented a small house in Long Beach but 20 minutes away from the church. The Belmont Shore neighborhood was at the beach, highly educated, and an extremely unchurched part of our city. We had already started a Bible study in our neighborhood. It was going well, yet none of them were driving up to where our church was.

So we prayed and recruited a few of our Light & Life North people (the “North” designation being a necessary suffix in the new vision of planting churches in different parts of Long Beach), including JR and Kim Rushik, Kim Jones, and Patrick Hodgkins. We started two more Bible studies in our homes and began casting a vision for a new church in Belmont Shore. We found a community recreation center that would rent to us on Sunday evenings, although they would not clean it after the Saturday night dances. Some of us walked to hundreds of homes, distributing notepads and inviting people to attend our grand opening.

After much prayer, we launched Light & Life Belmont Shores. On the morning of the launch and each Sunday for the next 10 months, you would find me loading sound equipment in the van, setting it up, and helping Deb mop sticky floors from the party in the rec center the night before. With no space there for the children's ministry, we would set up tents on the patio where the kids could experience "Camp Belmont."

Our people saw their pastors sweat. They observed the price we were willing to pay to see this new church get off the ground. Some were resentful—"Our pastor's taking away time from us." But most were excited because our values and vision were being incarnated, becoming visible. It impacted and shifted our culture. We were not going to just pray, or plan, or teach, or budget, or donate toward the River; we were going to DO the River. Our people were realizing our church was not who we used to be.

About 150 people came to the grand opening of Light & Life Belmont on Sunday evening. One-third of those came back each Sunday to form the core team. The Lord was with us, and the church began to grow, doubling in the first year. (More on this story later.)

Opening Up the Dam People

(Notice there is no *n* in the word *dam* in the heading of this section.) At Light & Life we had the greatest people who zealously wanted God's will for our church. But there were

certain influencers who had the power to dam the River if they went on a campaign to do so. I knew if we wanted a new culture to flow into the church, we would have to open up the “dam” people to what God was calling us to.

Most pastors trust too much in their ideas, their words, their eloquence, their passion to carry everyone onto their vision page. People listen with their hearts before their heads. To change your culture you must connect with their hearts. The old adage, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” is essential to prioritize in the process of a culture change.

The primary action you can take to influence the influencers is to take time to listen. Let them know you want to know their thoughts and even more importantly their feelings. Ask them their fears, their reservations, their hopes, their vision for the church. Tell them how important they are and what part they can play in moving the culture forward. Ask them honestly and directly for their support and help.

Most pastors don’t study the social dynamics of their church closely enough. Consequently, they don’t know who has the most clout in forming the opinions of others. They don’t know how information and influence spreads in their church.

Malcolm Gladwell in his classic book *The Tipping Point*²⁴ identifies three types of key influencers: 1) **Connectors** are highly social, broadly connected, and spread ideas broadly by leveraging their networks. 2) **Mavens** are highly knowledgeable, and they build trust by sharing reliable,

detailed information; 3) **Salesmen** are highly persuasive. They inspire and motivate others to take action. These three types of people are essential in creating culture because their combined efforts accelerate the spread of ideas and behaviors.

Churches have all three types of people sitting in worship services. Wise pastors seeking to create culture know how to influence each of these influencers. With Connectors, it's "Who do you know that I need to know?" With Mavens, it's "What do you need to know to help you be in the know?" With Salesmen, it's "What can I tell you that would make you excited about this direction?"

At Light & Life I knew that Beverly McLain was the mother of the church. She had held the place together through the three decades before I arrived. She was the ultimate Connector. I knew if we were going to change the culture I needed her as an ally, and that might not be easy. Bev was a spiritual woman, so I asked her if we could get together to pray for the church and have a little talk. So we prayed together a few times as I unpacked more of the River vision to her each time as part of our prayer time. By the time I was ready to publicly announce the River vision, Bev was all in and already spreading the vision to her network.

Our church board was a godly, sharp, and financially conservative group. I met with key members individually, listening to their questions about the financial game plan of this River Church thing. They were skeptical, but our past successes had put leadership change into my pocket. I spent every dime of it implementing such a cultural shift.

One pivotal board meeting when a formal vote about financing the new River vision was on the table, the discussion was a bit divided and strained. Our board president, Ed Gillert, was an opinion leader in the group, a Salesman who wasn't fully convinced about the culture shift. I suggested we spend some more time in prayer, so we stopped discussing and just prayed for another 30 minutes.

At the end of the prayer, I saw Ed take out a blue note card and start writing as the rest of us waited on him. Ed finished, stood up, and said, "Let me read what God gave to me during prayer." In big letters he had written, "When was the last time we tried something so big that if God isn't in it, it would certainly fail?" He took it to the bulletin board and pinned it there. Then he turned around and said, "Friends, this is the time to try something big for God!" The vote was unanimous. That blue note card has hung on the bulletin board for 25 years now!

To shift your culture, influence the influencers through loving, listening, painting the picture clearly, giving them a part, and praying with them.

Culture Creation and the Diffusion of Innovation

Even if you've done everything I've suggested, you won't convince everyone despite your best efforts. When seeking to change culture it is helpful to lead with a clear understanding of the "Diffusion of Innovation Curve." (I encourage pastors who are introducing a cultural shift to actually present this to the entire church so they can understand how sociological change takes place.)

The Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Curve was developed by Everett M. Rogers, a sociologist and communication theorist. He introduced the concept in his book *Diffusion of Innovations*, first published in 1962. Rogers' curve outlines how innovations (such as new technologies, ideas, or products) spread through a population over time and categorizes adopters into five groups based on their willingness and speed to adopt:

Innovators: (2.5% of the group) Risk-takers and enthusiasts who are the first to try new ideas. Open to experimentation and willing to deal with uncertainties.

Early Adopters: (13.5% of the group) Visionaries who embrace innovation early but after careful consideration. Often influential within their social networks, helping spread the adoption.

Early Majority: (34% of the group) Pragmatic users who adopt innovations after seeing evidence of success. They value reliability and practical benefits and avoid unnecessary risk.

Late Majority: (34% of the group) Skeptics who adopt only after the majority has proven the innovation's usefulness. Heavily influenced by peer pressure and necessity rather than desire.

Laggards: (16% of the group) Traditionalists or resisters who adopt only when it becomes unavoidable or the old solution is no longer viable.²⁵

This framework has been widely applied in various fields, including marketing, sociology, and technology adoption studies. Think smart phones, cryptocurrency, TikTok, Netflix,

electric vehicles, etc. It can also be applied to how cultural change happens in a people group like a church.

Consequently, it is important to run with the runners, those Innovators and Early Adopters, who create the momentum. In Ephesians 4 language, these are often those with apostolic or evangelistic gifts. They see the vision and act on it with you.

Most pastors give too much attention to the Late Majority and Laggards, some of whom will never buy in and some who will actively work against the vision. Often the Laggards have the loudest voices.

While we must love everyone, we cannot listen equally to everyone. “Strategic neglect” must be practiced in cultural change processes. A leader’s attention is a powerful resource that must be placed on the first 16% of those listed above in order to move the vision forward.

Creating Sodalic Bubbles on the River

Culture change in an organization often requires the creation of a “sodalic team” or “sodalic bubble.” The term *sodalic* is derived from the Latin word *sodalitas*, meaning “fellowship” or “brotherhood,” and it implies a group with a shared mission or purpose. People in this group address objectives that fall outside the routine (modalic) operations of the organization.

Jesus and his disciples were a sodalic bubble within the religious structures of Judaism. They were a small group of disruptors with a vision of a new kind of Jewish religion. The modalic religion controlled by the Pharisees and Sadducees needed a revolution. Jesus and his team came to celebrate

the spirit of the Old Testament while liberating it from its legalism and limitations into the new culture of the church of Jesus. Think of Jesus saying, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). This sodalic team was hand-chosen by Jesus, and at first they were a small bubble within the modality of the religious culture. But within three years they were influencing the entire culture of Israel.

At Light & Life I created a sodalic bubble in a group called Ministers of God (MOGS). We were a band of brothers, friends on mission, innovators, called together to launch the River. It was an invitation-only, high-commitment group, with expectations that might change lives. I chose seven men in whom I saw the calling of God to ministry and asked for their allegiance to the vision. To be in the group you had to be willing to answer God’s call on your life, whatever that might be.

I can remember exhorting them, “Gentlemen, it is dangerous to be in this group. God is going to call you to do some radical things for him. Are you willing?” Then I laid the map of our city in the middle of the table and said, “Here’s the vision, guys. We are going to lead the church into the vision! Are you all in?” They had no title, no paycheck, no position, no formal ministry school requirements, no elected or appointed office in the church. But they had a zeal for the mission.

These MOGS began to do some radical ministry exploits both individually and together. We didn’t publicize it, but word began to spread about this revolutionary group. They were the leaven beginning to infect the whole loaf. Remember Jesus’ words, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?

It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Luke 13:20-21).

Five of the original seven became church planters. All of them ended up leading ministries. The group members changed over time as MOGS were called out. But for the first five years of the River vision, this group influenced the culture change perhaps more than anything else.

Stories Feed The River

Have you ever gathered around the family table and shared stories about loved ones like Grandpa Fred or Aunt Mary? These stories often reflect the core values of your family. I remember one such story about my widowed mother, who in 1962 offered to babysit a young African-American girl every afternoon so her mother could work the swing shift. Despite facing ridicule from our all-white neighbors in the trailer park, Mom stood firm, choosing love over prejudice.

That story, told and retold over the years, became a cornerstone of our family’s culture, shaping it for generations. Perhaps it is one reason I was passionate about leading a multiethnic church. (Fifteen years into our ministry at Light & Life our church was recognized nationally as one of the most diverse churches in America.) Stories change us.

Tribes used to sit around their fires and tell their stories to pass on and preserve their cultural identities. Sport teams have key stories from their past that provide motivation and culture for their present. Likewise, the stories of our church help create

the culture of our church. At Light & Life we had been telling “addition stories,” and they were good, God-stories. But our stories needed to shift to multiplication. At first we had only a handful of stories we could tell.

One was our origin story. In 1954 the downtown First Free Methodist Church felt called to pioneer a new church in North Long Beach, where new homes were sprouting up like dandelions. A few bold souls answered the call and started a Bible study in North Long Beach. Two years later they bought some property but had no money for a building. Being the creative and zealous believers they were, they pulled a big yellow school bus onto the property and held the first church services of Light & Life.

By 1999 when we were launching the River, the downtown church was long gone. But here Light & Life was, one of the largest churches in our denomination. What if First Church had not chosen to plant? It would have faded into the pages of history. Instead it was living on in the daughter she planted. I would end the story by asking, “What will our legacy be as a church? What can we do to impact thousands?”

Since we had so few multiplication stories, we also had to import stories from other places that were planting churches. We told those stories and asked, “Why can’t that be our story? We have the same God they do.”

We told multiplication stories from individuals, from small groups, and from ministries. Stories like, “John brought his friend Jim, who brought Ted, and now Ted’s friends are coming to church. Four generations. John’s a hero!” “Deb started a small group then raised up Mary to lead her group.

Deb started another group then handed that one off to Bridgette, who trained Kristy, who went and started a small group with her friends. Deb and Bridgette are heroes!”

After we planted the first River church, I had my own stories to tell, and I told them even though some of our people felt I was loving our “baby” more than the “mother.” Once we had a few folks going to plant churches, we got them to tell the stories of their adventures and what God was doing through their new churches. These stories combined the power of “hero-making” and of rewarding the behaviors we wanted to see repeated. People love to be recognized and honored for their contributions. We kept telling some addition stories, but the bigger stories were the multiplication stories.

Rituals and Symbols on the River

Every culture has its rituals and symbols. Some are unintentional, but most are decisively calculated to promote and protect culture.

The Oakland Raiders professional football team is a textbook study in culture, especially related to rituals and symbols. Their famous logo—a pirate with a skull and crossbones—symbolizes rebellion, toughness, and an “outlaw” attitude. Their black and silver colors carry the theme forward. Their moniker of “Raider Nation” unifies them. The “Black Hole” is a section of the stadium where the most passionate and rowdy fans sit. Their Raider chants and their slogan of “Just win, baby!” further set them apart. Church leaders may be able to actually learn something from the Raiders. Paying

attention to our visual identities and to our symbolic rituals can help change our culture.

At Light & Life we changed our logo to communicate that we are a River Church. It states a few other values, but they all lead to the River. The logo is a circle representing the world as well as action. The multiple colors in the circle portray our commitment to multiethnic ministry. The interior of the circle is a top band of orange for light leading to two bands of green symbolizing life. The bottom band is blue for the living water of the River that flows from Jesus' light and his life. A couple of times a year we use the logo to teach our values and vision. So when our people see it, they see our calling as a church. We plaster it everywhere.

When the River first began flowing, we established an annual celebration called “Light the City” based on our Mission 2010 vision. We would invite all the daughter churches, have some great worship, invite each of their pastors to share something, pray powerful prayers over our city, have some good food, and help our churches get to know each other. It helped the River pick up speed. (We eventually stopped it, as our planting pastors who were meeting in theaters, warehouses, school cafeterias, etc., found that some of their people—upon discovering the mother church—decided to start attending in its more comfortable location.)

Another annual gathering was “Church Without Walls.” This was a festival in the park. It was an evangelistic outreach led by all the church plant pastors. After an upbeat worship time with band members from the different churches, a short gospel message was presented and a call for response was made.

Many people came to Christ at “Church Without Walls.” We also used it to give away food to those in need. A picnic with games and laughter followed the service. Celebrations built around the mission aid in solidifying the culture.

Up to four Sundays a year we would call an individual, or more usually a couple, onto the platform. We would announce the fact that he/she/they had been called into some vocational ministry role. We would then wash their feet, lay hands on them, pray over them, and send them into the harvest field. This foot washing became one of the most powerful acts of culture building. Over one hundred people have had their feet washed and been sent out by Light & Life.

Once or twice a year, one of those foot-washing Sundays would fall on Church Planting Sunday. Six to eighteen months prior, we would announce who the next church planter was going to be. The planter would then recruit and train a core team. On Church Planting Sunday the entire launch team would come forward—sometimes as few as 7, more times closer to 40, sometimes as many as 70, or once even 200. The planters and team would be celebrated. Then I would wash the planter and spouse’s feet as I prayed and spoke over them. Then the entire church prayed for them and their team. It was always a Sunday of cheers and tears for me.

Those Church Planting Sundays spoke loud and clear to our church. People who were called to stay would re-up their commitment to the River. Those feeling they may be called to church planting would be encouraged to lean in and listen to the Spirit. The culture was affirmed and advanced.

Much more could be written about creating or shifting culture, but we must always come back to the bottom line, which the Lord stated quite clearly: “Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1). He is the builder of your church, the source of the River, the center of your culture, and apart from him we can do nothing. So when it comes to culture building we continually cry out, “Build your house, oh Lord!”

Dandelions and Culture

A few years ago I sat in a small room with several of the most influential leaders in American evangelicalism. Network leaders, parachurch leaders, megachurch pastors, denominational leaders, university presidents, and federal lawyers had gathered to discuss the challenging new cultural climate the Gospel is operating in. Legislative, judicial, and spiritual approaches to preserving our freedoms were discussed.

When it was my turn to speak, I talked about dandelions. As I was growing up in Kansas, our large front yard had a challenge—the dandelions were taking over the lawn. My mom put me in charge of stopping the invasion. My first approach was to simply mow the yard, cutting off the bright yellow heads or the puffy white balls of the dandelions. When I was finished, I announced to my mother that I had conquered. She smiled.

Three weeks later, our lawn had more dandelions than ever. My mowing had held back the dandelion invasion for a brief season but had failed to change the culture of my yard. My mother explained that transforming our lawn would take some

digging. I would have to go below the surface on a plant-by-plant basis if I wanted a new lawn to take shape.

I knew such an individual task was beyond my ability. Consequently, in true Tom Sawyer fashion, I recruited friends to help in the mission. My “disciples” recruited others (who all wanted to play football on the lawn after the work was done), and eventually there was a carpet of rich green grass where the weeds had once been.

I learned that lawns and cultures change not through addressing the surface problems but through changing individual hearts. Too often our gospel efforts have been focused on the quickest ways to convert the masses, only to discover a few years later that we have only “mowed the surface.” Individual discipleship was Jesus’ method to bring deep change to lives and nations. It is also the primary way to change the culture of a church.

Much of our church growth methodology has held back the dandelions, but it has failed to reach below the surface to make disciples who are disciple-makers. Addition-focused models tend toward addressing the most people possible in the swiftest manner possible. Multiplication shifts the focus from the institution to the individual, from the crowd to the convert, from the consumer to the contributor.

The multiplication of Gospel-centered churches making individual disciples who make disciples is not one menu option on a buffet line of church models; it is the essential means of reaching the world.

8

River Rationale: Seven “Whys” for River Ministry

What’s the most well-known verse in the Bible? I asked ChatGPT that question—not because I didn’t know the answer, but I just wanted to see if even artificial intelligence could get it right. Bingo! John 3:16 it is. It is the WHY verse of the Bible. It is the WHY verse of creation. It is the WHY verse of salvation. It is the WHY verse for our mission.

The Living Bible came out in 1971. I was an eighth grader who was enthralled with the Jesus People Movement. This translation brought John 3:16 alive for me: “For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that anyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God’s sending and sacrificing of his only Son was motivated by one thing: his “so-much” love for a person like me. I remember telling the Lord, “I will give my life to help others know that you love them so much!”

Great sacrifice demands deep motivation. Great missions demand deep reasons. I am known for “corny” sayings (although in my mind, they are “catchy”). Here’s an example for this chapter: “If you want to FLY, deepen your WHY!”

This is certainly true when it comes to the sacrificial and scary call to move from a Lake to a River. The River must spring from deep-seated love for the lost. It must also be fed by well-reasoned underwater fountains (motivations). Allow me to share seven motivations that helped us as we launched and fed into the River.

Motivation 1: The Theology of Creation (to align with our created nature and fulfill God’s first command)

God built nature around multiplication. Genesis 1:11, 12 emphasizes the creation of plants and trees that were “seed bearing.” The seed is underlined more than the fruit. Why? Multiplication. In Genesis 1:20-22, God creates sea, land, and air creatures. After blessing them all, he commands them to “Be fruitful and multiply.”

Then Genesis 1:26-28 recounts the creation of humankind, made in the image of God. They were given a limited measure of God’s creative power. Humans were given their first blessing and first command: “Be fruitful and multiply.”

The command was not simply to reproduce but to multiply. This means their ability to create human life would be passed on to their offspring. If what Adam and Eve reproduced was sterile, human life would have ceased to exist after their children died.

Reproduction is different from multiplication. Reproduction is simply having a child. Multiplication is when that which is reproduced has both the ability and desire to reproduce and does so. Multiplication is the only means to “fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

This creation mandate to Adam and Eve is repeated to Noah following the great flood that destroyed all humans not in the ark (Genesis 9:1). Multiplication was still God’s Plan A after the flood. It is woven into the very fabric of all of nature and humanity itself.

If we do not use addition (reproduction) to serve multiplication (multiplying generations), we miss the design of God for our spiritual lives. We are motivated to fulfill our design instead of denying it with our self-centeredness.

Motivation 2: The Model and Mandate of Jesus **(to follow the example of Jesus in carrying out his mission to rescue lost people)**

Jesus didn’t just have a motive and mission; he had a method. It was a method that started and spread (and continues to spread) a worldwide movement.

When you study Jesus’ ministry method, you don’t see him seeking to draw a crowd. In fact he spent little time doing crowd-based ministry. He invested his time differently. It was counterintuitive: “Invest in a few to reach the many.” About 75% of Jesus’ time was spent with the 12 disciples and the chosen three—Peter, James, and John. Jesus mostly modeled a 1-on-3 or 1-on-12 version of disciple-making.

At Jesus' first call to his disciples, he was very clear about what he was up to with them: "Follow me ... and I will send you out to fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). As they followed him, he would transform them so they would become multipliers like him. By the end of his time with them, Jesus made it even clearer with his most important mission mandate: "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). He was telling them to "Go and do with other individuals what I have done with you. I modeled it, now repeat it—and have your disciples repeat it."

When you instill disciple-making as the number-one priority of the mission, you unleash the power of multiplication. As Dawson Trotman, founder of Navigators, is credited with saying, "You haven't made a disciple until your disciple makes a disciple."

If Jesus' three closest disciples had each made three disciples, and each of those disciples had done the same, continuing this pattern of disciple-making, the results would have been extraordinary. After just 20 generations, there would be approximately 1.7 billion disciples on earth. Considering that the estimated global population at the time of Jesus was about 300 million, this means the entire world could have been discipled in that timeframe. If each generation of discipleship took only three years (as in Jesus' case), this exponential growth could theoretically reach the whole world within just 60 years. The potential of multiplication is truly astonishing.

It is important to note, as Luke does in his Gospel, that Jesus did not teach only the 12 apostles; he taught many others as well. Luke 10:1 records Jesus sending out 36 pairs of disciples, 72 individuals who were in the discipleship process.

These 72 demonstrated again Jesus' emphasis on multiplication. Jesus was not seeking to gather people to where he was to increase the size of his congregation at Capernaum. He was "going," and he was sending his followers to where the people were in order to multiply the points where the Gospel could penetrate the culture.

What is fascinating is the prayer Jesus asked these 72 disciples to pray as they went. He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Luke 10:2). It seems Jesus was directing, "As you are going as one multiplied from me, be praying that God would raise up others as a multiplication of you. As you are being sent, pray for others who you can send ... workers who will extend the work of the harvest in these ripe fields." Multiplication was Jesus' method, and it must be ours as well.

Motivation 3: The Method in Acts (to follow the model of the first church to become a movement)

"Jesus started the church the way He wanted it, and now He wants it the way He started it" (a quote often attributed to legendary preacher Vance Havner).²⁶ I am passionate about this quote, and here's why. When you look at the church in Acts, you discover the priorities of disciple-making, simplicity, missional living, and multiplication. The church was born to be a movement, but we have tamed it into an institution.

Once political hierarchy, financial dependency, and ecclesial complexity were added to the church, she was so weighed down that she could no longer fly. She was still unstoppable,

but to whatever degree she was afflicted by these three maladies, she was limited in her advance. The book of Acts shows us a messy but movemental church, one nearly free of these encumbrances.

As you study Acts in the context of the epistles, a riveting picture emerges. From the last words of Jesus on earth: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), we see movemental language that harkens back to God’s first words to humans in Genesis 1:28 (ESV): “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

In Jerusalem, a new temple (the church) was birthed at Pentecost (Acts 2). However, it was not birthed to be a Lake with people making pilgrimages to see its glory. It was created to be a River that flowed to bring living water to “the ends of the earth” through disciples who made disciples, leaders who raised up leaders, and churches who planted churches.

As we at Light & Life studied the book of Acts we had a growing desire to look more like the church of Acts than the church of America.

In Acts:

- Ordinary people were filled with the Spirit and used mightily. (Acts 6-8)
- Daily personal holiness was taken seriously. (Acts 5:11, 9:31)
- Addition served multiplication. (Acts 9:31) (*Plēthynō* should be translated “multiplied” as ESV does.)
- Churches took their best leaders and sent them. (Acts 13:1-3)

- They risked their lives for the sake of spreading the Gospel. (Acts 15:26)
- They kept it simple and refused to complicate the church. (Acts 15:28-29)
- Money did not shape or slow the ministry. (Acts 18:3)
- Training was focused on sending. (Acts 19:9-10)

The River Church was motivated by this passion to be more like the church of Acts in the midst of a modern culture.

Motivation 4: The Priesthood of Believers (to empower and equip believers into the fullness of their calling)

I am always riveted by the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2. But a picture I missed for most of my ministry was the Acts 2:3 phenomena. Now it is the priority lens through which I view every disciple.

To refresh your memory, in Acts 2:2 they heard a distinct and mighty sound, like a continuous roar. Perhaps like the Lion of the Tribe of Judah unleashing his power. Then in 2:3 a bonfire comes down in the rafters and separates into individual tongues of fire. These flames then come upon the heads of all 120 people in the upper room—not just upon the apostles but upon both genders, all ages, all educational levels, all levels of righteousness, all length of time as disciples, all occupations. Each one got a fire on their head.

Then these believers began to do what they could never do in their own power. They began to speak in languages they had never learned. They testified to the greatness of God

and undoubtedly of the glory of Jesus. The languages being spoken were the native or heart languages of the different nations gathered there in Jerusalem.

This was revolutionary! Peter recognized what this was. “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy’” (Acts 2:16-17). This was a profound shift from the Old Testament. No longer were only a few individuals recipients of the Spirit. Now the emphasis was on ALL disciples being filled with the Spirit.

This event and truth set the stage for Peter to later write so powerfully: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). These 120 at Pentecost were the firstfruits of a “royal priesthood” who would “declare the praises” of Jesus. Jesus is our only High Priest, and he calls all of us who have his Spirit to be part of his priesthood.

This priestly calling must also be tied to Paul’s great declaration as to our identity: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). Every disciple has a calling from God, a priesthood to fulfill, good works to which they are assigned—and they have the fire on their head, empowering them to do it. So the question for leaders becomes “Do we see their flame, and are we giving these people avenues to pursue the fullness of their calling?” Addition focus doesn’t do that. It more often uses people’s gifts to grow the Lake.

I made that mistake. My head usher for many years was a

man named Terry Beasley. Terry was a really good usher. But one Church Planting Sunday, Terry stood up with one of our church planters and declared his intention to go with Brian Warth, the church planter we were launching. Brian saw the fire on Terry's head (that I hadn't). Brian quickly empowered him into the fullness of his calling and made him an associate pastor. Now Terry leads an international men's ministry. Multiplication opens doors for disciples to fulfill the fullness of their calling. We began looking more intentionally for the flame on the heads of ordinary disciples.

When I speak on the River, I often stump my audience by asking: What do a truck driver, a milk salesman, a convicted killer, a corporate business woman, a Korean rugby player, a Mexican cult member, a California beach girl, an insurance salesman, a Cambodian who escaped from the killing fields, a gang member with only an 8th-grade degree, a rental car salesman, a COO of a corporation, a Kansas farm boy, a janitor, a Boeing employee, and a construction worker all have in common? My answer: They have all become planters/pastors through Light & Life. These "priests" went on to lead churches of 50, 200, 500, even 1,000+. It's amazing what disciples can do when they have "fire on their head."

Motivation 5: The Passion for Evangelism (to see as many people as possible won for Christ through the impact of Light & Life)

It was the late Tim Keller who famously declared, "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches."²⁷

Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird illustrate this in their book *Viral Churches*. They've found that established Southern Baptist churches baptize 3.4 people per 100 resident members, while church plants average 11.7 per 100.²⁸

Even in—or perhaps *especially* in—a place like Manhattan, church planting is the means to reach more people with the Gospel: 40% of the Christian churches in Manhattan, New York, have been planted since the year 2000.²⁹ The Values Research Institute found that the evangelical population there has grown from less than 1% to now more than 3% since 1990!³⁰

At Light & Life we had a passion to see lost people come to know the life and love of Jesus. We were reaching many, but we wanted to reach the most! We began to realize that “Bigger isn’t better. More is better!” To reach more, the church needed to “go” more ... to go to new neighborhoods with new expressions of church. This called us away from our “bigger Lake” thinking to the flowing River mindset of multiplication.

When it’s about our “castle,” we want to reach people so they come to Christ and to our church. When it’s about God’s “Kingdom,” we want to reach people so they come to Christ even if they never come to our church.

Ezekiel’s vision in Ezekiel 47 was not one of people streaming into the temple to worship. Instead it was the temple being the source of a River that went to where the people were. The new temple would not be a place; it would be a certain kind of people—called out people, the church. A church that went to the people and shared the Gospel in their language, as pictured in Acts 2.

This is what happened on the day of Pentecost. The River flowed into a gathering of people in the upper room, and those Spirit-filled disciples went to the people with the good news. Soon there were gatherings (micro churches) in homes all over Jerusalem. Churches were being planted. The result? “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Let me end this point by asking you a question to illustrate the potential difference between addition and multiplication: If I gave you the choice of receiving a million dollars a day for 40 days or a magic penny that doubled every day for 40 days, which would you take? If you took the million and I took the penny, on day 17 you would have \$17 million, and I would have \$655—and I would look pretty dumb. But keep going, and on day 40 you would have \$40 million and I would only have \$5.5 billion ... and the next day?

Jesus used the “long game” strategy because he knew the power of multiplication to reach so many more people with the good news.

Motivation 6: The Failure of the Prevailing Model (to pursue a more effective means of spreading the Gospel and the Church)

Over the last 50 years, we have seen the rise of the megachurch phenomena. Fueled by the Church growth movement and an emphasis of “bigger is better,” the United States went from having 50 megachurches in 1970 to 310 by 1990 and to 1,250 by 2007.³¹ Today there are approximately 1,800 megachurches.³² I rejoice in this.

God has used these megachurches in phenomenal ways. The negative statistics would be worse without them. Yet, during this season of emphasis on “church growth” and “megachurch development,” the number of practicing Christians and church attendees has dropped dramatically. Consider:

In 1993, 45% of Americans reported attending religious services weekly. By 2023, this figure had decreased to 29%, indicating a 16-percentage point drop over 30 years.³³

In 1999, 70% of Americans were members of a church, synagogue, or mosque. This percentage fell to 47% by 2020, marking the first time it dropped below the majority level.³⁴

Among Millennials, only 22% attend religious services weekly, compared to 38% of Baby Boomers, highlighting a generational shift away from regular attendance.³⁵

The proportion of Americans identifying as religiously unaffiliated (“nones”) increased from 8% in 1990 to 26% in 2020, reflecting a growing segment of the population disengaged from organized religion.³⁶

The prevailing model of church is failing, quickly. There are a multiplicity of reasons for the decline of the church in America. Regardless of the reasons, however, we must face the fact that we cannot keep doing what we’ve been doing and expect different results. We can’t tweak our existing models and anticipate a full reversal of outcomes.

At Light & Life we were asking, “What can we do differently that will make the biggest difference for the church of Jesus

over the next 30 years?” It was obvious it wasn’t the Lake model. It had to look more like the River of multiplication that we see in Acts.

One troubling fact that motivated us to move toward the River was the stewardship of financial resources compared to the number of disciples being made. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I knew a pastor at the time whose church had spent \$4 million to address a bird problem on the property where they planned to build a massive new sanctuary.

We wondered at the time what our “cost per baptism” was. It was about \$15,000 per convert. We thought that was high. We didn’t realize how low it was compared to the American averages.

According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, in 2008 it cost about \$330,000 to convert and baptize a person in America (I’m sure it’s much more today).³⁷ The prevailing model is tragically expensive. This is undoubtedly one of the most glaring differences between the church in Acts and the current model of the American church.

Nice buildings, celebrity-size salaries, state-of-the-art sound and stages, parking spaces, excellent programming for all ages, professional quality bands—these are all wonderful and expensive. But we must honestly ask, “What is the Kingdom ROI?”

Perhaps an even bigger cost is two-fold. First, “What you win them *with*, you win them to.” In other words, believers who come to faith in these environments easily develop the expectation and the behaviors that these are the Kingdom

cultures necessary to produce conversions and discipleship. It is easy to inadvertently form “consumer Christians” in highly professional, programmed and produced settings.

Second, smaller churches often feel inadequate, inferior, and incapable of doing significant ministry. Their goal is often to grow more like the megachurches they see online. With 65 attendees being the median size of churches in America,³⁸ this leaves over half the churches thinking their Kingdom impact is limited.

The typical assessment for potential church planters is looking for those candidates who can gather and lead a church of over 200 people. Yet less than 10% of churches in America have over 200 members.³⁹ How many more church planters would be available if we were looking instead for those who can gather and lead 30–60 people?

Churches of 30 who embrace multiplication as their passionate priority can have incredible Kingdom impact, even if they never break the 60 barrier. At Light & Life we deliberately chose to empower church planters who we suspected would pastor churches of 50 and those who would pastor 500. We believed that regardless of size, the River DNA could have an outsized impact over 20 years of multiplying disciples, leaders, and churches.

Motivation 7: The Need of Our Context (to pioneer new non-facility-dependent churches within the constraints of our context)

Long Beach has nearly half a million people in 50 square miles of land. Yet within our city there is not one megachurch

and only five evangelical churches over 500 in attendance. On a Sunday morning less than 3% of Long Beach residents are in an evangelical church.

Additionally, there has not been one evangelical church building built in the last 35 years, and only three Conditional Use Permits were issued to allow a building to be rezoned as a church. To buy an existing church building with adequate parking to support a congregation of 200 would cost approximately 15 million dollars currently.

All these facts conspire to make it incredibly difficult to advance the prevailing model of the American church in our context. We had a choice to go very slow, raising enough money to plant a facility-based church or to be creative and not financially and facility dependent.

Consequently, our church plants have started in movie theaters, community centers, restaurants, hotel conference rooms, school cafeterias, large living rooms, backyards, and other churches' sanctuaries at odd hours. We have only helped purchase three existing church buildings for our plants in the past 25 years.

The reality is that more and more of the American population lives in contexts similar to ours. We need multitudes of smaller, non-facility-dependent churches in order to reach the lost in these environments.

How Big Is Your Why?

These seven motivations for multiplication became a resolve that was not driven by results but by convictions. Our “why”

would not change even though much of our “how” was subject to change, based on our results.

Author Simon Sinek uses three concentric circles to unpack the relationship between the *why*, *how*, and *what* of organizations. WHY is the inner circle, the core purpose. HOW is the middle circle, the process or methods. WHAT is the outer circle, the results or outcomes. He calls the WHY the “Golden Circle” and says that most leaders work from the outside inside in, but great leaders work from the inside out.⁴⁰

Most churches chase the what. They get a new vision of what they want to see happen, and they adjust their how based on the new what they are currently pursuing. Pastors read a new book, listen to a new podcast, or go to another conference, and they develop the next big “what” for their church. The basics of “disciples who make disciples, leaders who make leaders, and churches that plant churches” aren’t quick enough or shiny enough for them.

This is why you must start with WHY, then follow Jesus’ HOW. Then you will get the WHAT you are really looking for.

9

River Leaders: Traits of Multiplication Leaders

In 2018 when *Hero Maker—5 Essential Practices for Leaders to Multiply Leaders* was released, I took a picture with each of the three young pastors who served on our executive team. We used a stepladder that was hidden behind me. Each of the pastors were standing on the ladder in a way that made it look like they were standing on my shoulders. In their hands they had the new book, *Hero Maker*. By January 2022, Deb and I were turning over the leadership of Light & Life to Joel Silva and Sean Fenner as new co-lead pastors. In 2024 Light & Life had the most baptisms ever in one year. Now in 2025 the church is continuing to thrive.

I love those photos because they capture the heartbeat of River leadership and my passionate aspirations for ministry leadership. Who can I lift up by letting them stand on my shoulders?

In this chapter, after defining briefly the 5 Levels of Leadership, I want to share a few key spiritual traits that are essential to becoming a River Leader. The bad news is that each of these traits is an extreme challenge to our flesh. The good news is anyone can overcome these challenges through the power of the Spirit and become a River Leader.

In an article entitled “Five Levels of Hero-Making,” Todd Wilson and Dave Ferguson identify five levels of multiplication leaders. These levels roughly correspond to the five levels of churches identified in chapter 2 and can help pastors and church leaders identify where they might be in their multiplication leadership levels. My interpretive paraphrase below has brief descriptions of the five levels of multiplication leaders. Evaluate where you think you may be.

Level 1: Leaders Serving People

These leaders are restricted in their leadership by the fact that they love to serve people so much that they focus on it to the exclusion of recruiting and empowering other leaders. They often like being needed by others. They want to be the hero, so they fail to see the potential in others. Frequently they say, “There’s just no one else who can do it.” or “It’s just easier to do it myself than to train someone.” or “No one can do it nearly as well as me.” Consequently, they implement no intentional leadership development.

These leaders tend to maintain shrinking ponds.

Level 2: Leaders Recruiting Others

These leaders see the value in expanding ministry through others and are committed to recruiting others to share in the mission and the work. Level 2 leaders thrive on stability and drive for it. They are heroes who like to recruit other volunteers to share the work.

Level 2 leaders do invest in people, but they do so primarily and strategically for the purpose of operating the current system, perhaps improving the system, but primarily keeping it stable. The development is not typically for the growth and expansion of the organization. These leaders are optimizing their leadership to fit the needs of the system. What these leaders need most is to discern the need for change and to see others as potential heroes.

These leaders tend to build stable ponds.

Level 3: Leaders Developing Leaders

These leaders have moved beyond recruiting helpers to raising up leaders. They tend to thrive in organizations with a culture of growth and expansion. A primary measure of success is numerical growth. Making heroes of others is really about growing their organization. They tend to pursue legacies that will be measured by what they build, grow, and accumulate rather than by who they develop, release, and send.

“Winning” tends to be measured more by mobilizing people into the organization’s needs than it is by helping each person discover and engage their unique sweet spot of personal calling. What these leaders need most is to see those they recruit and

develop as uniquely made children of God who probably have a purpose beyond the local organization and its needs.

These leaders tend to build large lakes.

Level 4: Leaders Releasing Leaders

These leaders measure their success by the development and release of leaders. They see beyond addition growth. They embrace reproduction strategies over addition strategies. Their scorecard counts people who've been sent for impact beyond the local organization. Level 4 leaders live in the real-life tension between addition (Level 3) and multiplication (Level 5) that pulls them simultaneously in both directions.

What these leaders need most is intentionality and perseverance. They need to move from hero-making being programmatic to it being built organically into their DNA and natural rhythms of life and leadership.

These leaders tend to build small streams.

Level 5: Leaders Unleashing Leaders

These leaders see their primary purpose and legacy as the people they invest in.

They spend significant time and energy intentionally looking for and investing in other leaders. They see people for who they can be when empowered by the Spirit. They raise up leaders who raise up leaders.

They care much more deeply about the cause of Christ than they do the size of their church. Their scorecard is

overall Kingdom impact and growth. They are committed to identifying, developing, and releasing leaders—regardless of where they may go. They care more deeply about helping others find their unique roles than about filling the critical roles inside their organization. These leaders foster a multiplication culture that does not revolve around them or their leadership.

These leaders tend to build ever-expanding rivers!

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins talks about characteristics of Level 5 leaders in the corporate world. He states that Level 5 leaders are “seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results. They are relatively unknown outside their industry. They set up their successors for even greater success in the next generation.”⁴¹

My dear friend Ralph Moore is my picture of a Level 5 leader. Ralph planted the first Hope Chapel, which went on to plant 70 churches directly. More importantly, their River culture is so strong that now over 3,000 churches have flowed out of that network. It is one of the most prolific American-based planting stories of the last 50 years.

Yet, inevitably, when I ask large groups of pastors all over America, “How many of you have heard of Ralph Moore?,” only four or five hands go up. The best part of this reality is Ralph doesn’t care! Why? Because it’s about the mission, not about Ralph.

What level of leader do you think you are?

What level do you truly aspire to?

What level do you believe you can be?

The Story of Harold

Pastor Harold Taves was a Level 5 multiplication leader. He still ministers with greater impact than ever ... even though he departed for heaven a few decades ago. If you Google “Reverend Harold Taves,” you come up empty-handed. But Pastor Taves has had a profound Kingdom impact.

Pastor Taves served small Holiness churches like the one I attended growing up in rural Kansas. Having endured the lasting effects of childhood polio, he was unable to lift one of his arms. He never pastored a congregation larger than 80 people, never authored a book, never appeared in a magazine. His sermons lacked polished homiletics, yet Harold was widely recognized for his godliness, prayerfulness, humility, and profound faith.

Harold’s deepest passion was to raise up believers who would leverage their gifts and calling to influence others. Consequently, he poured his life into individuals like me. I was his “ministry apprentice” during my senior year of high school.

One primary result of Harold’s ministry was that over a dozen members of that obscure church went into full-time ministry, and thousands of lives have been changed because of it. Dozens of other disciples went on to impact their workplace, their relatives, and their social circles, reaching hundreds more with the life and love of Christ.

Recently when I was at one of our daughter churches and praying for a ministry couple being sent out to plant a “granddaughter” church, I thought of Pastor Taves. His ministry was still creating ripple effects 55 years later. His

“castle” may have been small, but his “Kingdom impact” was significant—and still growing.

Any leader can be a Harold. It’s not about talent, or church size, or degrees, or knowing the right people. It is about spiritual traits like the ones in the rest of this chapter. Most important of all, it’s about Spirit-dependency!

A River from Your Heart

In John 7 Jesus picks up on Ezekiel’s vision of the living river flowing out of the temple. Jesus is in Jerusalem on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, a feast that commemorates God’s provision for Israel during their wilderness journey and celebrates the agricultural harvest.

A significant part of the festival included a water-pouring ceremony, where priests would pour water drawn from the Pool of Siloam onto the altar. This act recalled the rock that released a river in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:4 states, “that rock was Christ”). The act also looked forward to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus stands up in the temple courts, probably at the exact moment the water was being poured out on the altar, and shouts: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37-39 ESV).

River Leaders live these verses on a daily basis.

Rivers, Temples, and the Spirit

In John 2:21, Jesus calls himself the temple. Later Paul writes about the church as the new living temple of God: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? ... For God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17) and “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21).

Jesus individualizes the temple in John 7:37 by saying “Let anyone ... come to me.” Paul does the same thing: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

When Ezekiel describes the temple with a river flowing from it, I believe he means all these entities and more—Christ, the Church, us individually, and even the buildingless temple of Revelation 21:22. But when he describes the River, he sees only one entity: the Spirit. The Spirit flowed from Christ, is flowing from the Church, and can flow from each of us. The Spirit is the “rivers of living water” that Jesus promised to every believer in John 7.

I emphasize this connection between the temple and the Spirit because it is underemphasized in the church. The church in America has erred in its dependency upon the power of the Spirit. On one side of the road is the ditch of acknowledgement of the **person** of the Spirit but ignorance of the **power** of the Spirit. On the other side is a focus on the

power of the Spirit without a commensurate passion for the **truth from** the Spirit.

Almost all global multiplication movements have a heavy emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit. From 1900 to 2020, Spirit-empowered Christianity grew at nearly four times the growth rate of both Christianity and the world's population. Currently, Spirit-empowered believers comprise one quarter of the entire Christian community, and that number is expected to grow to one third by the year 2050.⁴²

When Light & Life was called to start flowing like a River, to go from a Level 3 addition church to a Level 5 multiplication church, we knew we needed more of the Spirit's power. One of the first actions we took was to preach a sermon series through the book of Acts with an emphasis on the Holy Spirit. We tripled our focus on prayer. The "temple" needed cleansing, so we called for a holy consecration through 40 days of fasting and repentance. We emphasized the spiritual disciplines to increase our drinking from the Spirit. The result? The Spirit began to move in unprecedented ways.

Let me say it again. Foundational to all River Leaders is the John 7:37-39 lifestyle, including:

1. A zealous thirst for the Spirit
2. A continual coming to the Spirit
3. A daily drinking deeply of the Spirit
4. A passionate desire for and expectation of "flowing" the Spirit to thirsty people around them.

River Leaders have an extraordinary dependency upon the power, guidance, and work of the Holy Spirit!

7 Traits of River Leaders

In addition to this John 7:37-39 lifestyle, there are the seven key traits (or shifts) I needed to make—and I believe church leaders need to make—in order to move from addition to multiplication.

1. Identity (River Leaders shift their identity from *productivity to personhood*.)

Taking the risk to multiply demands a deep personal security in Christ. When we start giving away people and money in ways that won't directly benefit us and in ways that aren't popular, it puts our ego on the line. When people choose to go with a leader other than us, it can feel like personal rejection.

The security this requires must be grounded in a certainty of identity. **River Leaders are deeply secure in their identity as the beloved of God—period.** We know who we are, whose we are, and how loved we are. Our personal value is not in our productivity—how many people follow us, how many attend our church, how much money we raise, what degrees we attain, or whether or not we author books. Instead, our self-image and its derivative of self-worth are drawn from who God says we are and from the fact that we belong to him and are his beloved.

Jesus was called “beloved” (Mark 1:11 ESV) before his first miracle and before the launch of his public ministry. The Father didn't love him because of his productivity but because

of his personhood. Jesus often spoke of how loved he was by the Father. Whether the crowd was shouting, “Hosanna!” or “Crucify him!,” Jesus knew his value to his Father.

At the end of his ministry, John 13:3 says that “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.”

This verse illustrates three truths Jesus knew about himself:

First, Jesus knew his true spiritual position and power. (“all things under his power”)

Second, he knew where he had come from. (“from God”)

Third, he knew where he was going. (“returning to God”)

The certainty of these facts secured Jesus’ identity. They must secure ours as well.

The next verses (John 13:4-5) tell us “so” or “therefore” (because of the security of his identity) he got up, took the place of the lowest servant, and washed 24 dirty feet. Jesus could preach to a crowd of thousands or wash grubby feet, and it didn’t elevate or diminish his sense of being God’s beloved.

It’s the same spirit we see in the man Jesus called “the greatest,” John the Baptist. John’s disciples came to him all flustered because more people were going to get baptized by Jesus than by John (interpreted for us—to the church next door than to our church). What does John do? John announces, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

As our River at Light & Life flowed, there were times when things looked bad—offerings were down, salary cuts happened,

attendance was down, we had to move from three Sunday services to two. In those times I would begin to feel like a loser. But it seemed the Lord would ask me, “Larry, is Jesus increasing? Is the Kingdom growing?”

“Yes, Lord,” I would grudgingly respond.

“Then it’s okay if Larry is decreasing, right?”

“Yes, Lord.” I would respond, even though I wanted to say, “I guess so ... well, not really.”

The Lord would always whisper to my spirit, “Do you know how much I love you just because you’re you?” Soon I would feel like shutting down my pity party, picking up a towel, and washing some crusty feet.

“He Gets Us” is an advertising campaign that has reached millions of people. It emphasizes in wonderfully creative ways that Jesus understands us and has compassion upon us. But recently in a prayer time, I sensed the Lord say, “I get YOU! Larry, you are the treasure I get for going to the cross.” This is the Hebrews 12:2 reality. We are “the joy set before him [for which] he endured the cross.” He gets US! That blows my mind, but it fills my heart when I receive his love that way.

My identity and security are increasingly rooted in God’s love for me personally, regardless of my visible productivity. The more I accept and embrace this truth, the more free I am to be the one behind the spotlight shining it on others instead of trying to stand in it myself.

2. Surrender (River Leaders shift their leadership from control to chaordic.)

“Hi. My name is Larry. I am a recovering CEO.”

When I became pastor of Light & Life, the church-growth books were filled with sage advice on how to be a strong leader running an effective organization. There were some excellent contributions from the new science of leadership. It was a CEO model of business leadership that was baptized, sanctified, and brought into the church.

There were legendary pastors who were successfully promoting the “Holy CEO.” The church shifted from a “family and friends on mission” to a business with goals to achieve and targets to hit. The pastor became more CEO than servant-leader. The goal was control—quality control, staff control, worship control, financial control, program control.

The problem with any good idea carried too far is that it can begin to squeeze out Spirit-dependency. Relevant programs, well-crafted strategies, excellent sermons, great coffee, and super-guest experiences can back the Spirit into a corner of the church. Those are all good, and the Spirit can use them—if the Spirit is not limited by them and if their ultimate goal is serving the multiplication of disciples and churches.

I admit, I liked being in control. Surrender is not easy for me. When I am crossing a river, I like my feet to be firmly on the bottom and my head well above the water. But **River Leaders pursue full surrender to the Holy Spirit on a daily basis.**

The Wild Goose

Surrender is about “trusting the goose.” The common symbol for the Holy Spirit is the dove. It is a logical emblem because

of the dove that came from above and landed on Jesus at his baptism. John even describes the dove as alighting on Jesus and remaining (John 1:32).

But the Celtic Christians used the wild goose to represent the Holy Spirit. Why? Because a wild goose conveyed the ideas of wild, free, unpredictable, untamed, powerful, mysterious—an invitation to adventure! This is indeed the nature of the Holy Spirit! If we seek to control him or cage him in, we miss all of these attributes. Leaders often seem “scared of the Holy Goose,” as if surrendering to the Spirit won’t lead to God’s best. But it’s time to “Let the wild goose go!”

A wild goose also creates much more of a mess than a dove. Too many of us have stepped in goose dung and have said, “No more geese around here.” But as every movement leader knows, movements are messy. Multiplication is messy.

The Power of Chaordic

Multiplication demands the power of “chaordic.” The term was coined in the 1990s by Dee Hock, the founder and former CEO of Visa. *Chaordic* is the blending of the words *chaos* and *order*, and Hock used the term to describe the unique organizational model of Visa, which operates as a decentralized yet globally coherent network.

To illustrate “chaordic,” Dee Hock drew four overlapping circles. The far right circle, he titled “Control.” The far left circle was “Collapse.” The middle left circle was “Chaos,” and the middle right circle was “Order.” Hock argued that great organizations needed to live in the overlap between “Chaos” and “Order.” It was there that innovation, adaptability,

creativity, and true leadership were released into the mission of the organization.

If you shift too far right toward Control, you get rigidity, management, and institutional protection. If you shift too far left toward Collapse, you get so much “autonomy” that there is inadequate connectivity and insufficient unifying mission and beliefs. The sweet spot is the freedom of Chaos overlapping the minimal structure of Order.

Bringing this thinking to our River Church model, we would say that a Lake Church is a controlled environment. It can grow larger, but it’s tough to flow. A River Church is a chaordic environment. The water is running wild but within the banks. It has some chaos, but it is ordered by the banks it must run in. You can dam the river to control it, but then it’s a lake. You can take the banks away, but then it becomes a shallow lake that evaporates. It needs both chaos and order. “Chaordic” is the way I view the early church movement described in the book of Acts.

Ezekiel’s River and Surrender

Wild geese and chaordic leadership are concepts that are built on trust and surrender. We can either seek to be in control, or we can surrender control. The Spirit is calling us to trade our control for a trust in him that leads us to deep surrender.

This leads us back to the River in Ezekiel 47 and begs the question, “How deep do you want to go?”

Ezekiel sees five stages of a River. These can represent five stages of surrender:

- **Trickle-Deep:** You see the living water, but you can step over it. It has no significant impact on your life.

- **Ankle-Deep:** You step in the water. You feel it, and you can drink from it, but it's shallow. You feel very little, if any, of its power.
- **Knee-Deep:** You now must wade in the water. It impacts how you walk. You feel more of its power. You begin to experience the pull of the River.
- **Waist-Deep:** You now feel nearly the full force of the water. The current is pulling you. You could float if you choose. Your feet, however, are still on the River's floor.
- **Over-the-Head Deep:** You now have no control over the River. Your feet cannot touch the bottom. You are fully surrendered to the power of the current. The River carries you wherever it flows. It is both frightening and freeing to float in its power. It's the deep water of the Spirit. It is only reached through full surrender.

In the prophetic picture, this “deep water” is where Ezekiel sees the fruit trees lining the banks and fishermen casting their nets. It's where he discovers the power of the river to turn saltwater into fresh (47:7-12). Likewise, our depth of surrender to the River of the Spirit will determine the fruit and fish we harvest and the sanctifying power of holiness we demonstrate.

3. Equipper (River Leaders shift from *teaching* to *training*.)

IKEA is a significant blessing and a terrible curse to my life. Affordable, sturdy furniture is good. Larry trying to put it together is bad ... real bad. I would read the directions 20 times and still get it wrong three or four times. The curse of IKEA made me want to curse. Nevertheless, every year or two, there I was again with a bag of bolts and nuts and those cheap little allen wrenches they included.

A few years ago, YouTube changed everything. Now, almost any assembly task has a tutorial online, typically made by amateurs passionate about teaching others. Their goal isn't to showcase perfect assembly but to guide and empower you to build it yourself. Now when I put together IKEA furniture, instead of just reading the directions, I have a video of someone showing me what it *looks like* to follow the directions! It's a game changer.

Most pastors feel good if they do a really good job of telling people how to do it. It's a win if they have educated and entertained with a great Sunday sermon or a cogent Wednesday night Bible Study. The people applaud, pray, and promise to come back to hear more. (Just don't ask them next week or next year if they actually DID what you taught them to do.)

Level 5 multiplying leaders major not in teaching knowledge but in training skills. **River Leaders prioritize equipping others to do what they do until they are adequately doing it.** They know that American Christians are taught the knowledge of the Word far beyond their obedience to the Word. So River Leaders major in equipping people to flow, not just drink (John 7:37-39).

Pastor Harold (who I referenced earlier) trained me to pray—but not through his sermons on prayer. Every afternoon during my senior year in high school, I would go to his office. One of the first things we would do is go to the altar in the sanctuary and spend a half hour in prayer. He trained me with his example. His heart, his tears, his words, his priorities, his faith in prayer equipped me to pray.

As I made the River shift, I cut my sermon preparation time almost in half. My highest Kingdom impact time was when I was equipping, training, and demonstrating ... not when I was preaching to the crowd for 30 minutes. Most of the crowd never even noticed I was putting less time into the sermon.

River Leaders listen for the calling of the Spirit on the lives of other believers. Then they ask the Lord and the believer the same question, “How can I help equip them/you into the fullness of their/your call?” River Leaders are empowered for the purpose of empowering others (see my book, *The Empowerment Factor*).

This is a radical shift in orientation. As mentioned previously, pastors usually operate out of the “We can build it, you can help!” paradigm. This is code language for “I’ve got a great vision for our church, and you can volunteer in a way that helps build it!” But in an equipping church, that is flipped. The language is “You can build it, and we can help,” which translates, “God has gifted you and is giving you a mission and vision. We want to help/equip/train you to build what God is calling you to build.”

The first orientation is good and focuses on building the lake/church/castle. The second orientation is great, as it focuses on building the River and Kingdom. It unleashes the gifts and power of the Spirit through ordinary believers.

It is worth underlining that all five of the offices listed in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers) are commanded in verse 12 to “equip his people for works of service.” As leaders exercise the gifts they have been given, they must also be equipping saints into the ministry

God has called them. Yet, the church has been dismal at implementing verse 12, and we are suffering because of it.

4. Generational Thinker (River Leaders shift from the *generate* to the *generational* mindset.)

As a Kansas farm boy, I raised rabbits to make spending money. I could have raised mules, but I chose rabbits. Mules are big and can generate lots of work, but they are sterile. Rabbits are small and can do little work, but they have babies ... lots of babies. Six months after being born, they can give birth to eight new bunnies. In 18 months I went from 8 rabbits to 160 rabbits—four generations of hares.

Most pastors think “mule” instead of “rabbit.” They are focused on generating. It’s what they envision when they think of “successful” ministry. Generating growth in the number of attendees, generating number of baptisms, generating more godly character in their people, generating more revenue for their church, or even generating more church plants ... this is how you “win.” Generating is good ... but not great! Generational is greater. **River Leaders evaluate their ministry by how effective they are in helping the current generation create a next generation.**

Dave Ferguson at Community Christian in Chicago has thoroughly modeled this “generational thinking.” *Apprentice* is one of the most prevalent and culture-shaping words at Community Christian. When Deb and I became friends with Dave and Sue, we remarked to each other that *apprentice* must be one of their favorite words.

At every level and in every ministry of their church, the essentiality of having an apprentice is stressed. The

question “Who’s your apprentice?” is expected. Sitting in Dave’s backyard he told me, “I have selected my lead pastor apprentice, and in less than two years I will hand leadership over to him.” I had never heard the phrase “lead pastor apprentice,” but I immediately thought, “Now that’s brilliant and generational leadership at all levels!” It is not surprising that Community Christian is one of the most influential churches in the United States.

When spiritual father Paul writes to his son in the faith, Pastor Timothy, Paul’s focus is not on *generating* but on *generations*. As is often observed, there are four generations (Paul, Timothy, reliable people, others) in Paul’s command to Timothy: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Paul’s emphasis is not on Timothy’s teaching gift but on Timothy’s transmission job. Paul is saying, “Think generations, Timothy!” Who you can teach to teach is even more important than how much you are *able* to teach. Don’t just generate good content. Raise up generations of teachers.

River Leaders think four generations ahead. Who can I equip today who will equip someone else so deeply that they will equip someone else? I am equipping to send. This is Level 5 leadership—equipping folks with truth but also equipping them to go repeat the process with others. It focuses on producing teachers more than just teaching better or teaching more.

Missing this is why seminaries inadvertently often slow the spread of the Kingdom. I have been a trustee for many years of a large Christian university, and I believe greatly in the

value of education. But when our education fails to make disciples who make disciples, teachers who equip others to teach, and leaders who raise up leaders, then we have missed the “Jesus way” of advancing the Kingdom.

In John 15:16, Jesus tells us one mission we are saved for: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.” Focus on the phrase *fruit that will last*. Jesus wants us to produce a certain type of fruit: “fruit that will last.”

What’s the only way to make an apple last for 100 years? You focus on the seed. You plant the seed because it will reproduce and multiply. You think generationally. The apple lives on in the apples that grow from the tree that has been planted. This goes on generation after generation. Level 5 leaders train toward seeds, as much or even more than fruit.

What’s Your Legacy That Will Last?

On January 9, 2022, after 31 years of pastoring, Deb and I handed off the leadership of the church to two of our sons in the faith. They chose to make us “global pastors.” We went away for seven weeks. I returned to a 9 a.m. service by myself and walked in a little early. I was greeted by a greeter I didn’t know and who didn’t know me. She greeted me warmly and asked, “Is this your first time here?” I smiled and replied, “No, I’ve been a few times before.” She responded, “Well, I hope you like our service today.”

I got inside the door and was met by an usher who I had never seen and who didn’t know me. He said, “Can I show you a seat?” The sanctuary was basically empty, but he wanted to

do his job. I had sat for 31 years in the same spot on the front row. I knew I wouldn't be in that seat any longer, but I thought I'd probably be sitting at the far end of that front row. But I answered the usher, "Sure, you can show me a seat." He took me to one of the worst seats in the sanctuary in the middle of the row. He looked at me with a smile and asked, "How's this?" I smiled and said, "Thank you, it will be just fine." Then he confidently said, "I think you are really going to like service. We have really good preaching ... now."

I sat there moping and complaining to God. "I gave my life to this place for 31 years. I'm gone for 7 weeks, and they don't even know my name!" I felt the Lord respond so clearly, "Was it ever about **YOUR** name?" I was convicted ... but honestly still a little mad.

After the place filled up and worship started, I sensed the Lord whisper, "Look at the front row where you used to sit." So I did, then I saw it. There sat my two sons in the faith (who I had disciplined) leading the church, and beside them were two staff members (who they had disciplined). Next to them were two younger believers (who those staff members were discipling). The Lord said, "Larry, that's your *real* legacy—generational disciple-making and leadership empowerment. People who may forget your name but who will live for mine!" Fruit that will last.

River Leaders prioritize multiplying generations.

5. Generous (River Leaders shift from *protective management* to *radical generosity*.)

We may have missed the power punch of Jesus' instructions to his disciples when he sent them out: "Take nothing for the

journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt” (Luke 9:3). In other words: “You are not going to be your own source. God will provide.” At the end of his ministry, on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus asks the disciples, “When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?” “Nothing,” they answered (Luke 22:35). In other words, “Your supply source is reliable!”

River Leaders create an upward spiral of blessing by exercising extreme generosity based on their dependence on God as their source. Level 5 multiplication leaders have an “abundance” mindset as opposed to a “scarcity” mindset. They do not operate out of fear, seeking to preserve what they have. Instead they live with a profound open-handedness because they trust God as their source.

Scarcity thinking is living like there are only so many pieces of apple pie to go around, so you better get yours and guard yours. Abundance thinking is knowing that you are best friends with the pie baker and the owner of the apple orchard. Therefore, you can freely give your piece of the pie away. Your trust is in the unlimited source, not the limited resource. This is a posture of faith that results in radical generosity that creates an upward spiral of blessing. It is the Luke 6:38 principle of “Give, and it will be given to you.” To repeat myself, River Leaders really deeply believe that “You can’t outgive God.”

When it comes to leaders, workers, money, facilities, or any other resource your church possesses, the multiplication question is: “What does radical generosity look like?” Most pastors and boards, however, ask a defensive question: “How much can we afford to give?” This is why billions of donated

dollars designated for Kingdom mission are languishing in banks. There is a fear-based stewardship that can subtly usurp our trust in God, shifting our trust to our accumulated resources instead.

God's Crazy Math

River Leaders understand the unlimited spring is in the temple (Ezekiel 47) from the Spirit of God. This is not the business world with carefully calculated return on investment (ROI). This is Kingdom business. It is a supernatural rock that provided water for a nation in the desert (Exodus 17); it is a jar of flour that miraculously refills and an oil jug that keeps on pouring (1 Kings 17); it is 160 gallons of water that are changed into wine (John 2); it is feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish then having leftovers for a month (Matthew 14). With a source like our God, it's not crazy to be radically generous!

At Light & Life we have never tried to manage who or how many we give away to the next church plant. Instead, we tell our planters to recruit whoever they can to go with them. We encourage everyone in our congregation to listen for the Spirit's call to potentially go with the next plant. As much as 25% of our congregation has left with a plant. We are committed to radical generosity. Those times are scary for us, but every time (for 25 years) God quickly—or gradually—fills the church back up again. Every year we have ended up with more income than the year before!

In the third year of the River, our amazing youth pastors J.R. and Kim Rushik came to Deb and me and announced, “The Lord is calling us to plant a church back in Philadelphia.” I replied, “No, he's not.” I knew how important they were to

our church and to the River vision. We just could not afford to send them off. In addition, they were like a son and daughter to us. J.R. had a brilliant reply, “Will you pray about it?” How do you answer *no* to that question?

In prayer I was convicted of my mistrust of God’s provision. How could I teach radical generosity and not practice it? The Lord assured me he was indeed calling J.R. and Kim to plant. I came back to J.R. and said, “Go with our blessing.” He gathered a few people, moved to the east coast, and planted a large vibrant church. Then he started and leads the Church Development Network, a church planting group that has started over 250 churches in the past three years.

If I had tried to “protectively manage the flow” of the River, we would have missed this kind of fruitfulness. Whenever we have leaned into radical generosity, we find the upward spiral of God’s blessing. River Leaders often appear a bit crazy in the generosity department.

6. Interdependent (River Leaders shift from Me-centric leadership to We-centric leadership.)

Romans 16 is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. Paul, the hero maker, lists 26 people, including nine women. These 26 individuals are co-workers, ministry partners, and team members. God takes almost an entire chapter of Romans to tell us, “It takes a team. My Kingdom is not advanced by all-stars but by *all* who are willing to use their gifts.”

“Interdependent” is a dynamic trait filled with limitless possibilities. *Dependent* leaders spend their lives either feeling inadequate to contribute or waiting for someone else to do something so they can then contribute. *Independent* leaders

don't believe they need to depend on anyone. They believe they can do it with or without the help of others. *Interdependent* leaders realize that the primary action they need to take is to build a team and then work with them. This opens their Kingdom potential far beyond themselves. They become as powerful as the team they are serving with.

River Leaders are team builders who love bringing people together to accomplish the mission. They eschew solo performances, choosing instead to prioritize building teams. Jesus demonstrated this approach in many ways: calling the 12 to be with him, equipping and sending the 72 in pairs, traveling with his disciples and supportive women who provided financial and logistical help, and bringing his three key apostles to witness his transfiguration.

Jesus intentionally selected individuals with diverse strengths, shared his life openly with them, inspired them with a compelling vision, called them to deep commitment, fostered unity, nurtured their growth, delegated mission tasks, and entrusted them with the future of the Gospel. He made mutual love the defining mark of his team (John 13:34). Level 5 leaders emulate this “Jesus-style” approach to team development.

The book of Acts continues this emphasis on team ministry. Then Paul elevates the priority on teams through his letters. His teaching on the diversity of gifts and the necessity and value of each body part mandates a we-centered approach to the mission of Christ.

Yet, pastors have little if any training in building teams. I went all the way through my doctorate without even part of one class teaching this essential skill. The majority of church

leaders have little understanding of Ephesians 4:11 (ESV): “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (commonly known as APEST). Consequently, leaders often fail to put together teams who can effectively carry out the mission of Christ.

I believe in church planter assessments, especially if a large amount of finances will be invested in launching a new church. What I believe in even more is observing the fruit of a leader’s leadership. One of my key questions to our planters was: “Can you show me the team you have built for planting this new church?” The diversity of gifts, the unifying love, and the interdependency of the leader and team is a critical indicator of how well a new church will do.

7. Resilient (River Leaders shift from seeking immediate results to envisioning long-term impact.)

Few rivers flow straight. Almost all rivers curve and bend because they encounter obstacles in the geography they are flowing through. But rivers are determined, and they keep flowing toward the sea.

Resilient comes from a Latin term meaning “leaping back,” as in jumping back up on your feet when knocked down. It corresponds to the Apostle Paul’s admonition and promise, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

In 1980 Eugene Peterson titled his classic book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Peterson emphasized the need for perseverance and faithfulness in following Jesus Christ in a world obsessed with instant

gratification and quick fixes.

Level 5 Multiplying Leaders expect setbacks and what appear to be “failures.” Their direction, however, is not determined by short-term results but a dedication to long-term Kingdom expansion. Their perseverance is based on enduring principles, not seasonal methodology or temporary emotions. Their convictions and their reliance on the Spirit help them leap back to their feet. **River Leaders operate out of a long-term Kingdom mindset that empowers them to keep going in the face of short-term setbacks.**

When the River started, the first church Light & Life planted ended up “failing,” and I was the leader who planted it. Light & Life Belmont (which I wrote about earlier) grew and was having an impact in its community. We met in a community center, then a middle school auditorium, then a movie theater. We got to the point where I had to choose between mother and daughter church. It was one of the toughest decisions I ever made in ministry, but I ended up handing it over to our associate pastor, who was an excellent leader.

Through a set of unusual circumstances, two more pastors would come and go over the next five years before the difficult decision was made by the church to disband. A failure? Was the sweat, cost, and pain worth it? It depends on whether you view it from a local church or Kingdom perspective, from a short-term or long-term horizon.

During the years Light & Life Belmont existed, over one hundred people were baptized, another church was planted, and five members were called into vocational ministry. One of those members became a missionary in Washington, D.C.,

and has spiritually influenced many of the most powerful leaders in the world over the past two decades. The church didn't endure, but the Kingdom advanced powerfully. Isn't that the purpose of the church?

River Leaders Overflow

One of the mantras I seek to impart to all our pastors and staff is that "Ministry must be the overflow of your own personal love relationship with Jesus." This motto is rooted in Jesus' promise in John 7:37-39: Anyone who drinks from the well of Jesus will overflow with rivers of living water. As Eugene Peterson paraphrased Ephesians 5:18, "Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him."

Personal drinking from the Spirit leads to the public overflow of the Spirit through us. This is a defining trait of all River Leaders, and I've been trying to live that way for the past 40 years.

10

River Wisdom: 10 Lessons from 25 Years on the River

Have you ever wished you knew 10 years ago what you know today? How about 25 years ago? Several years ago we held a staff retreat high in the mountains of British Columbia. During one of the team exercises, our youngest staff member had a chance to ask me one question. It was this: “If you were who you are now, talking to yourself when you were my age, what words of wisdom would you tell yourself?”

One of my answers was this: “I would ask the question you just asked me to as many fruitful leaders as I could.” It was another way of saying, “A wise man learns from his mistakes; a wiser man learns from the mistakes of others.”

In my efforts to start a River Church, I wish I had a thousand do-overs. But God has been gracious. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian astutely stated, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”⁴³ The fear of the unknown and the knowledge that we will certainly

make leadership mistakes must not create leadership inertia. Our faith in God’s call, power, guidance, and ability to cause “all things [to] work together for good” (Romans 8:28 ESV) must overcome our fears.

In this chapter are 10 of the River Lessons that I have now learned are vital to multiplying the church. The first three are lessons I learned through my relationship with Exponential over the past 12 years. As Exponential Director of Equipping and Spiritual Engagement since 2017, I now teach these first three points as the three dimensions of multiplication.

1. Root multiplication in direct disciple-making.

For too many years I rooted church planting in leadership development instead of in direct disciple-making. This was a multiplication mistake. You can plant churches programmatically through leaders. Doing so makes you a Level 4 church and is effective ministry. But you will have a nearly impossible challenge going from Level 4 Reproduction to Level 5 Multiplication.

Everyone says, “Amen!” to disciple-making, but very few practice Jesus-style disciple-making. As I speak to various pastors across the United States, I usually ask, “Can you give me the names of two or three people you are discipling?” My question is always followed by an awkward silence as pastors try to come up with names. This is because so few pastors have been directly, personally disciplined themselves, and so few prioritize it in their ministries.

I made the mistake of using only “indirect methods” as the means to disciple people. Bible studies, small groups, Sunday school, seminars, training classes, Sunday sermons, prayer groups, discipleship programs, book clubs—these can all be excellent discipleship tools. But programs do not multiply; people multiply.

Jesus-style disciple-making is direct disciple-making. It happens when you identify two or three believers and enter into a committed personal discipleship relationship like Jesus did when he called the 12 to follow him. Jesus essentially said in Matthew 4:19, “Let’s do life together for three years. You listen to me teach then watch me live what I teach. You try out what I teach you and let me coach you. Then I will launch you to do the exact same thing with others.”

When disciple-making becomes the root from which leadership-making and church-planting grow, then you have organic DNA that gives birth to multiplication at all levels. Your church is then positioned to become an unstoppable movement.

We forget the multiplicative power of disciple-making. Revisit the math. One ordinary disciple who intensely practices direct disciple-making for a year with just one believer and then sends that one out to repeat the same process with someone else while they take on a new disciple has exponential potential. The first year there are 2 disciples; the next year 4; then 8; then 16; 32; 64; 128; 256; 512; 1,024; 2,048. In 11 years, more than a megachurch can potentially be disciplined through the Jesus method.

To think of direct disciple-making’s possibilities in a different, even slower model, consider this: A disciple-maker discipled three people for three years. Then those three new disciple-

makers plus the original disciple-maker each disciple three people for another three years, and this pattern is repeated every three years. After nine years, you have 64 disciples in your generational line. But keep going ... after 21 years, you have 16,384 disciples; and if you were to continue this for 30 years, 1,048,576 could theoretically be disciplined using the Jesus model.

Most of you reading this have 30 years of life ahead. What could your Kingdom impact be through multiplicative disciple-making?

The Matthew 28:19-20 commission of Jesus was given to ALL believers and especially to church leaders. But we don't expect disciple-making to be a practice of everyone in our church because it's the "professional's" job. But the professionals are too busy preaching and running programs—doing indirect discipleship—to prioritize direct, personal disciple-making. We aren't obeying Jesus' command or model.

As has been accurately stated, "If you plant a church, you may or may not get disciples. But if you make disciples, you will get a church." The normative question in our churches must become "Who are you discipling?" and/or "Who is discipling you?"

2. Mobilize disciples into their Ephesians 2:10 calling.

One of my failures was in adequately assisting believers in understanding their own uniqueness and calling. I was more interested in training them to be volunteers in our church than missionaries in their world. I discounted their individual calling.

Every believer has the same general or primary calling: Follow Jesus and make disciples. But every disciple also has a unique or secondary calling: Do the good works God uniquely assigned for you to do. Ephesians 2:10 describes this: “For we are God’s handiwork [or “masterpiece,” NLT], created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

These good works—or personalized assignments from God—are a joy to us and a tool to reach others for Christ. They shape our distinctive mission. Most Christians, however, are never taught to seek God for the calling on their life. “Calling” is reserved for those going into vocational ministry.

This call of God takes into account each believer’s one-of-a-kind personality, strengths, talents, spiritual gifts, passions, circumstances, location, network, experiences, age, etc. Then the call says, “I have an assignment that you were made for and fits you like a glove. My ‘good works’ that fit the ‘masterpiece’ you are start right where you are. Your current call is to be on mission with me where you live, work, study, or play. But my calling also leads you into the future I have for you as you pursue the fullness of my unique call on your life.”

Church members who are begged to volunteer, coerced into giving their time, or guilted into vacant jobs that need a warm body are noble for their willingness. Seldom, however, are they passionate. If, alternatively, you convince them they have a calling and help them discover it, then you can’t hold them back. You become a “door opener” for them. Mobilization is an essential River move.

When the River was in the early years, I had a vision during one of our all-night prayer gatherings. I was standing on a

grassy hill looking at the horizon. I suddenly turned around, and behind me I saw a high wall a hundred yards long. The wall was filled with doors. These doors were of all different sizes, shapes, and colors—there were purple squares, big red circles, small orange triangles, etc. I wondered about this and asked the Lord, “What does this mean?” He replied, “Turn around and see.”

When I turned around and looked at the horizon, I saw a mass of people coming my direction. The closer they came, I began to see that these people were different sizes, shapes, and colors. Some were purple squares, big red circles, small orange triangles, etc. I then saw myself begin to direct the individuals to the door that fit them; then I opened the door for them, and they were gone. I realized from the vision that my call was to simply be a doorkeeper, a door opener so people could flow through and go bring life somewhere else ... because “where the river flows everything will live” (Ezekiel 47:9).

Keep in mind that “the biggest lie the devil ever told the church is that ministry is done by professionals” (anonymous).

3. Intentionally structure the church for multiplication.

Architects draw up blueprints that are used for creating buildings to house people, sometimes lots of people as in a skyscraper. They design structures and systems to accomplish a certain purpose. This is also known as “capacity-building.”

Architects can design a 20-story apartment or a dock at the same waterfront. Each has a certain capacity. The apartment

is meant to gather and hold people. The dock is meant to welcome a ship long enough to refuel and restock it then send it off again.

Our churches tend to be structured more like apartments than docks. They are built for escaping the world, gathering, and holding. Level 4 and especially Level 5 churches are built like docks. They know boats are built for the ocean, not to stay tied to the shore. Docks are built to send and help sustain the mission of the boats.

Capacity-building has to do with

- how you schedule your church calendar
- the events you plan and prioritize
- how you structure your time as a leader
- what you prioritize in your church budget
- the job descriptions you create for staff or volunteers
- the training you choose to provide
- how you systematize support
- how you evaluate effectiveness
- how people and ministries are rewarded for effectiveness

Almost all churches are structured and systematized around “gathering” rather than “going.” Capacity-building overlaps culture in many ways, yet it is also distinct. At Light & Life we developed a culture of sending, but our capacity-building systems and structures were weak. I failed to build multiplication deep enough into our structure.

At Light & Life we built a culture that was highly motivational toward launching but not strategized thoughtfully. Preparation was never structured. We did things by “feel.” We were almost “anti-checklist.” For example, we never had a residency plan. We just brought leaders on as paid or volunteer staff and said, “Hang around and catch our DNA, ask questions, do ministry, and then we will send you out.” It worked to a degree but could have functioned much more effectively.

I also failed to build structures and systems to adequately sustain the boats we launched. Out of my apostolic gifting, I would inspire and launch planters and tell them, “Godspeed, and call me if you need me.” Some called me weekly; others never called. What we really needed was an ongoing coaching and care system that initiated resourcing to them.

To revisit the “chaordic” principle, I was probably a little too much on the “chaos” side and not enough on the “order.” There are a few of our church plants that lasted a few years but that could still be going if we had ensured they were receiving the attention and assistance they needed. At the same time, I want to issue a strong caution here. Too many churches and denominations seek to strategize, structure, and systematize their way into multiplication or movement. This approach ends up with notebooks of strategy on the office shelves.

Imagine that you see a powerful spring of Living Water, and in the far distance you see a desert in need of water. How do you get the water from the temple to the desert? It takes a channel. The channel doesn’t CREATE the flow; it CARRIES the flow.

Those who start with absolute dependency upon the spring (the Spirit) and focus lovingly on those dying in the desert (the

people) will figure out the channel. Start with the channel, and you will have no water to move and nowhere to move it. But don't neglect building the channel. The life is in the water, but you still need the channel.

4. Clarify your essential ecclesiology.

- Tom and five guys meet at the bar on Sunday evenings for Bible and Brew.
- Four couples on the cul-de-sac get together for dinner on Friday nights, and at the end, one of them reads a Scripture and prays.
- A dozen friends from across the nation meet on Zoom every week for a time of worship, Word, conversation, and prayer.
- A group of 50 people gather in the church building for a self-help motivational talk from a priest who reads out of a religious book of prayers before a closing religious ritual.

All of these are called *church* by those who participate. But is that accurate?

When does a gathering become a church? It depends on your ecclesiology.

For purposes of this chapter, I want to communicate one principle of ecclesiology of which I am certain: “The Church must simplify to multiply.”

If Jesus is there, gatherings of believers of any size using any form of worship are an expression of the “universal Church.” But not any gathering is a defined “local church”—that is, an ongoing, healthy biblical community. Each denomination and

network must decide what the essential elements of a local church are for them.

Too much of ecclesiology has been complicated by human traditions rather than kept simple by biblical truth. The apostles Peter and John could never have been ordained in many denominations. Other groups called “church” are so organic and informal that there are many New Testament Scriptures being inadvertently disobeyed. Others have bought so deeply into business leadership models and paradigms, you hardly need or can feel the Spirit there.

If you set your essential ecclesiology bar too *low*, you will rob people of the full power of a biblical family. Reverence for the sacred can be diminished, resulting in Doritos and grape soda being served for communion. The gathering will be something *less than* what the New Testament defines as church.

If you set the ecclesiology bar too *high*, you will stifle the mobilization of everyday missionaries and limit the multiplication of new churches. The believers will experience institutional church with layers of human-produced traditions. It will be something *different from* what the New Testament describes as church.

It wasn’t until Exponential asked me to do a year-long study on essential ecclesiology that my own definition became clear. This has shaped how I recruit, train, and send planters. Here is the overview of my essential ecclesiology (explained in more detail in the Exponential book, *Mobilization Flywheel*):

“Church” is happening when these seven traits are recognizable in a gathering:

1. Jesus is worshipped as Lord.
2. Scripture is taught and obeyed as truth.
3. Believers gather regularly for fellowship and prayer.
4. Sacraments are practiced.
5. Spiritual authority is present, credible, and active.
6. God's mission of disciple-making and servanthood are core priorities.
7. The presence of the Spirit is active in the gathering.

Note: All of these seven traits are observable on some tangible level (except, perhaps, the seventh), thus allowing evaluation of their presence. This description leaves ample room for the variety of sizes, practices, forms of governance, and diverse doctrines present in the church today. Yet, if any of these seven essential attributes are not present to some degree, then the gathering has probably not matured into a local church.

The River Church has well-defined banks ... but only two of them, and the river is wide.

I wish I had clarified and simplified my ecclesiology much earlier than I did.

5. Shape the form of church to the needs of the context.

Form follows function. In the church we have too rigidly defended our forms and hindered the functions. Rather than prioritizing the mission, we have protected our methods. If we have deeply held biblical convictions and clarity on our essential ecclesiology, we can encourage all forms of church.

At Light & Life we have planted basically one form of church. We used the “hive off” model—raise up a leader, help them recruit a team and core members, recruit a few short-term volunteers who would go with them for 3 to 12 months, help them find a meeting place that would hold 40 to 200 people, give them some support money, and launch them. We were hoping for mostly churches of 70 to 150, a few of 200 to 400, and every now and then, one that might outgrow the mother church.

This model worked well in our densely populated area, but it had major drawbacks. Affordable spaces to rent where you could gather this many people and have parking for them was tough. In addition the place had to be zoned to allow for a church. (We’ve had gatherings shut down by city officials.) We did get creative in finding these kinds of gathering spaces. Our churches have started in back rooms of restaurants, theaters, school cafeterias, school auditoriums, Seventh Day Adventist churches, dying Protestant churches, community centers, funeral chapels, YMCAs, hotel conference rooms, picnic shelters, warehouses, etc.

One of my mistakes was doggedly pursuing this form of church without thinking creatively about other healthy delivery systems for the function of church. I have friends who have burgeoning churches made up of over one hundred micro churches that don’t own one building and don’t have any rented space. There are churches happening in business places during lunch hours. “Fresh expression” churches are creating all kinds of forms while honoring essential ecclesiology—house churches, online/digital churches, cowboy churches, pub churches, dinner churches, coffeeshop churches, gaming churches, cul-de-sac churches, Crossfit churches, community service churches, motorcycle churches, etc.

Steve Addison identifies “adaptive methods” as one of the key elements of dynamic movements.⁴⁴ Addison posits that dynamic movements must avoid rigid adherence to traditional structures or fixed strategies. Instead, they should foster a culture of experimentation, flexibility, and resilience. This allows the movement to remain relevant, overcome obstacles, and capitalize on new possibilities, ultimately ensuring its sustainability and growth over time.

6. Empower teachable and accountable disciples quickly.

One of the most common attributes of gospel movements is the rapid deployment of disciples into frontline ministry. This means unleashing the freshness of their personal fire to fuel the spread of the fire of the movement.

Jesus commissioned and sent out his disciples early in his ministry. They weren’t ready yet, but they were excited, teachable, and accountable. Jesus got the team out of the locker room and into the game quickly. Their ministry experiences opened them up to more training. Jesus’ example is not the usual pattern in our American Christianity.

In my opinion the rapid spread of Methodism in early America was significantly hobbled by the introduction of the requirement of formal education for its ministers. John Wesley valued education and encouraged self-study among preachers but did not mandate formal seminary training. Practical experience and personal piety were considered more important than academic credentials.

Consequently, Methodist lay ministers and circuit riders

spread the Gospel with great zeal. When the formal education requirement was introduced in the latter part of the 19th century, it reduced the number of available preachers willing or able to meet these new standards. Additionally, it distanced the clergy from the lay people, making ministry seem less accessible and the work of professionals.

At Light & Life we did well at empowering leaders quickly and making ministry accessible to all. We authorized lay leaders with minimal training to teach the Bible, to baptize new believers, to serve communion, to raise up leaders, cast out demons, do hospital visitation, even to perform weddings if a licensed pastor was also involved.

What we did *not* do well was ensuring that those we empowered were teachable and accountable. Rapid deployment usually increases your quantity but decreases your quality. This challenge can be effectively addressed if those you empower are committed to being learners and have ongoing training provided. They also must be submitted to spiritual authority in their ministries.

Movements are usually led by mavericks. Mavericks aren't content with the effectiveness of the status quo. They question leadership. They push against the boundaries with innovation. Mavericks are comfortable with chaordic leadership.

The challenge with mavericks is that they can easily become rebels. The difference between a maverick and a rebel is their teachability and accountability. Rebels are independent, self-assured, disrespectful of spiritual authority, and spread criticism about the status quo more than momentum for the mission.

Mavericks are focused on the mission at all costs yet are not out to destroy the institution. This was John Wesley's approach.

So we have a principle and mantra we follow at Light & Life: "We reward mavericks and remove rebels."

7. Focus on the *oikos*, not individuals alone.

In Mark 5, Jesus heals the demoniac, who then begs to go with Jesus on his journeys. Jesus refuses his request and offers a commission instead: "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). The phrase "your own people" is translated in other versions as "family" or "friends" or "house." These are all seeking to translate the Greek word *oikos*.

Oikos is an extended social circle. It includes those in your literal house and those who consider themselves connected to your household. This web of relationships (family, friends, relatives, servants, goods and service providers) is your *oikos*. Jesus was saying to the demoniac, "Start there ... not with people you have never met. Let those closest to you see your change and speak up about me." Jesus knew his evangelistic impact would flow most quickly and dynamically along relational lines.

In our individualistic American society we may think such a focus is outdated and no longer effective. Wrong! Recent research reports that it's more impactful than ever: "Up to 80% of first-time church attendees report that a personal invitation from a friend or family member was the primary reason they visited."⁴⁵

The first churches were planted by the Gospel permeating an *oikos* and a church springing up in their midst. Special meals were natural gatherings that easily turned into house churches. Movements today are always marked by contagious relationships that distribute the message of Jesus in an organic manner.

Most (80%) of Light & Life was made up of extended networks of family and friends. This was especially true when we were gathering a core team for a plant. It only required two or three *oikos* to comprise a solid core group to send out.

Multi-level sales has harnessed this *oikos* principle to the tune of trillions of dollars in sales. The church needs to see the inherent power of our *oikos*. Our people need to be equipped to identify, build, and steward for the Kingdom those relationships God has blessed them with. I didn't do this well.

8. Create streams of income that feed the River.

The money monster eats multiplication. Much of the reluctance to equip and send, to plant and multiply is not because pastors disagree with the idea or think they have a better plan than Jesus. It's because it threatens their paycheck.

Rick, a young leader who felt deeply called to start a church, confessed his hesitancy: "I have an adequate job that supplies enough for our family to survive. Do you think I should just quit my job and take a leap of faith to start the church?" My response was, "Not unless God pushes you off the cliff!" Too many young zealots jump off the cliff with no parachute and then are mad at God when they crash.

Paul is our example for finances both personally and ministerially. Paul refused to allow money to lead the mission. Because he followed this conviction, he had times of feasting and times of fasting. There was personal sacrifice and discomfort in multiplying the movement. He lived by faith and not by sight.

At the same time, Paul didn't pray for ravens to deliver Happy Meals. He had a plan that we could call "The 5 B's Approach:"

Believers

Paul believed and taught believers to give generously to support gospel workers. Today, leaders need to teach the power of the principle (not law) of the tithe. Generosity attracts God's favor and releases a cycle of his blessing. Many pastors don't come close to tithing but are upset that their churches aren't giving more.

Benefactors

Paul had wealthy believers like Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Aquila who supported his ministry. The current distribution of wealth in America is problematic yet carries with it opportunity. More wealth in fewer hands means we must help believers open those hands up more widely than ever for the sake of multiplying the church. Pray for and disciple the wealthy into Kingdom generosity.

Bi-vocational

Paul had a marketable skill that he was happy to use to supply the income he and even others needed (Acts 20:33-35). He allowed his ministry to shape around his side hustle whenever necessary.

Business as Mission

Paul's tentmaking business was out to make a good profit that could serve him and the ministry. It was also an effective outpost of the Gospel. More pastors could support themselves if they started businesses that met the needs of their community and turned a profit to support the ministry to the community. Joshua Brown, the "Pressure Washing Pastor," is a prime example of tentmaking. His company is meeting a real need while also providing opportunities for other leaders to make good money while staying flexible and available for ministry. Churches also have income-producing potential. Nonprofits in mission can have sidestream businesses that are for-profit.

Budget-Neutral Ministry

Paul did ministry in a way that didn't carry an ongoing overhead that would control the freedom of the movement. His ministry was built around relationships, discipleship, free preaching venues, and acts of compassion (whether healing or feeding the poor). The further we get away from this kind of budgeting for ministry, the bigger the budget is going to be. The first thing that budget shortfalls gobble up is multiplication.

Refuse to allow finances to dictate the flow of the River. "We will do it when we can afford it" is the fastest way to the slowest impact. As stated before, "You can trust the Almighty or the almighty dollar, but you can't trust both!" At the same time, use wisdom to increase the income and decrease the overhead.

9. Plant churches that are committed to planting churches.

Parents produce children, but they can't produce grandchildren. Parents can, however, help instill a love for

children into their children, likely increasing their offspring's desire to have children of their own.

At Light & Life we were fairly good at reproducing, but I fell short in instilling a deep value and commitment in our daughter churches to “go and do the same.” This is a key factor in our failure to move from a Level 4+ Reproduction church to a Level 5 Multiplication church. I thought we were winning by getting a new plant out the door, and I knew how tough it was to plant a church. So I encouraged our plants to eventually plant, but it was not a strong expectation.

Exponential's definition of a Multiplier is “a healthy disciple-making leader who champions reproduction.” I think this strikes the right balance. As churches we have to instill a disciple-making DNA that promotes and expects reproduction at every level. Healthy disciples who reproduce will give birth to healthy leaders who champion reproduction of leaders who then start churches that have reproduction permeating their culture. This will organically give rise to multiplication.

If I had a do-over, I would want our mother church's “support funding” of our church plants to be based on a demonstration of championing reproduction. This ups the ante of the expectation. The evidence could be an action such as identifying a potential planter for the first church they will plant even before launching, or setting aside 5% of their budget for their first church plant, or prayerfully identifying the community where they will plant their first church.

We won't achieve a multiplication movement just by reproducing more churches programmatically. We must

saturate our church plants with this Kingdom passion for reproduction, with a vision to become a distributary.

10. Develop passionate “friends on mission” to feed the River.

Billy Graham’s incredible and sustained fruitfulness had much to do with his tight friendships with a few men who shared his passion for the mission. Cliff, George, Grady, and T. W. were Billy’s “friends on mission.” They shared the same values, vision, and vocabulary. They all rose higher, ran further, and accomplished more with greater joy because they were “all in, together.”

For the first 14 years of the River, I had a few close friends in ministry, but none who were actively advancing the cause of multiplication. That changed in 2013 when I met Todd Wilson, co-founder and former CEO of Exponential, and Bill Couchenour, Exponential’s Director of Development and Learning Communities. They not only became trusted friends but also shared my passion for multiplication. Their advanced insights, broad experience, and depth of conversation on the subject inspired me, elevating my own commitment, understanding, and ability to articulate the principles of multiplication to new heights.

They introduced me to other multiplication leaders who were also ahead of me and became close friends—Ralph Moore, Peyton Jones, Jason Stewart, Ed Love, and many others. These relationships created emotional, intellectual, and spiritual synergy for the mission. Plus they make the journey a lot more fun! I wish I had pursued these kinds of friendships much

sooner.

Glance Back, Focus Forward

There is much truth to Roy T. Bennett's quote, "The past is a place of reference, not a place of residence."⁴⁶ We must direct our lives, ministries, and churches the same way we drive our cars. Focus on the windshield in front of us, while glancing in the rear view mirror. The backward look is only meant to help inform us in how to advance into the future God has for us.

My multitude of regrets in life and ministry sometimes seek to capture and hobble my future possibilities. Do you ever let the "woulda, coulda, shoulda" thoughts take up too much brain space? I sure do. But the Gospel that saves me also liberates me into the "I will, I can, I shall" of the future.

We serve the God who specializes in "do-overs," who loves to redeem regrets with his grace, cover sins with his blood, and untie the weights from our past that keep us from flying. Refuse to walk backward through life.

One of the men I admire most in this regard is Pastor Brian Warth. Convicted of a gang murder as a teenager, Brian was sentenced to life in prison. Brian met Jesus and was set free spiritually. Then Brian was miraculously pardoned and set free physically after 16 years. Brian refused to let his past determine his future. With fire in his heart he came to Light & Life, and we eventually launched what became our largest church, larger than Light & Life itself! Chapel of Change continues to grow and plant churches.

I am always impressed with the Apostle Paul's approach to his

regrets. He did not deny his past but used it to propel his future. “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12b). We have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. He has important, eternal reasons for taking hold of us. Therefore, press on!

Conclusion: The River Wins!

John Chapman knew the power of multiplication. When he looked at an apple, he did not see a quick snack. Instead he envisioned orchards. John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, had a significant impact on the American frontier during the early 19th century. He planted apple trees and established nurseries across large parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Ontario, as well as northern West Virginia.

The most impactful action Chapman took was to freely give apple seeds and seedlings to the pioneers he met. Providing encouragement and instruction to these pioneers, Johnny sent them off to plant their own trees. Some of those seeds became orchards. Johnny's life preached the message of multiplication. Maybe he was the person to first say, "You can count the number of seeds in an apple, but you can't count the number of apples in a seed."

Johnny also planted a different kind of seed: the Gospel. Johnny was a preacher of the risen Christ. He had no pulpit, but he had the Gospel seed, which he shared with one person at a time. While a bit errant in some of his theology, Johnny's prayer was undoubtedly to see the Gospel multiply like his apple trees and spread the fame of Jesus across the frontier.

In the small town of Savannah, Ohio, stands a 150-year-old apple tree planted by Johnny Appleseed—and it's still producing fruit. Through droughts, storms, World Wars, and AI, Johnny's tree continues to deliver a ton of apples yearly. How? Its location and depth of its roots. Johnny planted it above an underground aquifer, a river of living water.⁴⁷

Scripture declares, "Where the river flows everything will live" (Ezekiel 47:9) and "That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers" (Psalm 1:3).

The call of the Spirit is for a new generation of spiritual John and Jane Appleseeds—those men and women who practice the power of multiplicative disciple-making, who see the fire on the head of ordinary people, who believe in the priority of churches planting more churches.

I think it is fitting that I am writing this conclusion in the early morning hours of New Year's Day, 2025. I have started it on my knees and will soon hike up the mountain behind our house to watch the sunrise.

The new year dawns with all kinds of difficult realities stuffed full of glorious possibilities. These possibilities come disguised

as individuals, seemingly insignificant compared to the challenge of changing the world. Yet each individual is a seed with an orchard of potential—or to shift back to our River analogy, rivers of living water can flow from anyone who drinks of the Spirit (John 7:38).

These possibilities also come camouflaged as struggling Level 1 churches, as stagnant Level 2 churches, or as growing Level 3 churches missing the greater impact God has for them. These churches can begin to reproduce (Level 4) and stretch toward Level 5 multiplication movements. Through the Spirit's power, they can become River Churches.

A Vision of Rivers

As I was praying this morning, the Spirit of the Lord shared a vision, a vivid picture in my mind that continued to unfold. I have no doubt it was inspired by Ezekiel 47. First, he underlined a word I have used in this book, *distributaries*. Then I saw a very tall, solitary mountain with a flat top. The mountain was sitting in the middle of a desert, surrounded by sand for as far as I could see. On the flat top of the mountain perched a magnificent temple that radiated light.

As I watched, small waterfalls began to spring out of each side of the temple and run down the mountainside. As they flowed they grew into larger rivers. Then suddenly new rivers sprang out of each of the rivers, and new rivers of all sizes formed out of those branches. Some of those branches were larger than the rivers they flowed from. By the time the rivers reached the desert, there were well over one hundred rivers flowing into the sand. Then as I gazed in wonder, the entire

desert began to blossom with flowers and fruit trees. The culture of the desert had been transformed by the River.

The desert of our secular culture and the dryness of most church cultures in America is impacting pastors. COVID's exposure of the Church's spiritual and ministry maturity has been disheartening. Pastors are growing weary of spoon-feeding consumers. The challenge of institutional church in post-Christian America is exhausting. Many are throwing in the ministry towel.

The good news is we are seeing more and more River Leaders starting Rivers in the desert. A new path of multiplication is being championed. Celebrity-seeking is diminishing. Church growth as the ultimate target is being abandoned. Personal disciple-making with reproduction as a goal is being rediscovered. Creative expressions of the church are burgeoning and being legitimized. The Spirit is flowing.

Jubatas, Bow Down!

The “Jubatas” of our culture are not idols on the bank of the River as in our opening story. They are idols in our hearts. Idols in the church. They are real spiritual forces who hate multiplication of the church. We will declare the Lordship of Jesus in front of the gates of hell. We “have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.”

The gates of hell will not prevail. The River wins in the end. The last chapter of God's Word declares the victory of the River!

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me **the river of the water of life**, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.

And they will reign for ever and ever. (emphasis added)

Light & Life's story is unique. Yet *your* church, regardless of size, age, or setting can begin to “flow” as it is filled with the Spirit and employs the principles in these pages. Multiplying and sending disciples, leaders, and churches is possible for you because we serve the God with whom all things are possible! You can be a River church.

Light & Life in North Long Beach, now three years into the pastoral leadership of Sean Fenner and Joel Silva, is the largest it has ever been, baptizing the most ever and planting more churches than ever. The River culture is alive and thriving.

My dream for a megachurch was too small. God's desire was to start a River that would flow to places I would never hear about through people who would never know my name. Far more than 2,000 or even 20,000 people are now downstream from Light & Life, experiencing Jesus due to our ministry.

The most exciting fact is those numbers are expanding yearly through new disciples, leaders, and church plants.

The truth is, we still only have 39 parking spaces ... but that's more than enough to start a River.

Pray with me for a movement of “River Churches” to bring the lifegiving water of Jesus to the desert we live in.

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About the Author

Dr. Larry Walkemeyer serves as the Strategic Catalyst for Multiplication for Free Methodist USA encouraging the multiplication of disciples, leaders and churches nationally and is on the Executive Leadership Team of the Free Methodist USA.

He is also Global Pastor for Light & Life Church, Long Beach, CA., a multiplying, multi-ethnic, urban church he and Deb led for the past 30 years. During their tenure the church grew dynamically, and planted churches both nationally and globally.

As Director of Equipping and Spiritual Engagement for Exponential (the world's largest church planting resource group), Larry seeks to influence the church of Jesus toward multiplication. Holding a doctorate in church leadership and as the author/co-author of ten books, Larry speaks and consults frequently across the USA.

Azusa Pacific University, from which Larry holds a Doctorate of Ministry, has the recognized Larry with the Centennial Award, naming him one of the most influential graduates in its history. Larry serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees for Azusa Pacific University.

Larry and Dr. Deb Walkemeyer have been married since 1978. They write and speak frequently on marriage, ministry, and leadership. They have two amazing adult daughters. Larry enjoys biking, working out, snow skiing, waterskiing, boating and traveling.

Resources by Larry Walkemeyer

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