



5 WAYS WE ARE REIMAGINING CHURCH

IN MATTHEW 16:18, JESUS SAYS,

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

We take great confidence from God's promise in this verse! The church is built on a solid foundation and because of that will always continue to exist here on earth. The church is not dependent upon human power or striving to ensure that God's mission in the world continues. Clearly, we know this covenant to be true as the gospel has proliferated throughout history, even in the most hostile places in the world.

HOWEVER, WE ARE WELL AWARE THAT THE WORLD HAS CHANGED.

There is great concern for the local church and it is therefore obvious we need to innovate our approach to ministry. God doesn't guarantee that any particular local congregation will prevail amidst fluctuating cultural sentiment and demographics. Change is necessary. Our goal is not the institutional survival of churches, but rather that God would extend the ability of congregations to reach their unique mission in their individual context.



In ECO, we desire to help congregations and leaders think and act differently as well as create environments that support churches as they live into the realities of an ever-changing world. Because ECO's mission is building flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ, we want to help your church make five key shifts to ensure future vitality.

Shift #1



From "Clergy-Centered" to
an "Unleashed-Laity"

Greg Ogden's thesis in his book, *Unfinished Business*, is that the Protestant Reformation made great adjustments to the church, but one aspect that was left incomplete was a move away from a clergy-centric model of leadership. While the Protestant Reformers understood that it wasn't the priest that conferred salvation, there was still the understanding that ministry was centered upon the pastor. Thus, the enormous clergy-laity divide has remained for the last 500 years.

However, Ephesians 4 states that the whole body works together to build and equip itself for the work of ministry, and the whole of Scripture supports this truth. Thus, the church needs to recalibrate in a way that helps all people discover their unique calling and gifts, deploying them to demonstrate and share the gospel in the places where they live, work, and play.

There are many barriers to living out the shift away from a clergy-centered model. Congregants often see themselves as the ones who pay others to do ministry on their behalf. They see themselves as having "secular" vocations, allowing them to pay professional clergy to take on the "sacred" responsibilities. Unleashing the laity involves a change in the unwritten agreement that is prevalent in the mind of many churches and their covenant partners (ECO's term for members).



In ECO, we allow many lay leaders to participate in ministry activities normally reserved for clergy, such as the celebration of sacraments in missional communities. We work to equip pastors to disciple and mentor their lay leaders to engage in greater ministry. Because lay leaders can have wider responsibilities, we have also raised the bar on the expectations and competencies that are in keeping with the roles they fulfill in the world.

Shift #2



From "An Addition/Subtraction Mindset" to
"A Multiplication Mentality"

In established churches, it is very easy to focus on how many people have we added to the church and how many people have we lost. It is certainly important to pay attention to these dynamics since we clearly want people to come to know Jesus and be involved in the fellowship of the church. We want to make every effort to disciple and care for those in our flocks and not lose those whom God has entrusted to our care. In addition, the reality is that we have a church to run and adding or subtracting people will enhance or inhibit our ability to fulfill the mission of the church.

With all of these factors, it is understandable why churches and leaders would focus primarily on the dynamics of addition and subtraction. In fact, if we think about multiplication, i.e., new groups, micro-churches, planting new churches, and so on, it can initially feel like subtraction to an existing church or small group. It takes time, money, energy, and people to start something new that will feel like a loss to the established system.

However, we know both from the biology of living organisms, as well as the research on church planting, that healthy things not only grow...they multiply! There has never been a greater need for creatively investing in multiplication in order to carry forward the gospel in the United States. Our culture continues to rapidly change, and there is a greater diversity of populations to reach with the gospel now more than ever. It would be impossible for established churches alone to reach all corners of society. Therefore, we need our established churches to be passionate about developing and deploying leaders who will function like missionaries to plant both the gospel and new churches in innovative ways in diverse contexts.



In ECO, we have a passion for multiplication. We have a robust church planting assessment process that helps potential planters determine where they thrive. We have training and coaching to help support people whether they are planting churches in a "launch large" model, or innovative micro-churches to reach unique populations. Our micro-churches range anywhere from a BBQ restaurant that has church on Sunday evening, or a community of Brazilian bull riders, to those seeking to plant churches in the metaverse.

Shift #3



From "Pastor as Shepherd" to
"Pastor as Leader"

The predominant image of the pastor that has carried over from Christendom is that the pastor is the shepherd of the flock. The image of a shepherd certainly has wonderful rooting in scripture and it is a helpful image if understood correctly. The challenge is that we see the role of the shepherd through western eyes. We view a shepherd as almost synonymous with "caretaker." Churches have unfortunately believed that the pastor is there for their comfort and convenience. It is almost understood that the pastor functions like an owner of a dog or cat and seeks to make life as easy, safe and comfortable for their pets.

The type of shepherd envisioned in scripture is one who takes care of the sheep - not for the comfort of the sheep but for the usefulness of the animals for the master. The sheep were valuable because they produced wool, reproduced, and provided meat. The shepherd nurtured the sheep so that they could provide value for the master. We certainly don't want to see the people in congregations through a utilitarian lens. However, in reading Ephesians 4, we understand the role of the shepherd as one among other roles, such as equipping the saints for ministry.

Perhaps rather than redefining what it means to be a shepherd, we need to shift to embrace the leadership role of the pastor. Far too often, especially in Presbyterian circles, we have minimized or even discouraged the leadership function of the pastor. In our tradition we have even gone so far as simply to call the pastor a "Teaching Elder." However, congregations need the pastor to exhibit leadership behavior to help them achieve the vision to which God has called them. This of course doesn't mean the pastor is a dictator or steamrolls over the people; rather the pastor must use appropriate leadership skills to lead others in discerning God's vision, as well as synergizing staff and laity to fulfill that vision.



In ECO, we seek innovative ways to develop holistic leaders who not only have leadership competencies, but are expressing their leadership through their own deeply formed faith. We create communities of leaders who can strengthen, encourage and support one another as they engage in the challenging task of leading God's people to His preferred future.

Shift #4



From "Counting Attendance "
to "Measuring Engagement"

For years, church leaders have recognized the limitations of defining success in terms of worship attendance. One benefit of COVID has been an even further realization that attendance, whether in person or online, is not the indication of the church's health. Yet it is easy to default to attendance, and changes in attendance, as an indicator of how well the congregation is doing.

So what might we measure instead? It takes more discussion, effort, and intentionality but perhaps it is better for us to focus on the engagement of our people in the mission of God and their transformation to the likeness of Christ. Questions such as: How many of our people have personalized discipleship plans? How many have significant relationships with those who do not yet know Christ and with whom they are having gospel conversations? How has our congregation been uniquely touched with the tangible love of Jesus?



In ECO, we make a concerted effort to focus on the underlying health of the congregation. We have tools to help congregations assess the health of their church and have resources to help enhance their vitality as they seek to flourish.

Shift #5



From "Protection" to
"Innovation"

Churches aren't often thought of as leaders in innovation. There is an old joke that says, "How many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb?" The punchline is, "Change? Why would we want to change?" Many times churches will want to take a protective posture of the status quo rather than take risks.

Jesus normalizes risk in the life of the individual disciple and in the collective expression of the church. We don't see the word innovation in scripture, but we see examples all through the Bible of how the people responded in new and imaginative ways in order to bring about God's Kingdom. For example, in the book of Acts we see followers of Jesus who preached the word and established His church. The church looked different in each context depending on if they were in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, or the ends of the earth.

We often say, "the Gospel never changes, but the church must change constantly." We don't want to change simply for the sake of change, but we know the culture around us is constantly changing and evolving. Therefore, we need to be constantly learning and adapting in order to most effectively bring the unchanging gospel to an ever-changing world.



In ECO, we seek to foster environments where pastors and congregations can learn and experiment. We support churches as they seek innovative steps, even as they anticipate receiving the inevitable resistance from those in the congregation.