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Corps of Discovery: A Twenty-First-Century Contextual Missiology for the Denominational Church in the United States

Terri Martinson Elton

Introduction

On May 14th, 1804, the Corps of Discovery set sail up the Missouri River with forty-seven men under the direction of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.¹ The object of their mission was to find a “northwest passage” to the Pacific Ocean.² On September 23rd, 1806,³ twenty-eight months after setting sail, the corps returned, having crossed more than 8,000 miles of frontier only to report that they had not accomplished their mission.⁴ It was true that they had not discovered a continuous waterway all the way to the Pacific, but Lewis and Clark had accomplished so much more. They were the first to chart maps of this territory; they discovered thousands of new plants and animals; and they found their way through previously unknown terrain, something no “United States citizen had ever done before. [E]very American living or traveling west of the Mississippi River today goes in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark.”⁵ As a result of this mission, the

1. *National Geographic Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West* (2002) DVD.

2. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Lewis and Clark: Voyage of Discovery* (National Geographic Society, 1998), p. 2.

3. *National Geographic Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West* (2002) DVD.

4. Ambrose, *Lewis and Clark*, pp. 229, 234.

5. Ambrose, *Lewis and Clark*, p. 231. I will use “American” in this essay to describe the people living in the United States. I realize that American can also refer to people living in Central or South America; but many of the sources I refer to are writers from the United

United States' focal point changed: it shifted from the East toward the West, and a new ideology emerged.⁶ It is not clear what drove Lewis or Clark, but with their quest they set a new course that redirected the future of a people.

At the time of this 200th anniversary of Lewis and Clark's historic Corps of Discovery, it may be appropriate to form a new "corps of discovery" and set out on another mission — a mission that seeks new opportunities for sharing the gospel in the United States during the twenty-first century. It is perhaps time for leaders of the twenty-first-century church to heed God's call and participate in God's mission so that the denominational church may discover a contextual missiology for a new era.⁷

The church of the twenty-first century can learn from the trail-blazing adventures of past leaders as it prepares to move forward at a new moment in time. In an effort to prepare for such an adventure, I will look back in this chapter into American history, unearthing things we have learned in the political setting of the United States and from the history of denominationalism within the American Protestant church. I hope to stir the reader's imagination about the future of denominationalism, particu-

States who use this term to describe themselves. Periodically, I will use "America" to refer to the geographic region of the United States. This, too, picks up on the reference writers use in describing their own land.

6. Ambrose, *Lewis and Clark*, p. 26.

7. Hereafter, I will use "church" (with a lowercase "c") as a shortened version of the denominational church in the United States. While I will lay out the evolution of the denominational church later in this essay, I will offer a brief definition here. "Demonination," as a word, was used in the early years of the United States as a way for the Christian church to speak of the multiple expressions of Christianity in a neutral and unifying way. It referred to the group being discussed as but one member of a larger entity. "Denominationalism" was used as the opposite of sectarianism. Many church historians took up "denominational theory" as a way to study the unique evolution of the Christian church in the United States. While denominationalism has sociological elements to it, it also has theological ones, for within denominationalism there exists a theology of the church, or ecclesiology. This embedded ecclesiology is the primary angle of denominationalism that I will use in this essay. It is important to note that, in the early years, denominationalism primarily referred to the Protestant church. More recently it has come to encompass Catholics and Jews as well. This essay, however, will focus primarily on the Protestant development of denominationalism. For more on denominationalism, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 381-82; Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 80-81; Russell E. Richey, ed., *Denominationalism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), pp. 9-15, 19-42.

larly about developing a missional ecclesiology for the denominational church in a postmodern age.

The Landscape of the United States

Setting the Political Scene

Each year millions of tourists drive across South Dakota prairies through farms, ranches, and tourist spots for the sole purpose of pausing at a significant piece of U.S. history. Mount Rushmore, a tribute to four influential presidents, is a lens into the heart of the United States: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt highlight crucial sources of the DNA of the nation they served.

Thomas Jefferson, who was vice president for one term and president for two, shaped the United States in its founding years — before it was a democratic republic — as much as when he was in office. He was known for his writing ability and thus was asked to draft a document that articulated the desires of the nation's early leaders. In a time when wealthy landlords ran society, and when opportunities were not available for all people, he called for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In an age when equality was not practiced, he wrote that "all men are created equal," and in doing so, "foresaw a United States with a democratic, representative government — one that placed much responsibility on the individual and relied little on strong central control."⁸ Thus Jefferson's writings gave birth to the Declaration of Independence, and the road to democracy began. It is almost impossible to imagine how radical these ideals were at the time, and equally hard to imagine the United States without such a foundation.

However, putting these ideals forward in writing was not enough to build a country. People needed to move these ideals into reality. And people did! George Washington, recognized for his military success, rose up among the passionate Founding Fathers as the one who would help give form to this new society. Moving from the chair of the Constitutional Convention to serve as the first president of the United States, Washington helped establish a democratic, representative governing system. The cor-

8. Robert G. Athearn, *American Heritage Illustrated History of the United States: A New Nation*, vol. 4 (New York: Choice Publishing, Inc., 1989), p. 291.

nerstone was laid: the United States was a new nation operating within a new framework. Just as the poetic words of Jefferson continue to call for freedom, the mall in front of the Washington Monument embodies the democratic ideals Washington believed in: it continues to be the location for demonstrations, protests, and rallies.⁹

The establishment of the United States was not all smooth sailing: the country that strove for equality, liberty, and unity had many heavy seas to navigate. In fact, “[i]n the middle of the 19th century . . . many people in America saw the northern and southern halves of the country as being so different that they might as well have been two different worlds.”¹⁰ A nation that was divided and still practicing slavery was the situation Abraham Lincoln stepped into. On January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, though it did not immediately end slavery — or the Civil War. But it did become a turning point in the nation’s history, once again embedding the principles of the Founding Fathers into a new generation of Americans. In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln “eloquently outlined his general hope for the outcome of the war,” and called the nation back to its core principles.¹¹ On April 9, 1865, the news of Lee’s surrender signaled the end of the war, but, “[l]ess than a week later, on April 14, the entire country was stunned by the news that Abraham Lincoln had been shot by an assassin.”¹² Lincoln’s primary work, however, was completed. He had done what some considered impossible: by the end of his life as president, he had laid the foundations for freeing the slaves, and the United States had remained a union.

As the American nation moved into the twentieth century, it needed a new style and focus of leadership. Theodore Roosevelt “realized that in the new century America would have to assume more responsibility, expand its reach and interests, reject its nineteenth-century role of isolationism, and take up its twentieth-century burden of leadership” (Ambrose, p. 80). And with Roosevelt’s lead, the new century was marked with a new style of leadership. Theodore Roosevelt’s “greatness lay in preparing America to become a world power” (p. 78). Roosevelt moved America to

9. Stephen Ambrose, *To America: Personal Reflections of an Historian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 13.

10. Rachel Filene Seidman, *The Civil War: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 13.

11. Seidman, *Civil War*, pp. 156-57.

12. Seidman, *Civil War*, p. 142.

an offensive posture as he prepared the country for world conflict, demonstrated that the United States was a strong and independent force to its allies and foes, and had the foresight to preserve large sections of the country. In fact, one hundred years after Lewis and Clark first passed through the land known today as Yellowstone Park, Roosevelt made it a national park, preserving it and entrusting it to future generations (Ambrose, pp. 79, 91). Roosevelt picked up on the themes already established in the nation and optimistically looked to the future.

Living Out the Proclamation

Democracy and equality were more easily proclaimed than lived: the ideals set out by the United States at its inception still challenge its people more than two centuries later. The freeing of the slaves, waves of immigrants, women's right to vote, and the civil rights movement — all of these, individually, tested these notions and challenged the United States to add yet another core principle to its DNA: diversity.

Immigration has been a constant throughout the history of the United States, and it can provide great insight into the reality behind this core principle. Witnessed over the centuries along the country's borders, at its shores, and in its airports, immigration has been a part of the rich heritage that has blessed the United States. The land of the free has welcomed, sheltered, and provided opportunities for people from many countries and has created a mosaic of people seeking refuge, religious and economic opportunity, and the opportunity to be reunited with family members.¹³

In fact, the United States is a land of immigrants. Immigrants "are our parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, doctors, lawyers, sports heroes, actors, cooks, waiters, baby-sitters, merchants, and yes, even our politicians."¹⁴ No other country is known as a country of immigrants as the United States is. The colorful diversity that these many immigrant groups have brought to America can be seen in the neighborhoods of urban centers but also in small rural towns, in the Northeast of the United

13. Barbara Brooks Kimmel and Alan M. Lubiner, *Immigration Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Guide to the U.S. Immigration Process*, 6th ed. rev. (Chester, NJ: Next Decade, 2003), p. ix.

14. Kimmel and Lubiner, *Immigration Made Simple*, p. x.

States, in the Midwest, in the South, and on the West Coast. Immigrants have been numerous and diverse: the earliest were primarily from Europe, but other waves have come from Asia and Africa, as well as from Mexico and the Caribbean.

Throughout history, immigration “continually brought transfusions of new blood and energy and ways of thinking that kept the United States in flux.” President John F. Kennedy said that immigration was “the secret of America,” for it was a nation of “people with the fresh memory of old traditions who dared to explore new frontiers.”¹⁵ The flow of immigrants reminds U.S. citizens that this nation does not belong to one race, creed, or ethnic group. Rather, it is a nation of diverse people, from different homelands, sharing one country based on a set of ideals they strive to keep alive with each new challenge and opportunity.

The DNA of the United States

What is the DNA of the United States? *Discovery, democracy, equality, and diversity* — four virtues that have been born, tested, and challenged in this country and still stand strong today. Lewis and Clark were men of *discovery*. Unsuccessful in finding a new waterway, they discovered much more and demonstrated for future generations that courage and mission are powerful resources. They showed courage as they left their known resources and vehicles behind and sought a new destination. But they also learned that, in order to survive in unknown territory, they had to engage the wisdom of those already familiar with it.

Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt were significant leaders who moved *democracy* and *equality* from concepts into reality. Each played a role in helping the people of the United States believe that a democratic government, for the people and by the people, was worth the fight. The American people would need to be reminded again and again of what it means to be a democracy, but each time the people would accept the challenge. Equality has been a difficult principle to embody. Perhaps the Founding Fathers did not realize, or could not even imagine, what true equality in the United States would mean. Yet they envisioned

15. *Immigrants: The New Americans*, Our American Century series (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1999), p. 20.

and proclaimed it, and over time it has become the foundation on which future generations would wrestle with the issues of their day. "Liberty and justice for all" has become more than a line embedded in the Pledge of Allegiance; it has become a challenge for the American people to turn into a reality.

Diversity, as seen in the waves of immigrants throughout United States history, has only just begun. This mosaic nation continues to change, adapt, and change again as waves of immigrants continue to arrive. As second- and third-generation immigrants assimilate into their new country, cultural differences fade, allowing people to forget that members of their own family were once foreigners who were welcomed to this soil. Celebrating and sustaining this virtue of diversity will demand a continual reminder that it is a significant part of the nation's character.

The Landscape of the Denominational Christian Church

Implanted in the United States landscape is yet another story, one that parallels and draws from the political story and one that continues — yet departs from — the existing Christian story. The denominational church was planted in this soil of *discovery, democracy, equality, and diversity*. In the second part of this chapter I will unearth the state of the church by exploring different stages of denominationalism in the United States. In each stage I will seek to articulate the adhesive principle, highlight important events, and note the prevailing structure.¹⁶

16. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 77-93. I recognize the modern temptation to oversimplify complex and diverse realities by creating neat, all-encompassing categories. This typology could certainly be used for such purposes, and any use flirts with the dangers of such reductions. Acknowledging that this typology does not acknowledge all the historical elements of the denominational church, this essay uses this typology in a general way so as to serve as a snapshot of the history of the denominational church in the United States. It is my premise that, in order to deconstruct the current reality of denominations, it is necessary to have a handle on its historical evolution. This history, then, serves as another contextual lens with which to view the denominational church. Having named the shortcomings, I move forward hoping that this history both informs and criticizes the denominational church's current moment in history.

Stage One: Ethnic Voluntarism, the Separation of Church and State, the Great Awakening, and the Emergence of Denominations

In *The Lively Experiment*, Sidney Mead says that the church in the United States is both a continuation of the European state church and a new experiment.¹⁷ The freedom that the Founding Fathers exercised was not only political; it was also religious. While some colonists tried to establish religious uniformity enforced by the state, it was clear that this approach was not going to work. Hence, religious freedom and the separation of church and state prevailed, and suddenly choice was a word connected with religion. "The form of church life that resulted . . . depended on the voluntary support of a committed laity."¹⁸ The church's success required that people attend local congregations, and that gave congregations increased power.

The result of this new voluntary state of affairs was the formation of denominations, and the denominational church. While denominations have primarily English roots, that is, in the Glorious Revolution (1688-1689) and the Toleration Act (1689) in England, the principle of separation of church and state that was developed by Roger Williams's community in the United States provided new soil in which these ideas could grow.¹⁹ Thus denominations are the direct result of a free religious society in which many churches could coexist, as like-minded churches organized into distinct organizations.²⁰ This emerging reality created the backdrop for the first stage of denominations, known as ethnic voluntarism, an eighteenth-century phenomenon that was essentially a continuation of the logic of the Toleration Act.

In this stage, denominations tended to honor ethnic boundaries: this is known as the adhesive principle. Denominations here functioned pri-

17. Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers), p. x.

18. Ahlstrom, *American People*, p. 382.

19. Information on the Glorious Revolution is available at www.britannica.com/eb/article-9072799. A copy of the Toleration Act is available at www.agh-attorneys.com/4_act_of_tolerantion_1689.htm [both accessed Oct. 1, 2005].

20. Mullin and Richey, *Reimaging*, pp. 75-76. Russell Richey puts it this way: "Denominationalism presents the denomination as a voluntaristic ecclesial body. It . . . presupposes a condition of legal or de facto toleration and religious freedom. . . . It is . . . a movement or body understanding itself to be legitimate and self-sufficient, a proper 'church' . . . a body that concedes the authenticity of other churches even as it claims its own . . . with intentions and the capacity for self-perpetuation."

marily as extensions of European state church bodies planted in a new frontier. Their basic structure was that they were associations formed out of struggles. These associations usually understood “themselves as under the authority of some home country judicatory,” yet they “found themselves to be quasi-independent and forced by the sheer distance to resolve problems, adjudicate moral and theological disputes, and identify, train, and authenticate leadership” (Mullin and Richey, p. 79).

During this period, the most influential force alongside the church was the Enlightenment. Missiologist David Bosch believes that no single factor has had a greater influence on the church than the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment era had its beginnings in the seventeenth century and quickly became the established worldview.²¹ Knowledge and science would become the rule of the day. Faith in God was seen primarily as a private thing, though theology was viewed as a science, and “God’s kingdom became increasingly aligned with the culture and civilization of the West” (Bosch, p. 271). This “enlightened” view led to the idea that the United States had a divine role in God’s providence (the footings of the idea that would become known as *manifest destiny*), an ideal that would drive its mission, shape its attitude toward the world, and impact the church’s view of world missions.²²

“Although religion played a profound role in motivating settlement in North America, by the early eighteenth century many observers were

21. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 262-67. David Bosch identifies seven factors of the Enlightenment: “age of *reason*, operated with a *subject-object scheme*, the *elimination of purpose* from science and the introduction of direct causality as the clue to the understanding of reality, its belief in *progress*, *scientific knowledge was factual, value-free and neutral*, *all problems were in principle solvable*, and regarded people as *emancipated, autonomous individuals*.” See also Ahlstrom, *American People*, pp. 357-58.

22. Michael T. Lubragge says: “Americans used Manifest Destiny as their proclamation of superiority and insisted that their conquests merely fulfilled the divine mission that man is impelled by forces beyond human control.” He continues: “To some, the Manifest Destiny Doctrine was based on the idea that America had a divine providence. It had a future that was destined by God to expand its borders, with no limit to area or country. . . . For example, the idea that the Puritan notion of establishing a ‘city on a hill’ was eventually secularized into Manifest Destiny — a sort of materialistic, religious, utopian destiny.” <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/E/manifest/manifj.htm>. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_Destiny for a history/origin and <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/osulliva.htm> for John L. O’Sullivan’s historic article on Manifest Destiny in 1839 [all accessed Oct. 1, 2005].

beginning to detect a severe deterioration in the quality of spiritual life.”²³ But all that changed by the middle of the eighteenth century, when “a wave of religious revivalism swept through the British colonies in North America” (Findling and Thackeray, p. 6). The Great Awakening of the 1730s-1760s birthed a pietistic spirit that would come to characterize much of American religious life. This Awakening was widespread and involved people across denominational lines. “People everywhere were caught up in the movement, and its influence was spread by innumerable local pastors, passing itinerants, and lay exhorters.”²⁴ The Awakening played an important role in forming a national consciousness, and it embedded a renewed spiritual life and mission spirit in the church,²⁵ which became the catalyst for interdenominational and intercolonial activities.²⁶ People got on board, enthusiasm spread, a movement was created, and in many ways the unifying factor of denominations was born.

*Stage Two: Purposive Missionary Associations:
Christianizing America, Divine Purpose, and Mission Societies*

As the country expanded, a need for the church to reach out to the expanding frontier developed; thus denominations became active in missionary and evangelistic activities that led to the second stage, the purposive missionary association.²⁷ Denominations began viewing the entire country as their mission field, beginning the slow process of breaking down the ethnic enclaves and moving “towards the building of a Christian America” Territory, ethnic groups, piety, and regions influenced the make-up of denominations, but not as much as the unifying idea that God had blessed the United States in giving it a divine purpose, an ideal that served as the cohesive principle (Mullin and Richey, p. 81).

23. John E. Findling and Frank W. Thackeray, eds., *Events That Changed America in the Eighteenth Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 7.

24. Hudson, *Religion in America*, p. 75.

25. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 210; Ahlstrom, *American People*, p. 289. “By the end of the nineteenth century more missionaries were being sent from the USA than from any other country, which is a testimony to missionary enthusiasm especially among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists.”

26. Ahlstrom, *American People*, p. 29.

27. Ahlstrom, *American People*, p. 77.

During this stage, national denominational structures became more formal in an effort to keep up with the growing needs of the expanding nation. Many adopted the form of the voluntary mission society, which was one of the strategic enterprises born during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as independent agencies formed outside the church for the purpose of mission.²⁸ Mission societies were created throughout Europe and North America and became the “Protestant archetype.”²⁹ Voluntary mission societies and the ideology of divine purpose not only fueled missions in North America but also were the force behind sending missionaries around the world. This stage created an outward, optimistic posture for the church in the United States.

Stage Three: Churchly Denominationalism: Definition, Doctrine, and Immigration

After the Civil War, denominations saw the rise of a churchly style (Mullin and Richey, p. 77). This stage was marked by the “old insiders,” those who tended to be shaped by the views of the established churches of Europe, pushing against the revivalistic spirit that had overtaken the church on the frontier in the previous stage. These “old insiders” responded with an increased confessionalism, a focus on tradition, a claim for the importance of “one’s own ecclesial identity,” and a defining of themselves over against the nonliturgical movements. The expansive push of the previous stage now turned inward for reorganization. Continuing the common drive for a Christian nation, denominations put great effort into youth and men’s organizations, improving Sunday school literature, erecting church build-

28. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, p. 210. William Carey (1792) is credited as the founding father of this kind of organization: he was sent from England to India, not by a church body or magistrate, but by a group of individuals who banded together apart from the established church for the purpose of missions.

29. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, p. 212. List of Societies: London Missionary Society (1795), Scottish Missionary Society (1796), Netherlands Missionary Society (1797), Church Missionary Society (1799), British and Foreign Missionary Society (1804), American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (1814), Basel Mission (1816), Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1817-1818), Danish Missionary Society (1821), Berlin Missionary Society (1824), Rhenish Missionary Society (1828), Swedish Missionary Society (1835), and the North German Missionary Society (1836), to mention a few.

ings, and enhancing congregational life. In addition, each denomination worked to enhance their issues of polity, governance, and structures for mission (Mullin and Richey, pp. 82-84).

The most influential outside event during this period was the Civil War. As the country struggled to remain united, the issue of slavery found its way into the church. While slavery was not the cause for the divisions between denominations, it exacerbated the differences that were already present. In fact, "slavery exposed important ecclesiastical issues and . . . after the divisions, if not before, each of the sectional churches found it important to construe its purposes in theological and ecclesiastical terms" (Mullin and Richey, p. 83).

To the unifying purpose of Christianizing America, another practical purpose was added: the need to address immigrants. "In America the immigrants had to begin anew, individually and in groups, to achieve their aspirations for culture and well-being. Religious institutions, therefore, often became a more vital factor than they had ever been before." Immigration both influenced the landscape of the United States and shaped the church. During the colonial period, three denominational bodies (Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians — all with British backgrounds)³⁰ made up 80 percent of Americans claiming any church affiliation. However, that drastically changed during the nineteenth century.³¹

In 1926, by which time 40 percent of the population claimed a religious relationship, Roman Catholics were the largest single group (18,605,000), while the next three largest denominations — Baptists (8,011,000), Methodist (7,764,000), and Lutheran (3,226,000) — accounted for 59 percent of the Protestants. (Ahlstrom, p. 517)

Immigration greatly influenced the churches that thrived; that is, the church affiliation that immigrants brought with them dramatically shaped the denominational profile of the American church during this stage.

30. Ahlstrom, *American People*, p. 517.

31. Ahlstrom, *American People*, p. 517.

Stage Four: Corporate Organization: World Conferences, Ecumenism, and Corporate Structures

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, denominations added another layer to their polity: organizational structures influenced by the emerging discipline of organizational theory. This corporate view was the fourth stage of denominationalism, and it began with a deepened, internal focus on structure, which, over time, resulted in a more instrumental view of the church (Mullin and Richey, p. 85). Bureaucracy, organizational grammar, and professionalism were some of the byproducts of this stage. For example, national agencies with staffs became commonplace; denominations now included national, regional, and local expressions; and clear expectations for clergy were established. All of these were the evolutionary precursors of denominations becoming top-down regulatory systems, what would emerge in the fifth stage.

Significant outside influence during this stage came from a series of world mission conferences. In 1910, participants from over 160 boards or agencies came together with optimism for world missions. The focus was not on doctrine or polity but on consultation, cooperation, and mission strategy for evangelizing the world.³² The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference “is often considered the high point of this nineteenth-century ecumenical mission movement” (Bevans and Schroeder, pp. 208-9), marking a new day for the international church. It was the culmination of a series of international events that would eventually both draw the international ecumenical church together and divide it.

The International Missionary Council (IMC), formed in 1921 in the aftermath of Edinburgh, led the international missionary conversation for the next four decades. Of the seven IMC gatherings, the 1952 Willingen meeting was the most important: it resulted in the eventual formulation of the *missio Dei* concept.³³ This concept changed the church identity from being the sender in missions to the entity being sent, turning existing missionary practices upside down.³⁴ In 1961, the IMC merged with the World

32. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, p. 220.

33. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 370.

34. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 370. Lesslie Newbigin, in a pamphlet published soon after the convention, summarized the consensus with three points: “the church is the mission,” “the home base is everywhere,” and “mission in partnership.”

Council of Churches (WCC)³⁵ and became the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), which would set forth the idea that “God’s mission was not geographically bound; rather, one should talk of ‘mission on six continents’” (Bevans and Schroeder, p. 260).

The Roman Catholic Church burst forth with a renewed missionary posture in 1962 with the Second Vatican Council’s *Ad Gentes*, proclaiming that the church is “missionary by its very nature.”³⁶ Under Pope John XXIII’s leadership, the Roman Catholic Church set in motion major changes that would not only shake up the world of that church body but also influence the entire international religious scene. “[T]he church began to ‘read the signs of the times’ and to acknowledge the movement of God’s Spirit outside the Catholic Church” (Bevans and Schroeder, p. 243), which opened the door to dialogue between Roman Catholics and Protestants in new and significant ways. As a result, a broader ecumenical conversation commenced.

By this stage, the adhesive principle of denominations was fading, but two themes remained. First, denominations were full-fledged organizational systems with defined processes, roles, and techniques imported from the corporate world. The result of this reality was that the mission of the church was now deeply embedded in a formal organizational structure. Second, the modern ecumenical movement was finding some cohesion among many denominations. While a good number of these efforts emerged from the need for cooperation both at home and abroad, the by-product was new opportunities for dialogue and the beginnings of imagining a broader view of God’s mission.

Stage Five: Post-Denominationalism Confessionalism — Regulation, Pluralism, and a Turn

The fifth stage began in the late 1960s and early 1970s when denominations started to become full regulatory agencies. The professional, bureaucratic, and organizational structures that began in the previous stage had now become commonplace. Yet they were unable to provide the de-

35. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, p. 243. The WCC was formed in 1948 by bringing two streams of international work together: the Life and Work movement and the Faith and Order movement.

36. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, p. 7. See www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/v2miss.htm for the full document [accessed Oct. 7, 2005].

sired cohesion that was required to address the new diversity being experienced. Russell Richey says: "Denominations have lost or are losing long-familiar adhesive and dynamic principles and are groping, often desperately, for tactics that work and unite" (Mullin and Richey, p. 87). The notion of a Christian nation that earlier denominational leaders dreamed about was not to be, because the United States was well on its way to becoming a pluralistic society. At the same time, however, there was a rising effort among conservative Christians to reclaim a moral foundation for the country. During this time, Robert Wuthnow notes, denominations "split badly and fairly cleanly into theologically conservative and liberal camps."³⁷ Christian unity would not occur across the country — or even within Christian churches themselves.

Without a clear, cohesive purpose, denominations grabbed for control by developing themselves into regulatory agencies, and they sought to win converts by establishing new mechanisms through consulting, marketing, and offering grants. But these efforts, while offering some short-term wins, did not produce the long-lasting results that were needed. "The top-down, imposed, common denominational grammar [began] to erode." And, as a result, church members began to shop *among* denominations to find a church home. This required denominations to refocus their efforts on establishing their own unique identity, which called for denominational loyalty and refined church polity (Mullin and Richey, pp. 88-90).

Outside the church, "the advent of new social movements opposing the Vietnam War, imperialism, racism, sexism, and capitalist societies" were visible signs of an emerging stirring that was taking place.³⁸ Just as the dream of the United States truly becoming a Christian nation within a framework of civil religion was fading, so were the hopes of the "enlightened" beginning to weaken. Sociology, philosophy, the arts, literature, and science all experienced the first tremors that would soon question many of their basic ideals.³⁹ While no one could clearly articulate what was going on, something was in the air and many were beginning to feel a turn coming.

37. In Mullin and Richey, *Reimaging*, pp. 87, 88.

38. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), p. 4.

39. Craig Van Gelder, "Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition," in *Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 113-38.

Stage Six: What's Next?

Russell Richey notes that each stage of denominationalism “partook of organizational materials of its day,” and “[e]ach type or style functioned with a distinctive vision of American society and of Protestant responsibility therein.” It is true that the typology of previous stages did not die out as the next stage surfaced; thus, in some denominations, many of the historical frames were — and still are — operating concurrently. Yet these typological stages highlight the cohesive factors during each stage, and they reflect the church’s needs at that point in history (Mullin and Richey, p. 77).

Currently, denominations are in a state of flux. The organizational structures created in stage four and the regulatory agencies of stage five are no longer affordable or sufficient for the twenty-first-century church mission. Some are pessimistic about the future of denominations and have proclaimed their imminent death, while others are optimistic and have witnessed pockets of vitality and innovation. While opinions vary on the future status of denominations, one thing everyone agrees on is that denominations are in a stage of transition.⁴⁰ Transition is not something new for denominations; but, in order to move through this transition effectively, they have to address some key questions: “What is the mission of the church in the twenty-first century?” “What is the role of denominations in the future?” These are questions that I will take up in the final section of this chapter.

The Future of Denominationalism in a Postmodern Age

Imagine, if you will, this absurd scene: you are on a weeklong backpacking trip with a group of colleagues, hiking through beautiful forests and along trails in a national park. Everyone is enjoying the scenery, the fresh air, the peace and quiet, and the chance to reflect on oneself in God’s wondrous creation. On the fourth day the leader of your recreational expedition, for the first time, pauses in the trail and appears uncertain. Looking around in several directions, he takes off his hat, scratches his head, digs through his

40. David A. Roozen and James R. Neiman, eds., *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 1-4.

fanny pack and pulls out a map with many folds. He scrutinizes the details of the map, glancing up now and then to survey the scene ahead of your party.

This ritual continues for a few minutes. Members of the party begin to murmur to each other, quietly at first. Before long, though, one of the group steps out of line, walks up to the deliberating trail guide, and bends down over the map with him. A few seconds later, she jumps to her feet and exclaims, "This will never get us where we are headed! It's a map of downtown Kansas City!"⁴¹

Some of us have felt this way about the church in recent times: the church seems to be living in a new time, a time when the terrain often doesn't match the map. More pertinently, perhaps, what maps are churches using today? Are these maps providing the needed direction? What about tomorrow? And what has come of this turn? The church, using a Thomas Kuhn concept, is in the midst of a *paradigm shift*.⁴²

As I have observed above, denominations are also in a state of flux. To attend to this flux, we need to address both form and function. The first task has to do with defining the work of the church (the cohesive principle), and the second asks what form this work will take (leadership and structure).⁴³ In addition, the church needs to recognize its current location (context). Hence there are four elements that are key ingredients for understanding the future of the church and for developing a twenty-first-century ecclesiology: cohesive principle, context, leadership, and structure. I will discuss these elements in this final section.

Cohesive Principle: What's the Mission?

In a time when the center has been called into question, it's time to ask: What is the mission of the twenty-first-century church? What will be its cohesive principle? Any adequate answer will have to begin with a strong

41. George B. Thompson, Jr., "Leadership for Congregational Vitality: Paradigmatic Explorations in Open Systems Organizational Culture Theory," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 53.

42. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

43. Roozen and Nieman, *Church, Identity, and Change*, p. 12. These are two lenses used in this study of eight denominations.

biblical and theological base. Recognizing that the church is the one being sent rather than the sender means viewing the church as missionary by its very nature and requires the church to have a missional theology. The missional theology that I suggest here, while very brief, will address three primary areas: view of God, view of the church, and view of the gospel.

View of God

“The Church in North America has an obstacle to overcome if it is to get past its impoverished missional imagination,” says Gary Simpson. “That obstacle is its inadequate view of God.”⁴⁴ The church’s doctrine of God matters, and it matters because a person’s view of God influences her view of herself in relationship to God, others, and the world. It matters because a person’s understanding of God’s mission will impact his understanding of the church’s mission.

As I have suggested above, the *missio Dei* is the core to understanding missional theology. The trinitarian view of God found in *missio Dei* has two main impulses. The first impulse is a sending one: “God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”⁴⁵ The second impulse is its communal nature: “In confessing that God is, we encounter God’s existence as a trinity — a tri-unity, a social community of three persons within the Godhead.”⁴⁶ This sending, communal God works in and through community; and with this doctrine of God, not only is the church’s mission God’s mission, but here God acts as the primary agent in mission, the church as secondary. This means that God has been, is, and will be active in the world. We, as God’s church, simply must seek to participate in God’s mission in the world.

44. Gary M. Simpson, “No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity,” *Word and World* 18 (Summer 1998): 264.

45. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

46. Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 96. For a full development, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), and John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

View of the Church

What, then, is the view of the church? George Hunsberger says, "It is the church's mission to represent the reign of God."⁴⁷ The church is not the reign of God, but "presents it as its community (koinonia), its servant (diakonia), and its messenger (kerygma)." Or, to use Lesslie Newbigin's language, the church is the "sign, instrument, and foretaste" of God's reign.⁴⁸ Craig Van Gelder adds that the church's "very existence demonstrates that [God's] redemptive reign has already begun. Its very presence invites the world to watch, listen, examine, and consider accepting God's reign as a superior way of living."⁴⁹ Hence, the church bears witness to a different way of life, one that is shaped, modeled, and influenced by God. The church lives within the now and the not yet, the tangible pointing to the intangible, the embodiment of the messenger's message, a witness to the gospel. Bearing witness "is not about program and method. It is about openly inviting others into the community of new humanity so they can experience the grace of God."⁵⁰

View of the Gospel

If the church is to bear witness to the gospel, then what exactly is the gospel? The gospel is brought into the world through the person of Jesus Christ. This was God's breaking into the world incarnationally. God, as the active agent in mission, took the form of a human and came to earth. It is the work of the church to continue to live out the gospel in its time in history. Douglas John Hall appeals for the gospel's active, surprising nature. He argues that the gospel is always good news "because it engages, takes on and does battle with the bad news, offering another alternative, another vision of what could be, another way into the future." So how is the gospel taking on the bad news? How is it that Christ's coming into the world offers us a new future today? If the church can engage the issues of its day with "a responsive Word that really addresses and engages context, that Word will be

47. George Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 15-16.

48. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 110.

49. Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, p. 100.

50. Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, p. 153.

gospel.”⁵¹ This is a missional understanding of gospel: gospel as missionary activity, initiated first by God, incarnational, embodied and located in a time and place, and which offers people an alternative way, a new future.

So what’s the mission? The mission is that a communal, sending God calls and sends the church to be a witness to the reign of God, proclaiming and living this good news incarnationally. This is the church’s reason for being; this is the center to which the church clings, for God has called the church to join in this mission of redeeming and transforming the world. God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to love the world, and now God sends the church. It is the church’s mission to participate in God’s mission, constantly seeking ways of bearing witness to this in-breaking of grace that has been bestowed upon it.

Context: Postmodernism

Cultural anthropology reminds us that context matters, for all culture is influenced and shaped by its context, both historically and geographically.⁵² Hence, the church’s context matters. Today a new contextual challenge has surfaced, and once again the church needs leaders to scout out new ways.

“It appears that postmodernism increasingly represents the cultural air that we breathe,”⁵³ says Van Gelder. The modern world that emerged out of the Enlightenment era was the foundation on which ideologies of the past centuries were built. It shaped the worldview for hundreds of years, it is the ground on which U.S. institutions were built, and it is the paradigm within which the church has operated. And now this foundation is being called into question. Stanley Grenz warns: “The shift from the familiar territory of modernity to the uncharted terrain of postmodernity has grave implications for those who seek to live as Christ’s disciples in the new context.”⁵⁴ Postmodernism is the single greatest influence on the context of the United States and the church today. But what is postmodernism?

51. Douglas John Hall, “What Is Theology?” *Crosscurrents* (Summer 2003): 177, 179.

52. For more on cultural anthropology and context, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 25-58.

53. Van Gelder, “Postmodernism and Evangelicals: A Unique Missiological Challenge at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century,” *Missiology* 30, no. 4 (Oct. 2002): 493.

54. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 162.

The tremors that were noticed in the 1960s and 1970s have come to be known as “the postmodern turn.”⁵⁵ By the 1980s the roots of this turn were firmly planted in popular culture, and the move from the fringe to the mainstream was complete: postmodernity was born (Grenz, p. 17). While various definitions are given for postmodernism, at its core postmodernism “represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built,” and instead the lifting up and celebrating of local, particular, and diverse lines of thinking and expression (Grenz, p. 5).

While many in the United States would not describe themselves as pure-bred postmoderns, postmodern ideals have already infiltrated the world in which they find themselves. For example, the personal computer and the worldwide web have opened up a whole host of new possibilities. These new realities allow for information to be accessible to people regardless of status or education; they create new venues of expression for professionals and amateurs alike; and they thrive on broad and diverse clientele and facilitate global networking. But the computer is not the only place one is exposed to this new world. Literature, theater, television, and film have introduced postmodernity into popular culture, juxtaposing ideas, images, and concepts that play with, clash, or confuse the reader/viewer. These efforts seek to raise questions, dislodge presuppositions, and challenge in ways that *moderns* would never have thought possible. The mere presence of postmodern discourse has forced most disciplines into new territory.

George Cladis has identified some postmodern characteristics that have an impact on church leadership.⁵⁶ These characteristics push the church to rethink its *modus operandi*. Critiquing church organizational structures and leadership qualities, Cladis calls the church to become more like an organism with flattened accountability systems and larger networks, while also providing opportunities for personal investment. Cladis believes vision, values, trust, meaning, and innovation will replace status, credentials, and bureaucracy. Cladis’s boldest statements are his pro-

55. Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn*, p. viii.

56. George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), p. 18. Cladis approaches these postmodern times with optimism, seeing this as a time offering “wonderful new opportunities for the Church of Jesus Christ to be reformed and renewed along biblical lines.”

nouncements that "Christendom is over in America" and that the "main-line church domination has ended" (Cladis, pp. 19-27).

If church leadership is to meet the challenges of postmodernity, something different must emerge. The landscape in which the church was planted and flourished has now changed. Van Gelder concurs: "We are living in a new day in America. The shifts in the cultural context have presented a new challenge for the churches to address America as a mission field."⁵⁷ As the church addresses its mission field, it must do so with a different form of church. Organizations that will thrive within postmodernity must be living systems attentive to interdependence, vision, innovation, and meaning-making. While it is true that the modern world is still alive in places throughout the country, it is also true that the old ways will not serve the world of the future. Thomas Kuhn might be a prophetic voice for the church today. He says that

. . . the emergence of new theories is generally preceded by a period of pronounced professional insecurity. As one might expect, that insecurity is generated by . . . persistent failure. . . . Failure of existing rules is the prelude for new ones.⁵⁸

Perhaps this is just such a time. Perhaps leaders are using maps that describe terrain different from their location; perhaps they need a new passageway. Context is both broad (i.e., historical) and particular (i.e., geographical): whereas postmodernism is the broad, historical context, context also applies specifically to one's geography. This means that the church must take its specific context seriously. This will require national, regional, and local attention, the study of changing surroundings, and the continual pondering of one's engagement of the gospel within one's unique situation.

Leadership: Missionaries Empowered by the Spirit

It should come as no surprise that leadership in this emerging context may look different from the way it did in the past. In fact, first-generation postmodern leaders already look different. One need only visit one of the

57. Hunsberger, *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, p. 68.

58. Kuhn, *Structure*, pp. 67-68.

hundreds of postmodern ministries that have sprung up across the United States to see the evidence.⁵⁹ Yet some common characteristics are surfacing: one characteristic of leaders in postmodern ministries is that they are missionaries. Postmodern leaders seek to engage their particular contexts with the good news of the gospel. They know their unique context through study and immersion; they know the language; and they are using any available resources to create missionary encounters. These encounters may result in forming faith communities, but they also may not do that. They may be ministries at skating parks, coffeeshops, or virtual communities that live solely on the Internet. While forms may vary, the core of each ministry is the common desire to effectively speak the gospel to its particular context. Postmodern missionary leaders demonstrate characteristics similar to those of Lewis and Clark as they explore postmodernity's new terrain and draw wisdom from the natives. These leaders will be called to discover the unique characteristics of this time and place in history, including engaging with those who are immersed in it.

If the first characteristic of a postmodern leader is to be a missionary, then who might these missionaries be? These missionaries are clergy and laity; they are people on the fringes and people steeped in the church; and they are professionals as well as novices from various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. No one category defines them. But more than any category or status, authenticity seems central. As Cladis makes clear, postmodern people want leaders who are genuine, those who care little about educational background, titles, or positions (Cladis, p. 21). This re-orientation both threatens current leadership structures and can provide new opportunities for leadership among the laity, just as mission societies provided those opportunities in the past. Therefore, future church leadership can grow to include a broader mix of people: the theologically trained and untrained, clergy and laity (with the line between them becoming blurred), a wider range of ethnicities, and the list could go on. This emerging phenomenon invites leadership models to become more decentralized and to allow for grass-roots leadership models to surface. Thus, the second characteristic is diverse leadership using decentralized leadership models.

The second characteristic leads to a third: similar to the blurring of

59. One great example of this diverse leadership is *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), written by the leading postmodern church leaders and edited by Leonard Sweet. Their profiles are quite diverse.

lines within leadership, there exists a blurring of lines between the church and the world. In his book *Boundary Leaders*, Gary Gunderson articulates the stirring that he perceives taking place within people of faith. Faithful followers of Jesus are finding ways of living their faith in all areas of their lives. No longer does the church need to be the only place for ministry, because, as its people become apostolic and engage in God's mission, they are finding ways of living their faith wherever they are. Centered Life, an initiative of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, actually works with church leadership to create this spirit within congregations.⁶⁰ This apostolic nature marks the third characteristic of leadership.

In a missional church within a postmodern context, the source of power need not come from one's denomination or one's place in a structure. Rather, it needs to come from God. A church seeking power from God continually strives to maintain a connection with God and is alive in the Spirit. Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald imagine such a church as being "a community of the Real Presence, the embodiment of the risen and living Lord, the community infused with transcendence, and the witness to the coming kingdom." Leadership in such a church allows it to be an organism that is shaped and molded by Christ.⁶¹ In such situations, the church exercises leadership when it seeks to live out God's mission in the world, specifically God's unique mission for each church, in that church's time in history and in its particular location. With power resting in God's hands and not the hands of humans, leadership can be freed to proclaim and live out God's good news. When people rely on the premise that God has been faithful in the past and will continue to be faithful in the future, this final characteristic of postmodern leadership recognizes God as the source of power.

Structure: Open, Networking System

Having defined the mission, the context, and the key characteristics of leadership in the emerging postmodern context, I now want to step out even further and suggest a polity for a missional ecclesiology. Two things

60. See www.centeredlife.org.

61. Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald, *Imagining a Church in the Spirit: A Task for Mainline Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 12, 117.

are worth noting here. First of all, the current ecclesiastical structures of denominations have been influenced as much by the political landscape in which they emerged as by the theological underpinnings of each denomination. To varying degrees, each denominational polity has been shaped by the state and federal governments in which it lives.⁶² Therefore, what has become commonplace for many within the church needs to be deconstructed. This deconstruction is beyond the realm of this essay, but it is important to be aware of this reality and how particular ideologies of power have found their way into church structures. Second, it is important to note what a missional ecclesiology is and is not.

A missional ecclesiology will always include organizational forms, but one should not see these as the church. Organizations need to serve, not to determine, the nature of the church with its duality of being both divine and human. They also need to serve the ministry of the church in all of its diverse functions.⁶³

A missional ecclesiology in a postmodern context needs to reflect the organic nature of the emerging context. Here the new sciences can shed some light. Margaret Wheatley, in her study of new sciences in search of leadership lessons, has discovered that order can be found in a chaotic world, and nonequilibrium is actually healthy for a living entity.⁶⁴ In addition, self-organizing systems demonstrate their viability and resilience in their great capacity to adapt and create structures that fit the moment.⁶⁵ In such a system, “stability comes from a deepening center, a clarity about who it is,” not a lack of chaos or a well-defined structure (Wheatley, p. 83). In a world that is fluid and flexible, control cannot provide stability within organizations. In fact, the opposite is true. Wheatley notes that “all life lives off-balance in a world that is open to change” (Wheatley, p. 89).

62. See Roozen and Nieman, *Church, Identity, and Change*, pp. 12-14, for a broad overview of this notion.

63. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 71-72.

64. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), pp. 75-78, 85. “A living system changes in order to preserve itself.”

65. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, pp. 82, 89. In fact, “[w]hen leaders strive for equilibrium and stability by imposing control, constricting people’s freedom and inhibiting local change, they only create the conditions that threaten the organization’s survival.”

Therefore, any organizational form in a fluid, shifting environment will need to have the characteristics of a self-organizing system, open to change and centered on a clear purpose in order to survive. Immigration serves as a great example of how this fluidity has played out within the United States, for as immigration has interacted with the changing environment, structures have been transformed.

However, any proposed structure for the church not only needs to fit within the emerging postmodern context but also needs to participate in God's mission, drawing from biblical and historical resources. In *The Essence of the Church*, Van Gelder unpacks church structure by looking at the word *ecclesia* and its three uses in the New Testament. One use refers to the *local* gathering or congregation: "A congregation is an *ecclesia*, a called out assembly for the purpose of being the people of God in a particular place." The second use refers to a cluster of congregations in a general *region*: this is the concept behind the development of synods or regions within a denomination. The third use refers to the church *catholic*, identifying the universal visible church. The function of the local expression is articulated in many ways throughout the Bible, as are the attributes of the universal visible church. But the function of the second usage is less explicit. Van Gelder describes one key dimension of the second function as being "mobile missional structures" that exist beyond local congregations for the purpose of intertwining, coordinating, and expanding ministry. These structures do not all look alike: some are apostolic leaders sent out to congregations, others are mobile teams sent out or created for resourcing purposes, and others are simply at-large leaders.⁶⁶

A missional polity needs all three elements and functions. To be missional, the local congregation must think theologically and sociologically about its context as it engages it with the gospel message. In a postmodern context, congregations will have a heightened role, for they are the closest to their particular setting and have the greatest potential for having an impact on it. Pairing congregations with the realities of new scientific theories and treating congregations as living systems could unleash the enormous potential that congregations have to regulate themselves if and when they are centered on a clear purpose.

"Mobile missional structures" also need to be in place. But what if these structures weren't actually structures at all, but loosely connected

66. Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, pp. 163-72.

networks instead? Paul Martinson says: "Rather than centralized bureaucracies, we need dispersed networks that fit the communication realities of our day." Using missionary agencies as a model, he suggests that mobile missionary structures could "serve to consult, inform, inspire, and connect" particular ministries, "letting the energy of local communities of faith take shape in any number of ways [and] in many manners of configuration."⁶⁷ Sharon Henderson Callahan integrated her own research with Bolman and Deal's frames⁶⁸ and Wheatley's new science, and she found that "new church leaders will attend to the relationships and gifts of humans (human resource), build networks to defy the notion of scarcity with the promise of shared abundance (political) and celebrate the reality of our shared grounding in Christ (symbolic)."⁶⁹ Judicatories, missionary agencies, and parachurch organizations are necessary in a missional ecclesiology, but they are intended to be supportive of local congregations. They are to be mobile missional structures that function as connective tissue, binding local congregations with the church's overall mission. Together, local congregations and mobile missional structures are to strive for, and to uphold the principles of, becoming one catholic church, the final element of the church.

*A New Ecclesiology: Postmodern Denominationalism,
a Missional Movement*

"Why is it that some ideas or behaviors or products start epidemics and others don't?" This is the core question that has stimulated the explorations of Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell wonders: "What can we do to deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own?"⁷⁰ An epidemic is a movement that spreads rampantly, almost

67. Paul Varo Martinson, "Social Capital and the New Missionary Pragmatics," *Word and World* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 158-59. For an already existing postmodern example, see www.emergentvillage.org.

68. Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

69. Sharon Henderson Callahan, "Shifting Images of Church Invite New Leadership," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 78-79.

70. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), p. 14.

out of control, throughout society. What if the church could learn about and create such a movement?

Gladwell believes that there are three rules that make sense of epidemics: the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context. The Law of the Few refers to the fact that epidemics are “driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people.” The Stickiness Factor says that there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable.” The Power of Context recognizes that “[e]ven the smallest and subtlest and most unexpected of factors can affect the way we act,” and “human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem” (Gladwell, pp. 21-29). Behind these rules lies an important belief that sudden change can (and does) happen. “We are all, at heart, gradualists. . . . But the world of the Tipping Point is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is a possibility” (Gladwell, pp. 13-14). Using this frame of reference and these simple rules, we may be able to create positive epidemics or movements.

What if denominations in a postmodern age were about creating positive epidemics, epidemics similar to the Great Awakenings in early U.S. history — which moved across denominations and the country? The future work of denominations could be to fan the flames of a Christian movement, to suggest that radical change is possible, to ignite contagious behavior, to rely on and invest in a few critical individuals, and to tend to contexts. This move would focus on investing in a dynamic future, and it would require leaving many of the present vehicles behind. It would be a movement that sought to be aligned with the *missio Dei* and to be guided by the Spirit. With this loosely established missional center, individual denominations could live into this reality from their own theological frameworks with the particulars unique to their tradition, knowing that the mystery of God is broad enough and the current postmodern context diverse enough to embrace and welcome such a plethora of Christian expressions. National efforts could challenge the church missionally, recognizing again that the United States is a mission field and constantly pushing for a bigger vision of God’s activity in the world. Local efforts could challenge the church communally, keeping it real and authentic as it lives into a new era of apostolic leadership. Put another way, the current postmodern context and the current denominational stage call for the pendulum to swing, from denominations being tightly run, inward-focused organizations to being mission-driven organisms that seek their vitality locally, nationally, and globally.

It is important to remember that the church’s particular mission

lives in tension with the greater culture. As the church seeks to create a Christian movement, it needs to find touch points from within the context in which it lives for bringing forth the good news. As the church seeks to be the sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God, it lives within a dynamic paradox of being in the world but not of the world. Could the DNA of the United States offer points at which the church could address anew the current situation? Could the church set out to reframe the virtues of discovery, democracy, equality, and diversity into defining principles for living out God's kingdom here on earth?⁷¹ Could church leaders today learn from leaders of the past about the necessity of exploring new paths and setting up new ways of being a people? Is there, once again, the need to listen to the emerging voices and offer a prophetic word, while operating from an offensive, rather than defensive, position? The dynamics of the postmodern American context provide both challenges and opportunities for the church as it rewrites its maps for participation in God's mission, rather than trying to Christianize America as its primary compass.

What, then, has emerged? A missional ecclesiology centered in a missional theology organized as a network of congregations that operate as self-organizing systems, led by missionary leaders empowered by the Spirit to create a Christian movement in a postmodern context. Missional theology becomes the church's driving force. Apostolic leaders who understand the importance of context are sent out with the good news of the gospel, blurring the lines between church and the world. The church values the various gifts and passions each person brings into the ministry of a particular location, and its leaders earn the right to be heard in their given context by being genuine and authentic.

Each ministry is part of a larger fluid network that, from the outside, might seem chaotic, but that is held together with a clear center allowing it to ebb and flow as needed. Networking begins locally but soon expands,

71. Framed within the political setting of the U.S., these virtues are not directly connected with God's kingdom. Yet it seems that each provides rich soil from which to grow new Christian missionary practices. One quick cut might look something like this: discovery = God's creative way of connecting and loving God's people. God makes God's self new all throughout the Bible; democracy and equality = God's kingdom turns upside down the power structures of society and throws open the doors of the kingdom to people that society has rejected (children, women, and slaves, to name a few); and diversity = God chose particular people with various experiences to be witnesses to the transformational power of God's message in their lives. This is but a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven.

eventually reaching to the far ends of the earth. The glue within these networks is the commitment to consciously strive toward unity and uphold the overarching attributes of the whole Christian church.

While individual churches or denominations could tend to this work on their own, it seems that there is an opening in history where denominations across the board are asking similar questions and wrestling with similar issues. Such timing is not often available and invites denominations to emphasize what they have in common — their missional drive — rather than emphasizing their differences. Perhaps this common calling can provide a foundation that is deeper than the civic religion that has emerged in the United States and can unite the denominational church at a more significant level, the level of bringing the Good News of God into a world filled with bad news. It is a fact that, as the church lives within the comingling of the modern and the postmodern, forgiveness and grace are attributes the church must not forget.⁷² The church must keep in mind that its goal is not theological consensus; rather, its goal is Christians journeying together, grappling with what it means to live a life of discipleship in their day. A shift in paradigms will not happen overnight, and not everyone will make the leap at the same time. For just as it took the church almost a century to wrestle with the issue of slavery, so it might take the better part of a generation to fully make this shift.⁷³ But there will be moments when small, subterranean efforts will reach Gladwell's "tipping point," and the bulk of society will experience a paradigm shift. It is my prayer that the church will have the foresight to stand on the front edge of this postmodern turn rather than becoming an obstacle to change, for there is an emerging world that needs to hear the Good News of the gospel.

Conclusion

I have in this chapter sought to revive a spirit of discovery within the denominational church in the United States. I have done so by describing the landscape at various times in history, by articulating the DNA through which the country has lived, fought, and emerged, and by reminding the denominational church of its continuity within historical Christianity and

72. Van Gelder, "Postmodernism and Evangelicals," p. 495.

73. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, pp. 141, 171-75.

challenging it to develop a new contextual missiology. Ultimately, the calling of the church is complicated and exciting, straightforward yet complex. Moving the church into the twenty-first century might seem as crazy as Lewis and Clark sailing up the Missouri River in search of the Pacific Ocean. Yet, if the church engages in this postmodern adventure, people for years to come may marvel at the beautiful landscape there is to discover. For Lewis and Clark, it only took a few leaders with a clear mission, determination, and a willingness to venture forth. Will you join the twenty-first-century church's Corps of Discovery and help create a Christian movement within the postmodern context?