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At first we were reluctant to release this Chapter by itself, fearing it may not make enough sense as a stand-alone document. But enough participants from our Making The Shift Trainings are requesting this material for use with their congregations that we decided to go ahead. For those who want more context, or feel like they are missing too much, see the end of this chapter for how to secure a copy of the full book and Field Guide. We hope this Chapter contributes to your journey as disciples and participants in God's mission in this world.

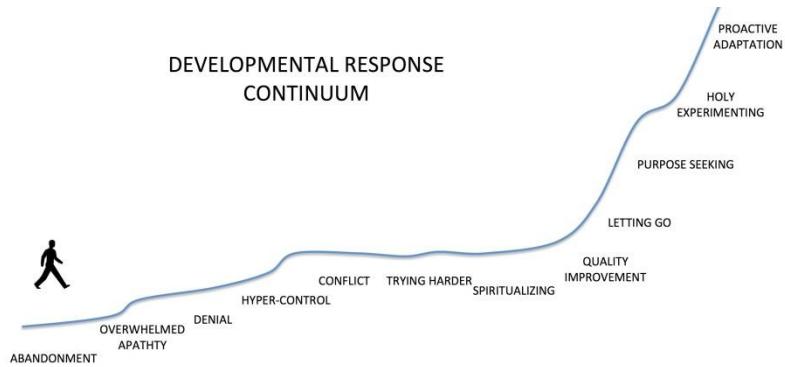
*Mark Tidsworth, President  
Pinnacle Leadership Associates*

Source: *Shift: Three Big Moves For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*, Mark Tidsworth, Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WHEN THE CURRENT CHANGES DIRECTION

Coaching clergy and consulting churches provides the opportunity for observing the reactions of churches to our shifting context. The variety of reactions is fascinating. As you read through the following, consider where your congregation may be in its journey. Some of the following reactions are more adaptive than others, as you will notice. I offer these descriptions with no judgment. Change is difficult and resistance is inevitable. We must grow sufficiently convinced that what we are doing is not advancing the mission before we will change. Perhaps these are points on the developmental response continuum when we encounter unexpected change, when currents change direction. Clergy, church staff, lay persons, and entire congregations find themselves somewhere on this response continuum.



#### Abandonment

Early on, no one notices abandonment happening. One family leaves because they want more programming for their children. Another couple leaves because they would like to be in a church with people their own age. Another simply stops participating, dropping out of the Christian Church altogether. It takes several leavings before church leaders recognize the abandonment pattern. Few people are angry or irritated with this church; not leaving because of overt conflict. Instead, due to ongoing low-level disappointment, boredom, and hopelessness, they just drift away. The engagement factor in this congregation dips so low that

people find themselves adrift, feeling like it wouldn't matter if they did leave the church. Eventually they do.

Statistics in the United States confirm this. The numbers of people who participate in a Christian church are shrinking, partly because those involved are walking away. They find themselves believing something is missing, the church has grown irrelevant, or they are embarrassed about what the church is saying to its world. Irrelevance of the church, along with disengagement from what's really happening in the world, combine to form a context from which people disengage. Working the Modern Era paradigm of church with Postmodern disciples leaves these disciples high and dry. Eventually they walk away.

How do we know if our congregation is experiencing abandonment? This reaction is very easy to identify. Simply look at participation levels. Is this church numerically shrinking? If so, one explanation may be that it is still living like it's 1965, 1975, or even 1995. What's the eventual outcome? Well, folk wisdom in ministerial circles used to say, "A church is a hard thing to kill." I know clergy who work as parachurch ministers (chaplains, consultants, therapists, etc.) full time and then pastor very small congregations as well. Some of these churches are robust small ministries. Many others are trying to hang on with dignity until the doors close. Some of these congregations have experienced major contextual changes which contributed to their demise, largely external factors. Many more (the majority) made unconscious or conscious choices along the way which led to their demise. Every living organism must adapt to its environment to endure. Not all organisms make it.

### **Overwhelmed Apathy**

What happens to an individual when the pace of change is too fast? How do we react when it seems like we are drinking from a fire hose? When stress becomes distress and we grow overwhelmed, what do we do? A frequent response is to enter a period of apathy.

The 1960s saw a series of psychological and social science studies out of which the term "learned helplessness" evolved. Subjects were exposed to a dilemma, then made to feel like they could not take action which would resolve the dilemma. Over time, subjects just quit trying. Even when conditions obviously changed, making it possible for them to resolve the dilemma, subjects resisted lifting a finger. They had learned helplessness; a posture of inaction in the face of challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Some congregations find themselves experiencing learned helplessness. They see the changes happening in their contexts, they learn about the Postmodern Era's arrival, and they despair. When they look at who they are, they believe things will never change in their congregation,

never allowing adaptation. Secretly, the disciples in these congregations believe their church won't ultimately make the changes necessary to flourish in this new world. The limitations, dynamics, norms, and culture of their church are too rigid and ingrained for adaptive change to flourish. When this is one's perspective, then one experiences helplessness. "No matter what we do, things here will not change, so we might as well just live with it."

This reaction is similar to abandonment at its core (belief the church is not and will not adapt), yet the outcome is different. This church has lost who it's going to lose. Those remaining are loyal, caring, dedicated disciples who don't see any other options besides riding it out. They are committed to Christ and to God's Church, never considering walking away. Yet, they see themselves as living on a dead end street – one which has been closed off at both ends. As one might imagine, this perspective (typically unconscious) leads to a lack of energy, momentum, and hope. Apathy becomes the prevailing feeling or ethos of these congregations.

### **Denial**

Why do you participate with a Christian Church? When we are honest, most of us are driven by mixed motivations for being a part of a church. There is the most noble motivation (desire to join with other Christ-followers around God's mission), yet most of carry secondary motivations also. In listening to churches, I hear them expressed in these ways.

"There are so many changes in my world these days; it's nice to come to the one place where things remain the same."

"Stress in my life is so high; I'm glad I can come here to a low stress environment."

"Church (as I have known it) has always been so meaningful to me. Now I want my children (or grandchildren) to have the opportunity for the same kind of experience I had (church done the same way it was done when I was a child)."

We can hear positive intent and healthy motivation mixed in these statements. Yet, they also indicate an expectation that church is the one organism or organization in their world which does not change. This unrealistic expectation is a primary factor driving the denial reaction. When enough individual disciples in a congregation are here, the collective theme in the congregation is denial.

How long can a church keep denial going? You would be amazed at the perseverance of some, partly because one denial effect feels so good to the congregation – turning inward. These congregations turn their energy, resources, and collective emotionality in toward each other,

resulting in a temporary strengthening of relational bonds. Some focus this energy into feeling like a persecuted minority (“It’s us against the heathen world”), while others simply invest much effort in tending to the needs and wants of one another. Pastors become chaplains, individual care-givers to the disciples in these churches. People feel really loved, largely because the church is self-focused, attentive to every need. Since this all feels so good, denial becomes a hard habit to break.

### **Hyper-control**

We were reflecting on the last year of progress in their church during the annual retreat for the lay leaders. As we went around the room, one gentleman described the church’s journey this way. “When things got out of control here, I decided I had been sitting back too much. So I, along with some others who think like me, decided to take back control. We did and now we are on the right track again.”

I didn’t know how to respond. The story I knew of this church is that a small group had taken control, manipulated the church into a corner, forced the pastor to resign, devastating this faith community in the process. This kind of control led to about half the congregation leaving (church split), and the remaining disciples were emotionally despairing about the future of this church. Fortunately, they were willing to work toward reconciliation and healing, leading to new life. But the hyper-control of this gentleman along with his cohorts led to great pain and suffering, rather than helpful intervention.

One tendency of humankind when we are faced with dynamics beyond our direct control, is to overly invest in controlling what we can. Often this hyper-control is driven by a low-grade anger, just under its surface. We feel like life is doing something to us (removing our control), and that we are losing what’s precious to us (our church), so we grow frustrated and irritated. We rush in to take control again.

How do we know when hyper-control is our congregation’s response? An effort to improve policies and procedures is a clear sign. Disciples start saying that if we were more organized, more systematic in what we do, with improved job descriptions and better tracking mechanisms...then our church would be fine. The allure of this fantasy is in the beauty of clear policies and procedures printed on nice paper with clear and clean lines of responsibility articulated therein. This can make us feel as if the world is safe again. Everything seems under control because we have a policy or a procedure to tell us what to do in regard to most everything. When the big picture seems out of control, overly-controlling the small picture gives us some level of comfort.

Unfortunately, this hyper-controlling tendency is nearly always maladaptive. It is the exact opposite of what's most needed – yielding to the winds of the Holy Spirit. This is the time to open up, to let go, to follow the Spirit's movement and energy. In fact, many churches continue policies and procedures which are no longer relevant...simply familiar, making them feel safe in a changing world. Clamping down through organizational procedures smothers the Spirit, rather than setting the Spirit free.

### **Conflict**

Does this go without saying? I'm almost embarrassed to describe conflict at this point. Each of the previous reactions can contribute to a rising tension level resulting in church conflict. What drives church conflict and how does it develop?

We are “sense-making” organisms as human beings. Our minds are always working to help us comprehend the world around us. So, when things change for the worse in our church experience, we naturally look for explanations. Without an understanding of the larger dynamics in the world influencing our local context, we assign an explanation to something else. Sometimes this leads to blame, coupled with magic bullet thinking. We diagnose the problem as coming from a single source, along with a fix which is the magic bullet. Here are some magic bullet solution statements, which rest on a foundation of blame.

“If we just had a more gifted pastor, then our church would be fine.”

“If we spent more time in prayer, then our church would be fine.”

“If the music were better or different, then our church would be fine.”

“If we would just add a worship service of another style, then our church would be fine.”

“If our people would give more generously, then our church could do what it needs to do, and would be fine.”

“If our people were more committed (or any other spiritually oriented description), then our church would be fine.”

When we think this way, then we seek to eradicate the problem from the church and replace it with the answer. This causes conflict on two levels. First, others don't see the problem the same way, defining it differently. Therefore they do not agree with the suggested fix. Second, the problem is far more expansive than tactical changes can fix, resulting in greater frustration after the fix is applied.

Most churches experience some level of conflict when the wheels begin to come off their Modern Era church-as-we-have-known-it paradigm.

### **Trying Harder**

“If we are not getting the results we want, then we are not trying hard enough. We need to apply more effort and engage more fully. Then the results will follow.”

There is some truth in this statement, making it alluring. Sometimes we grow lazy as congregations. Sometimes we coast for too long between intense periods of effort. Sometimes we need to roll up our sleeves and apply ourselves.

This reaction and tactic is helpful under conditions of continuous, incremental change. When the model we are using is still relevant, then working that model more vigorously can be helpful. What happens when the model itself is the problem? This is when we are pounding the proverbial square peg into the round hole. Our answer to the inevitable frustration is to pound harder. The result is increased frustration. Trying harder to force an irrelevant church model to work actually creates greater frustration. Perhaps congregations have to attempt this first, before growing open to new paradigms. Maybe people have to exhaust themselves working an outdated model before they are open to large-scale change.

### **Spiritualizing**

(Is that a word?)

What I mean here is the tendency to see a lack of spirituality, faith, and God-focus as the problem. Perhaps it’s unconfessed sin in the church. Perhaps it’s a lack of sincere prayer. Perhaps our people are just not committed enough. The lack of spiritual vigor and commitment is seen as the problem.

This reaction too has some truth in it, enough to make it dangerous. At all times, all of us are less than we might be in relationship to God. Who would not want higher levels of faith and a more robust spirituality? Pursuing God and a stronger faith is part of the Christian journey.

Simultaneously, though spiritual renewal always helps, it simply does not address how to be church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Great Awakenings, which took place periodically throughout America’s history, were always accompanied by innovative practices and new methodology. We need increased levels of faith and spirituality in order to have the heart to engage the questions of our day, yet increased faith and spirituality are not the same as engaging the questions of our day. If we are not careful, we find ourselves shaming one another for not being “spiritual” enough. We hear clergy and lay persons alike articulating this perspective regularly. “If our people would just read the Bible more, pray more, grow more committed, etc., then...” The

result when we stay with this perspective is that the church feels ashamed of its faith practices, hanging its head in despair. “Not only are we failing as a church, we are shabby Christians too.” The downward spiral speeds up when this reaction is practiced.

### **Quality Improvement**

Alan Roxburgh, who writes about the Missional Church Movement, describes this reaction as “shining the apple.”<sup>2</sup> If we can improve our quality, then we will regain our glory days as a church. This is the belief behind the quality improvement reaction.

What’s fascinating is that a church may find itself with short-term gains when it improves its quality. Christians in other congregations hear about what’s happening at this church and they transfer membership. This becomes the “go to” church in its community. They become known as the church with a great youth program, or wonderful choir, or with a new kind of worship service, or with a great new preacher. With time, these churches who improve their quality may find that they are fishing in the Christian pond. They are catching fish, but the fish are swimming over from another aquarium. That pond of fish is limited and small (other Christians), and will be fished out rather quickly. These churches find themselves searching for the next big improvement which will draw others to their church campus. Over time, the next big improvement brings fewer fish. Quality improvement can help any church, yet it does not resolve the dilemmas inherent in moving from the Modern Era to the Postmodern Era.

### **Letting Go**

Now we are moving toward adaptive change. Perhaps the previously mentioned reactions are steps on this adaptive church journey. We have to grow convinced that church-as-we-have-known-it is no longer viable before most of us are willing to relinquish our church paradigm. Perhaps we first have to work the Modern Era church model vigorously, knowing we have laid it all on the line, experiencing lower return on investment, before we willingly let go.

Eventually though, adaptive churches recognize it’s time to let go of their way of being church. This step in the journey typically includes quite a mix of emotions. Disciples are relieved they are no longer pressuring themselves to do something they perceive as irrelevant and unhelpful. Disciples also are unsettled, finding themselves in a transition zone, without clarity about how to be church. This is a new experience for many, creating vulnerability when it comes to participating in a faith community. Disciples also experience grief. The way we have been church together includes emotionally charged memories about very meaningful and significant experiences in life. Recognizing those particular practices are going away is sad. Even when we are convinced we must change, the change involves letting go, which brings grief to our experience. Wise congregational leaders recognize this grief, finding ways to help the

congregation process and move through the valley of the shadow. Grief management is a key part of the adaptive change process.

### **Purpose Seeking**

Watching congregations move to this point is fascinating. If we could describe their reaction in the previous step of Letting Go with a body movement, it would include a person putting up their hands and backing away from the table. This step, purpose seeking, involves putting our hands down, perhaps on our hips and saying, “Well, what’s the purpose of this whole church thing anyway?” When churches start asking this kind of question, we know they are on the way toward a more invigorated expression of their collective faith. In essence they are asking about the mission or purpose of the church. Below this question is another. “Is the mission or purpose of the Church worth all the pain and discomfort we will endure in order to adapt to our current context?”

This is when churches are open to engaging those three life-giving questions. With fresh eyes they read the scriptures. With new openness they engage the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. They experience a kind of conversion or reformation. This conversion is not to faith, but rather to a new freedom in their faith expression. No longer must they do church the way they have done church. Now they re-discover the passion, vigor, and hope of their faith. Reconnecting with the purpose of it all infuses these churches with passionate spirituality. This feels like fresh winds of the Spirit to the weary worn Modern Era spiritual pilgrims.

### **Holy Experimenting**

Later, in Chapter Ten, which describes making the shift toward being a missional church, we will explore holy experimenting in depth. Yet, it’s relevant here, because it is a location on this developmental response continuum. After letting go of church-as-we-have-known-it, followed by clarifying what this church-thing is all about anyway (purpose seeking), then faith communities will find themselves experimenting. Some experimenting simply happens because of the movement from one stop on this continuum to the next. Other experiments will be intentionally pursued by the faith community as they engage the movement from one stop to another.

Holy experimenting involves not only giving ourselves permission to experiment, but actively encouraging and pursuing disciple development or missional experimentation. The faith community itself embraces experimentation as a legitimate pathway forward. They affirm experiments, holding up the outcomes as instructive and directional. They believe following the Holy Spirit involves pushing beyond themselves and their comfort zones, discovering new

expressions of faith life. These holy experiments then become part of the basis for the next stop on this developmental response continuum.

### **Proactive Adaptation**

Organisms who survive and thrive are those who experiment. They give themselves permission to be different. Sometimes they discover adaptive behaviors by accident. Either way, they are willing to try new ways of being in the world as they find it. Congregations engaged in proactive adaptation have let go of their efforts at returning to church-as-we-have-known-it. They are freed from trying to work a model which provides lower returns on investment. They are actively engaging the world around them, allowing this to shape how they structure church.

During the Shift Learning Experience and Making The Shift Weekends, it's great fun to give participants an opportunity to reflect on where their congregation is in its response to the shifting context. We describe each of the preceding reactions or responses, placing them on an imaginary continuum, inviting disciples to stand where they believe their church is in its developmental process.

Were you to place your congregation on this continuum, where would you stand?



### **Making The Shift Resources**

*Shift: Three Big Moves For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*, Mark Tidsworth, Pinnacle Leadership Press, November 2015. <http://www.pinnaclelead.com/church/pinnacle-leadership-press.html> or Amazon.com

When purchasing 5 books or more, we can get them for less than retail for you. Contact us to order.

Currently \$18 retail @ Amazon, \$14 from Pinnacle Leadership Press, \$12 when ordering over 75 copies.

## Making The Shift Field Guide And Congregational Experience

*Making The Shift Field Guide*, Mark Tidsworth, Pinnacle Leadership Press, Anticipated publication date February, 2016. <http://www.pinnaclelead.com/church/pinnacle-leadership-press.html> or Amazon.com

This Field Guide includes everything needed to engage a 9-week Small Group experience, along with Daily Engagements for each participant. Some congregations will use this 9-week experience for launching their Making The Shift Process. This is what you will find in this Making The Shift Field Guide:

Part One – Small Group Curriculum

Part Two – Daily Reflections – Integrated with the Small Group Curriculum

When purchasing 6 books or more, we can get them for less than retail for you. Contact us to order.

## Shift Learning Experience for Clergy, Church Staff, And/Or Lay Leadership Teams

We are glad to provide the Shift Learning Experience for your group of church leaders. We have presented this Shift Learning Experience in a variety of settings and time frames. Church Staff Development Days or Retreats or Lay Leadership Team Retreats are great settings to take in this experience. You can learn more about some ways others have engaged this learning experience on our website at [www.pinnaclelead.com](http://www.pinnaclelead.com).

## Making The Shift Enrichment Weekend

Mark Tidsworth or one of our Making The Shift Presenters will join your faith community for a weekend of learning, inspiration, spiritual renewal, and visioning. Some congregations will use this weekend to launch their Making The Shift Process Intensive, using the Field Guide. Others will use this weekend as a stand-alone event. Either way, this Making The Shift Enrichment Weekend includes:

- Making The Shift Presenter joining you on campus Friday Evening through Sunday
- Experiential learning and worship events for the entire congregation on Friday Evening and Saturday
- Sunday morning Bible Study led by Shift Presenter
- Participation in your worship gathering by your Presenter

Our hope is that this Making The Shift Weekend will provide a spiritual enrichment opportunity for faith communities, while inviting disciples into the three big moves.

## **Making The Shift Coaching Process**

Some faith communities who want to engage these three big moves with intentionality may secure a Making The Shift Coach. When you contact us, we will learn about your context, about your current engagement with the Shift material, and then design a process for moving forward. Your coach forms a one year agreement, including campus visits, coaching, and consulting focused on implementing the Making The Shift Process. We will describe the movements in this process more precisely when you contact us.

We are glad to talk with you about your interest and progress in making these three big moves.

Contact us:

Mark Tidsworth

Pinnacle Leadership Associates

<http://www.pinnaclelead.com/church/shift.html>

[markt@pinnaclelead.com](mailto:markt@pinnaclelead.com)

803-673-3634

