

The Missional Leader

How does a leader prepare to redirect a church toward its mission in the world?
by Chad Hall, *Leadership Journal* correspondent | posted 1/28/2008

In his role as super spy Ethan Hunt, Tom Cruise portrays an agent willing to face incredible odds and unbelievable danger in order to accomplish a "mission: impossible." Church leaders face assignments just as tough: to lead congregations to serve Christ in a changing and sometimes hostile world.

The word for this ministry challenge is missional. How does a church become missional? And for leaders, is moving a consumer church to become missional, in itself, a mission: impossible?

If you are preparing to lead your congregation to become more missional, here are four things you'll need.

1. Anticipate and work through conflict.

As with any transition, the shift to being more missional will be felt as a loss by those who are accustomed to traditional "the staff is here to meet my needs" assumptions. Churches that have long been self-focused have well-formed habits and attitudes that are tough to overcome.

Mike Breen of Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona, says that many members resisted the emphasis on laity doing ministry: "They were used to being consumers who paid professionals to do the ministry. It was like we were a restaurant where they'd been coming for years and had always been served great meals. When we handed them an apron and asked them to help in the kitchen, many resisted and quite a few left the church."

2. "Controlled release and releasing control."

That's how Jack Mercer describes it. A dogged resolve coupled with a relaxed willingness to let the Spirit blow in unexpected ways.

The leader must be direct and uncompromising in leading the church to live out the missional mindset. But once that mindset catches hold, the leader must step back and let go. Leaders who attempt to control the expressions of missionality will always be tempted to control them, and thus suffocate them.

Breen says that Community Church of Joy puts together community-size groups of fifty to gather around the vision of serving, but then lets each group give birth to its unique mission.

Like any birth, it is messy: "A leader with a controlling tendency—like most of us!—will try to come up with the mission for the community. But letting the group birth it allows the life of Jesus to be expressed in and through that community in ways the leader could never imagine."

Brian Wright is finding his leadership role in helping Northeast Baptist Church near Atlanta make the shift "from people being consumers to being producers." He has had to stop producing ministry for would-be consumers as well as cease trying to get people to resource

his ministry ideas. Instead, he is setting his members free to dream of what God wants to do and is then empowering them to do it.

"We gathered people in groups of six to eight and let them dream up ways of creatively addressing the needs of our community," he says. "I've helped the groups find grants to support the ministries, and I encourage and coach them to invest their own time and energy as well. Really, my role is as much to stay out of the way as it is to be involved."

3. Recognize the personal losses.

For pastors and other church leaders, this includes getting less recognition for doing ministry. Janetta Cravens of First Christian Church in Macon, Georgia, says their missional emphasis means the spotlight is less and less on her. "I've become more like a symphony conductor than one who actually plays an instrument. This has required me to really be a servant leader, to stop working for accolades, and to start measuring success according to the quality of music [ministry] the symphony members are producing."

Breen says the church staff also faced the reality that some paid positions would have to be eliminated in order to help the church shift toward lay-led and outward focused mission.

"We realized the church is not here to give someone a job. It was tough to make decisions that cost people their job on church staff, but the move toward being missional meant we had to become a lighter, more nimble church. Too much staff was weighing us down and preventing our pursuit of God's activity."

4. Stamina required en route to better days.

Since the transition toward missionality is complex, there will be great difficulties to endure. For leaders used to measuring success by attendance or accolades, they may have to endure desert days without those signs of success.

Signs of hecaptionh may get inverted. Attendance and giving may actually drop.

This is what happened at Community Church of Joy. Breen says, "We lost a lot of people initially. That was tough, but eventually the levels of commitment went up, and today we have a more highly committed congregation. Our attendance and giving are still rebounding, and we have a much higher level of commitment in almost every measurable way.

"Our average attendee gives 50 percent more than a year ago, we have more kids in Bible study, and more people in our teaching experiences. Interestingly, our demographic is shifting younger, because the younger people want a call to commitment, not another call to be a consumer. For them, being a consumer is not compelling. If we had not weaned ourselves of the consumer model, we'd never have gotten to the level of commitment we are today."

Chad Hall is a ministry coach and co-author of Coaching for Christian Leaders: A Practical Guide (Chalice Press, 2007). This column was excerpted from the article Missional: Possible in Leadership.