



## What is the Purpose of the CHURCH?!

If someone had asked me this question when I was a child, I would have said something like this—“The purpose of the church is to be family for me, it’s my home.” I spent the first twelve years of my life at First Christian Church in Naperville, IL enjoying many potluck tables decked out with cheesy covered casseroles. What was the purpose of the church? To provide me with hot-dish, love, faith, and belonging.

The question we ask of life provides the frame work for how we think and what we do. As a consultant, churches usually contact me with a question. The question is phrased in different ways, but could be summarized as this: “How do we deal with the pinch we are feeling?” When asked what this pinch might be, I often hear things like this:

- We don’t get as many visitors to our worship services as we used to.
- We don’t have as many young families, children, or youth.
- When young adults do come, they don’t get involved. They don’t serve on committees and in the ministries of our church.
- Our worship attendance and giving are down.

...OR...

- Things are humming along and most don’t think there’s a problem, but I know there’s a leak in the ship.

And the disconnect . . .

- We’re working harder and harder and seeing less results.
- We’re not connecting with our community. It changed and our church didn’t.
- People just aren’t interested in church anymore.

In facing the pinch, the longing is: “How can we grow (or get back to the size we were)?” There is a mental model in operation behind this question. The questions we ask are a window into the *mental model* that is in operation for us.

A *mental model* is a deeply ingrained assumption that influences what we think and therefore what we do.<sup>1</sup> It’s a picture of how the world works, and so we organize facts according to our mental model. It’s often subconscious, the proverbial water that the fish swims in and so isn’t aware of.

An example of a mental model would be a story I often tell, of a time when I regularly encountered a clerk at the local hardware store, a young man with long hair and long finger nails. I kept puzzling about this, wondering why. “Maybe he is a musician?” I theorized to myself. So one day I asked if he was a musician. He said no, why do you ask? I said I asked because he had long hair and finger nails. He said,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

“I just think that things that are meant to grow, should be allowed to grow.” I realized that I had a mental model going on here, which says that men should have short hair and clipped fingernails. And if this isn’t the case, he must be a musician. This young man unearthed a mental model for me.

History is filled with times when mental models shift, which usually causes widespread distress. The Copernican Revolution is often cited as an example, and one that caused much upheaval in the church in Western Europe. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century people made the paradigm shift away from the Ptolemaic view of the universe (which said that the earth was the center) to a heliocentric model (which said that the sun was at the center of the solar system).

The Copernican Revolution is a prime example regarding a key aspect of mental models. Mental models help us, because they provide a schema, or map for easily organizing information. They provide the shared understandings which enable an easy flow of communication and relationships within a culture. But sometimes, life changes in such a way that the assumptions our mental models are based on are no longer true. In that case, what was a helpful mental model now is hurtful. It keeps us from seeing what we need to see, and changing what we need to change. In the case of the Copernican Revolution, the mental model that the earth was the center of the universe no longer provided a helpful schema, but was actually hurting the process of learning about God’s creation through scientific inquiry.

Mental models are not just historical and grand in sweep, but are also very personal. When my daughter was born, I adapted to what was needed to care for an infant. I developed a mental model of what worked, what didn’t work. As my daughter became a toddler, my mental model for parenting began to change. When my daughter was a very young infant, crying meant something was wrong, and I needed to fix it. Usually it was hunger, so I fed her. As an older infant, crying didn’t always mean that I needed to fix something. It might mean she wanted something she couldn’t have. If I always tried to fix the crying by giving her what she wanted, I would be in trouble. If I didn’t learn when to say no, then I’d have a demanding toddler on my hands who thought she could always get her way. My previous assumption, “Crying means I need to fix something, usually by providing food” had to shift to “Crying might mean any number of things, some of which I can’t provide or fix right now.”



So we ask: Is this mental model serving us well today, or not? Are the assumptions this mental model is based on still true, or have the assumptions changed? Many theologians and church leaders are questioning whether the mental model of church that we operate under today is still helping us. To ask the question: *What is the purpose of the church?*—is to invite people to consider what their mental model for church might be, and whether it is still serving them well today.

Here are some of the assumptions that are no longer true of the church and the U.S.:

- The church exists in a supportive Christian culture.
- Most people look to the church to provide the community and teaching they need to raise their children.
- Most people are nominally Christian, or at least acquainted with the story of Jesus and the ways of doing church.

If these assumptions are no longer true, then our mental model for church needs to be reexamined. From my childhood experience of church, my understanding of the purpose of the church was to provide a faith community. In Naperville, IL when I was growing up people came to church. The pastor and lay leaders provided worship, Christian nurture, and opportunities for fellowship (like the famous all-church potluck). The people who came to church understood what participation was needed from them: they needed to be in church every week, give of their money, bring their children and themselves for the dedicated "Sunday School Hour", and dutifully prepare their covered dish for the regular potlucks. People in our communities today do not have these shared understandings of how church works, or a familiarity with the Christian story.

What is the purpose of the church, in light of these changing assumptions?

The former associate pastor at my church, Rev. Steve Wilde (who is now the pastor at Livermore Presbyterian), told a story in a sermon, which helps us unearth our mental model for church:

On thanksgiving, my family went over to my brother's house. There my two oldest sons were introduced to something the very first time: Flag football. My brother has four kids, the oldest was a little older than mine. When we got there my brother said, "Let's play flag football." It's become part of our Thanksgiving Day fun. Fast forward to this year, I was driving back from soccer with my oldest two sons, Diego and Mateo. Diego says to me,

"Dad, we gotta go practice."

"What?" I said.

"Flag football. Uncle Charlie is coming up and we need to make sure we can beat them."

My brother's older than me so I said,

"You're right! *We do need to practice!*"

So we got out all the flags and went out into the backyard. As we got into the backyard, Diego says,

"We gotta huddle up to make sure we got this right."

So Diego, Mateo and I huddled up like they do in the pros. Diego began to explain what we needed to do and know. He went through the signals we needed to pay attention to. "When you do this signal, then I'll do that. If I do this gesture Mateo, it means this. Dad, when you hike the ball, and I say this word, you do that."



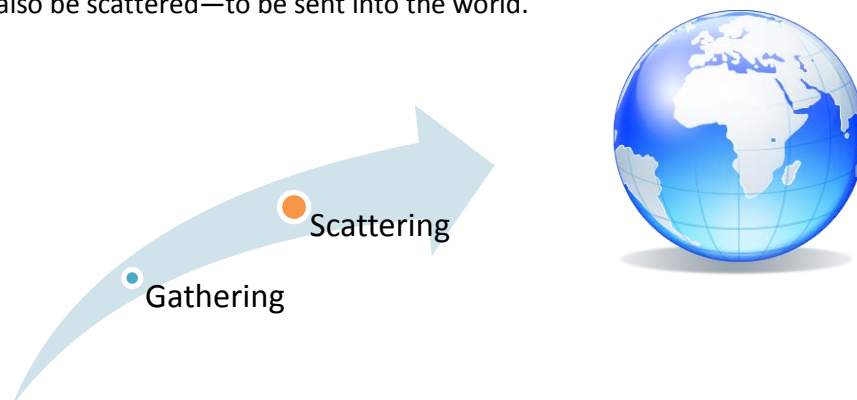
All the sudden I realized we'd been out for a very long time. All the time we'd been outside, we were sitting there in this huddle, talking about this game we were going to play. Eventually I had to explain to Diego and Mateo:

"The huddle is not the point, the huddle is to prepare us to play the game."

Steve then compared the Church to this backyard flag-football huddle. We've been more focused on the huddle than with playing the game. His scripture passage for the sermon was John 20:21, where Jesus addresses his disciples, whom he found huddled in the upper room after his resurrection:

*Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."  
And with that Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit..."*

He suggested that this passage contains two fundamental aspects of Christian community: *gathering* and *scattering*. The disciples were gathered in the upper room in a huddle. Jesus gives them a commission to also be scattered—to be sent into the world.



These two aspects of Christian community, *gathering* and *scattering*, were meant to be lived out simultaneously in the church. Both are an extremely important part of what it means to be the church. The gathering enables the scattering, the same way the huddle empowers playing the game of flag football. Both gathering and scattering are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The gathering aspect of our church life consists of many spiritual practices that are critical: worship, small groups, fellowship, and classes. These practices enable us to become the people of God, and be transformed by God's love and knit into a community together. But the gathering/huddle is not meant to be the point. It's not meant to be the destination. The huddle is meant to prepare us to play the game. The game is the scattering, how we as are sent out individually and together in teams into the world.

Because of our history as the church in a mainly "Christian" society, we are used to the huddle being the point. We didn't need to scatter, because people came to us and joined us in the huddle. Our mental model of church says that these gathering activities are the main purpose of the church. Worship, discipleship (such as classes, youth groups, small groups), prayer, and leadership meetings—these were all things we knew how to do and did well. *Faithfully attending to these gathering activities became the main purpose of the church.*

Those of us who are beginning to think that the main purpose of the church was to be the gathered AND sent people of God find that we struggle with the scattering part. We struggle with being sent by Jesus into the world, and in particular, the community outside our church's doorsteps. We're much more skilled when people come to us, and then we minister to them here, on our church campus. One reason we struggle with this is our history as being "*senders*", rather than being the "*send-ees*" (the ones sent).

We are used to sending people overseas to do mission work in mainly non-Christian countries. Now that our country is mainly non-Christian, it's a challenge to consider how we are the ones sent into this, our own country. Most of us would find it easier to send money to support a missionary overseas than we would to go across the street and share the good news with our neighbor.

Another challenge in re-thinking the scattering is the issue of doing mission/evangelism TO or FOR people versus doing mission/evangelism WITH people. The Church at large needs to rethink its mental model of how we engage the community outside our doors. Most churches have some aspect of community outreach, and that is good. However, it is sometimes characterized more by doing service to or *for* people, like cooking a meal for the homeless and serving it to them. Often there is not opportunity to build relationships over time with the people being served. The outreach consists of a more transactional exchange of the church's service/food providing for people's need. This aspect of our traditional outreach needs to be rethought toward ministries that build relationships with people, and a deeper sense of offering and experiencing hospitality in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Luke 10:1-12 is a passage that offers a mental model of scattering. The disciples are sent out by two. They follow a pattern of experiencing the hospitality of others: they are instructed to stay at one house (not move around from house to house), eat what is set before them, and proclaim "The Kingdom of God is at hand." The Kingdom message is shared in a context of deep relationships of mutual exchange. The disciples experience the hospitality of others.

An example of this rethinking outreach can be seen in the edited book *Practicing Theology*.<sup>3</sup> The story is told of an urban church which decided to stop their "outreach" program as the government sponsored food distribution center in their neighborhood because of the ways it kept the people in the neighborhood subordinate and at a distance. Instead, they began a more hospitality-oriented ministry of inviting the neighborhood to community meals where outsiders met and sat at table with church members.

Therefore, churches are served by rethinking their purpose around the tendency to see the huddle as the "main game we play", AND by rethinking what it means to be sent into the world beyond simple philanthropy (donations of money or work for needy persons).

## RETHINKING THE HUDDLE

In this article, I focus on rethinking our purpose around the church's tendency to see the huddle as the main game that we play. I began this article claiming that the questions we ask provide the framework for what we think and do. The questions we ask point to our mental models. The questions behind the issues often presented to me reveal a mental model that says: "The primary purpose of the church is to be a place where God's people gather."

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 29-42; George C. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 26-35, 95-121; Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2006), 171-82; Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002), 121-36.

<sup>3</sup> Volf and Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology*, 137-56. chapter entitled, "Liturgy, Ministry and the Stranger" by Gilbert Bond

The question---“*Why don’t people come to church much anymore?*”--- reveals a mental model that says, “The purpose of the church is to be the place where God’s people gather. There are many people of faith out there, because we are a Christian society, so these people should find us and join with us. But why aren’t more finding us and joining us?” The recently published 2009 American Religious Identification Survey indicated that the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990 (rising from 8 to 15%) and the percentage of self identified Christians has fallen 10% since 1990 (from 86 to 76%).<sup>4</sup>

The question---“*Why doesn’t the younger generation come to church?*”---reveals a mental model that says, “Most people are nominally Christian and familiar with the way we do church.” Many sources exist to document the waves of Baby boomers (born 1945-1963) who left the church. Their children are young adults now, adults who did not grow up with memories of attending church with their parents because their parents did not take them.

The statement---“*We’re not connected with our community, it changed and we didn’t.*”---reveals an openness to examining the mental model that says, “Most people in our community share our common heritage, culture, and religion.” It is good to question this assumption, because increasingly it is no longer true. Beginning to unearth this assumption behind our mental model of church is a start. *Knowing how to productively change in light of it is a big challenge.*

In Silicon Valley where I live, Anglo-Saxon Protestants are now a minority. Some of our cities here are 50% Asian (which includes people from China, Korea, Laos, Vietnam, Japan, India, Pakistan, Philippines, etc. It includes people who religiously may be Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim). This ethnic and religious diversity is also hitting the land of the covered casserole. I have a friend who pastors a church in the NW Minnesota town of Pelican Rapids. Her Swedish-Norwegian Lutheran church is coming to terms with the fact that their town has an influx of Mexican (Catholic) and Somali (Muslim) immigrants to work in the local Turkey factory. How does a church begin to build relationships across these ethnic/religious lines?

Steve Wilde gives a relevant example in his sermon which points to the changes of doing ministry in our present day world. He describes evangelism in the days of Rev. Billy Graham. Beginning in the 1950’s, Billy Graham held “crusades” which local churches sponsored. Church people were encouraged to bring their friends. Graham’s message was simple yet profound. “Come home to the story of Jesus, the story you know to be true.” This message worked in a society where most people were familiar with the story of Jesus, and had some nominal belief in Christianity. This is no longer the case. Many people have no idea what the story of Jesus is. Or they may know the basics of the story, but the Christ story is not the story that formed their life. Rather, the story that formed their life might be the story of Garu Nanak in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Punjabi (India), the founding Guru of Sikhism, the fifth largest organized religion in the world.

**Garu Nanak**

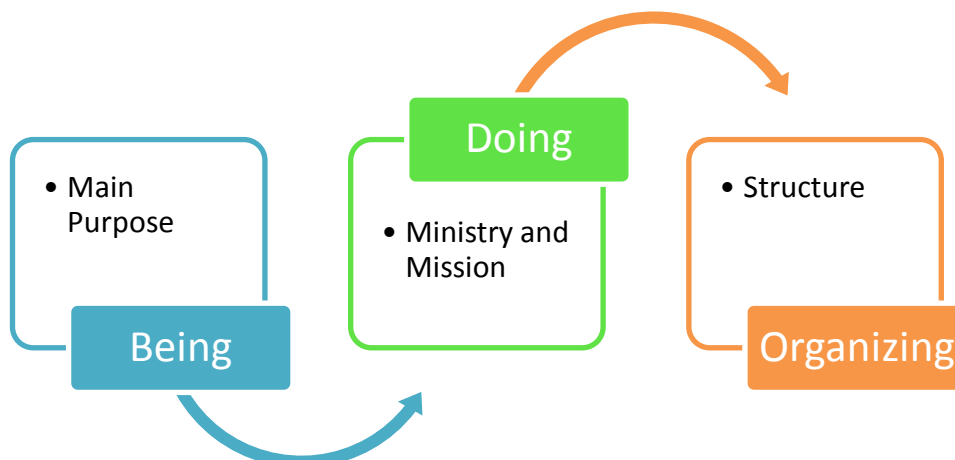


How does the church proceed, in light of these changing assumptions?

Many are advocating that the church begins through rethinking its main purpose and identity. Unearthing our mental model of what church at its core was meant to be. Craig Van Gelder explains how

<sup>4</sup> Jon Meacham, “The Decline and Fall of Christian America,” *Newsweek* 2009.

purpose and identity—our sense of who we are called to be as the church—determines what we do.<sup>5</sup> Then what we do over time determines how we organize and structure our action. The process looks like this:



**Being: Main purpose.** How does the church understand who it is?

Many images from Scripture and our common culture are available: Body of Christ, family of God, the sheep and the Shepherd, the sent people of God, provider of religious goods and services, a sanctuary (a place for God’s people to gather in the midst of a hostile world), a place to raise children in the Christian faith, etc.

**Doing: Ministry and Mission.** In light of the church’s self understanding, what does the church do?

Many ministries and mission abound: worship services, youth ministry, small groups, children and adult Sunday morning education classes, women’s/men’s ministries, any type of niche ministry (singles, grief support groups, etc), the list goes on and on.

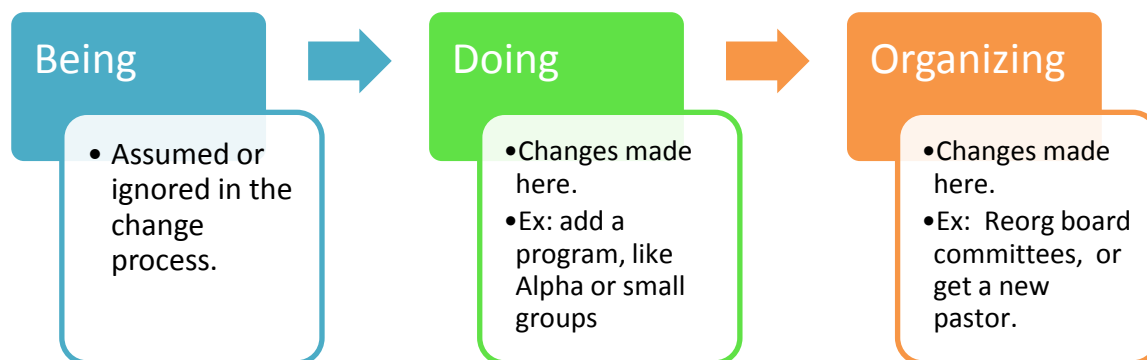
**Organizing: Structure.** How does the church structure what it does over time? How does the church recruit and train leaders for what it does?

This gets into denominational ways of governance. There are formal ways we structure our life together. Some churches structure their life through some type of coordinating board (session, council, or vestry). Some have a governing board and then deacons for spiritual/physical/emotional care of church members. There are also informal ways we structure our life together. Churches may have ministry teams and committees that are run by some combination of paid staff and lay volunteers.

Van Gelder asserts that the change needs to begin with this first, blue square of being—the identity or main purpose for which we exist. This is more radical than it appears on the surface.

When most churches look to make changes, they tend to start with the green square of doing, or the orange square of organizing or re-structuring.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 37, 102, 28, 55.



### **An example of changing what the church is *doing*:**

A church often will add a contemporary worship service to their Sunday morning offerings. This is not a bad thing to do, in fact, it could be quite a good thing. But done without a rethinking of main purpose, a few things tend to happen. In scenario #1, the contemporary worship service fails to bring in more people, and therefore the church decides that it was a bad thing to do. They may scrap that and try another thing, or give up and try nothing new for a while. In scenario #2, the contemporary service does bring in some new people, but over time it doesn't make the difference the church was looking for.

Either way, the church made a change in their ministry, they added a new thing to do, without examining the assumption behind the mental model of church that caused them to make this change. That assumption is this: People in U.S. society are predominately Christian and are looking to come to church. We know this to not be true. People aren't looking to join our huddle, whether it's a traditional huddle or a contemporary huddle. In light of this changed assumption, just adding a contemporary service *by itself* is like putting a band-aid on a cancer tumor.

*Let me be clear here, adding an alternate style of worship service is something I affirm, when it is part of rethinking the deeper purpose of church. When the church is trying to musically speak the language of the people in their context and understands that this is one way to engage the changing community of the church, it can lead to fruitful ends. However, changing worship style or adding a new worship service is inadequate on its own, because it still is focused on the huddle aspect of Christian community. It is not helping the church rethink the calling to be scattered into the world.*

### **An example of changing how a church *organizes* what it does:**

Churches will restructure their board, in an attempt to become more agile, less top heavy, and prevent burn-out of lay people. This could be a good change in structure, but unless there is a rethinking of the nature of ministry today, this tends to be inadequate. The status quo tends to pull the church back to where it was before.

Or a church will look to hire a new pastor who is a better preacher (to bring in more people) or a better administrator (so the church runs smoother), etc. A new pastor comes, and yet the still church faces the same deeper issues because the assumption this mental model of church is based on is not helpful.

There is no pastor who can adequately address the complexity of what it means to be the church in this time of history solely through their preaching or managerial abilities. It must be a team effort.

The claim I am making, is that change must begin with the church's understanding of their main purpose for existence, rather than begin with what the church does or how the church organizes what it does. This conception of the church's purpose for existence is the congregation's mental model for church, and thus it is harder to see and change. For an extreme example, if a church sees as its main purpose to provide a religious social club, it will then do ministries that facilitate socializing around faith themes, and will organize itself to this end. The other claim I am making is that we have historically conceived of our main purpose around aspects of huddling rather than around scattering. The things we know how to do, and for which we are organized for doing are the activities of huddling. Therefore, the church today is being called to rethink our main purpose as the church.

### RETHINKING THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

These are key four elements in unearthing one's mental model of church:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scripture's call regarding God's purpose for creating the Church</li> <li>2. The wider context in which the Church now finds itself</li> </ol> | } | <i>Universal and Broad in<br/>Scope</i>              |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. The congregation's particular history</li> <li>4. The context of the congregation's immediate community</li> </ol>                             | } | <i>Specific and Unique for<br/>Each Congregation</i> |

I will address the first two, universal issues in this document.

#### **Number One: The Scripture call regarding God's creation of the Church**

How do our mental models of church interact with God's call for the church? God's people have always struggled with this. The Old Testament prophets called Israel to account for living a different mental model of being God's people in the world than the one called forth in the law. Jesus' mental model for what it meant to be God's people was mercy—experiencing God's mercy and then extending it to others. This conflicted with the religious leader's mental model which said that God's people are to be holy and set apart through faithfulness to the law. A key part of renewal is unearthing what we think and reexamining it in light of God's call made known in Scripture.

God's creation of the church is connected with God's creation of the world. God created the world to be in a love relationship with God's self, and in a harmony of relationships with one another and the created order. This relationship to God, others, the created order was broken due to human sin. God's plan since that time has been to reconcile this brokenness. This plan was brought to fruition in Jesus' coming to earth and announcing that "the Kingdom of God is at hand." This Kingdom is one where God's love, justice, and mercy are known and lived. Jesus gathered a community of disciples, who then became apostles ("sent ones") because Jesus sent them out into the world, promising the presence of the Holy Spirit as they went. Thus the church was created at the commission of Jesus who sent his disciples into the world, and through the empowerment of the Spirit.

This rhythm of gathering as Jesus disciples—and—scattering as the “sent ones” was a key part of the identity of the early church. This rhythm was not entirely new. It was built into God’s people from their very formation in the covenant with Abram. In that call to Abram, God’s vision was revealed: God’s people were blessed to be a blessing to all peoples on the earth (Gen 12:3). German pastor and WWII martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer sums up this vision of God’s purpose for the church in the following quote: “The church is only the church when it exists *for others*.” (Emphasis mine)<sup>6</sup> The church was meant to live a rhythm of being blessed which flows out into living for others outside our fellowship. The church was meant to seek God’s nurture as a gathered community which in turn fuels being poured out for the benefit of people outside the church’s doors.

God’s salvation plan continues through the church, in our gathering and being sent. Yet it is God’s plan for establishing God’s kingdom of love and mercy. The church is a participant in what God is doing in the world. But the church is not identical to God’s kingdom. We are not the kingdom, we point to the kingdom. The Holy Spirit guides us in discerning what God is up to, and joining in God’s activity as a witness to the fact that God is at work in the world. Sometimes in the church we have forgotten that God is acting in the world as the larger horizon; we sometimes imagine God as is only acting in the world through the church and its activities. God’s work is larger than what occurs in and through the church. Therefore, as we seek to be the church for others, we look for God’s movement and seek to join what God is already doing.

## Number Two: The wider context in which the Church now finds itself.



The mental model of church that we now live with was formed in many ways as long ago as 313 AD. This is when the institutional church was born. This key turning event consisted of Emperor Constantine declaring Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity went from a movement characterized by a risky scattering, to an institution protected and ensured by the state. The church now could huddle safely, and the state encouraged people to engage in the church huddle. The church responded by learning how, in each succeeding generation, to minister to the people who joined in with the church huddle. Much creativity and wonderful ministry was done through all these years of church history, leading up to the suburban boom after World War II, the setting in which many of our churches were founded.

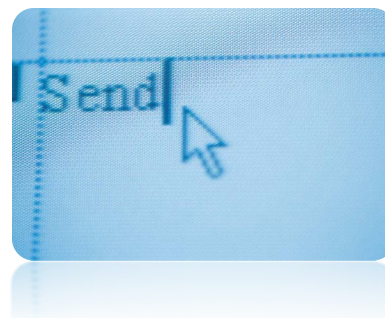
Key shifts changed the context in which the church exists. One shift was the long process in which the state began to not encourage or officially sanction the church huddle. This came in waves, beginning with the Protestant Reformation, and continuing with the separation of church and state in the formation of the U.S. Another key shift was the *Enlightenment* which led people to rethink the source of authority and meaning in life. This all combined to produce a Western society today that is increasingly secular in nature, and one in which the overall thought system does not encourage people to look for meaning and purpose within the walls of the church.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Publishing 1971).

When you combine the fact that since 313 AD the church has experienced itself as an approved institution (which people were encouraged to join), with the secularization of the West (which now means people are no longer inclined to join the church)—the church faces a crisis. Thus, the church needs to rethink our purpose in the midst of this crisis. If people don't come to us, perhaps we go to them? Our present era has more in common with the early church before Constantine's edict than it has ever had before. Perhaps God is calling forth a new imagination for how we "play the game" and move out from the huddle to the game.

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The picture we see in Scripture is that God envisioned God's people having an external focus. This is an incredible challenge, for we are used to people coming to us. As we've begun to grapple with the fact that people are no longer coming to us, our efforts have been around better attracting people to come to us. These are good efforts, but alone they come up short. We end up longing for people to join us and help us run our programs, instead of going out to build relationships with people—partnering with them and engaging them spiritually where they are to be found.



We are left with the call to change:

- How do we engage in the scattering which our huddle was meant to empower?
- What does it mean to be the sent people of God, as well as the gathered people of God?

The beginning is a careful rethinking of the main purpose of the church. The Spirit who gave birth to the Church in Pentecost long ago continues to give birth to the Church today. The Spirit guides us in understanding our being, which leads to new doing, which prompts different ways of organizing ourselves.

How would you answer the question: *What is the main purpose of the church?*

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## Appendix A: Discussion Questions

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1. What is the mental model of church that you grew up with? (or that was formed in your first experiences of church?)
  
2. How does your mental model of church compare to the mental model of church as a rhythm of gathering and being sent?
  
3. The author outlines a conception of organizational life such that a church's sense of being (identity/purpose) leads to doing (ministry) which results in organizing (structure).
  - a. What changes has your church made in the past few years?
  - b. Are these changes in the category of being, doing, or organizing?
  
4. The author claims that historically the Church in the West has focused more on the huddle (gathering activities of worship, Christian nurture, fellowship) than it has on playing the game (being sent out into the world).
  - a. Would you agree/disagree with this assessment of our common church history? Why or why not?
  
5. The author claims that the Church also needs to re-examine its mental model of the scattering toward doing mission/evangelism WITH people rather than TO or FOR people.
  - a. What do you think is the difference between "with" versus "to" or "for"?
  - b. What are the difficulties of doing mission/evangelism "with" people?

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