



# the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

## *In This Issue*

*I first met David Eagle in a course I was teaching at Regent College in Vancouver on the "missional church." I liked his enthusiastic practical insight and appreciated his energetic way of seeking vision to anchor his calling. I know he was enrolled at the Mennonite Seminary in Fresno. As his program there continued, I was pleased to hear how well his internship was going at Fresno's University Presbyterian Church, where he worked alongside the pastor, Chris Erdman, a frequent contributor to this newsletter.*

*Now David has teamed up with classmate Kristin Fast to provide a fascinating glimpse into a turn-around of vision taking place for a young pastor of a large and growing church. To their description of the momentum of that shift is added (on page 3) the personal reflections of that pastor, Tim Parsley. By sharing both, I hope we can all be encouraged, as Tim invites us, to be one another's brothers and sisters free of both pride and resentment, happy to find in each other the source of our continuing conversion.*

*-the editor*



## New Hope: A Dialogue on Missional Transformation in Seeker Sensitive Contexts

*David Edwin Eagle and Kristin Noelle Fast  
Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary  
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Walking into New Hope Christian Church in Visalia, CA is like walking into many seeker-sensitive churches. On the patio a woman serves coffee. Ushers greet worshipers with a handshake and a bulletin filled

pastors, including its senior pastor, moved on to pursue other callings, a new chapter in the life of the church began. Church leaders were already wondering whether growth truly defined the essence of the church.

**New Hope is seeking transformation from a market-driven church to a missional church.**

with multi-colored inserts. Pre-recorded worship music plays as the band sets up. A huge screen hangs above the unadorned stage, flashing announcements. Even from the street New Hope's utilitarian architecture echoes any of the large, evangelical churches that populate major intersections all around Visalia. And at one point New Hope was a large, fast-growing, market-driven church.

But when several of New Hope's

So when Tim Parsley, a young, then associate pastor, brought ideas from *Missional Church* into the conversation, he was met with open receptivity. Tim eventually found himself sitting behind the mahogany desk of the former senior pastor, charged with a church of 700. Now New Hope is seeking transformation from a market-driven church to a missional church. So, while New Hope may look like other seeker-focused churches,

beneath the surface shifts are taking place.

Tim discovered missional church literature while attending seminary. During subsequent years in ministry this literature began to form the base from which his current vision springs. But at a practical level, Tim is venturing into uncharted territory. Missional literature comes largely from mainline perspectives. And while offering significant *critique* of seeker-focused church models, it has provided little constructive discussion of what it means for pastors *already in* such contexts to initiate

proaching change. He can (a) work from within the church's structures to bring about change or (b) tear down the current structure and start over. He has chosen the first. Tim recognizes that parts of the old model have value – things such as contemporary worship and sermons inclusive of new and non-Christians. He compares these parts with the solid, functioning structures of a building. Those aspects of the church *opposed* to missional thinking are like walls and floors and girders needing replacement. The role of people like Tim, then, is to try to introduce necessary,

toward change, rather than thoughtlessly pushing aside the desires and expectations of market-driven members.

But difficulties litter the pathway of this approach. Maintaining an existing “structure” can mean the inadvertent use or preservation of methods and theology that stand starkly in contrast to missional thinking. Leaders like Tim are challenged to ask questions like, How much compromise of missional ideals is necessary to keep my congregation, *founded* on seeker sensitivity, from crumbling? At what point does necessary compromise actually subvert authentic missional conversion? And, maybe most significantly, How important is a missional *process* of change (i.e. the *way* leaders educate, introduce missional conversation, etc.) for establishing a truly missional congregation?

Below we highlight two areas where New Hope is wrestling with transition to a missional approach. We seek to examine these areas with respect to the questions raised above.

### ***Leadership in Tension***

In a number of ways, New Hope has provided fertile ground for the scatter-

*Continued on page 4*

**Tim has sought to value people over efficiency—to invite his congregation on a journey toward change**

missional transformation. This article attempts to open up this dialogue. With Tim's context and experiences as case examples, we hope to bring greater concreteness to the broader missional church discussion, honestly describing the significant challenges inherent to missional work in seeker-focused churches, but also raising constructive questions and insights for pastors like Tim to consider while blazing new missional trails.

### ***A Piece at a Time***

Tim has no assurance that missional transformation at New Hope will happen. The old market-driven paradigm provided security; it came with an owner's manual, defined goals, and measurable indicators. By contrast, Tim's efforts come with inherent ambiguities. Without clear success measures or comparable examples from which to learn, Tim has had to discover for himself what it means to balance legitimate pragmatic concerns with often lofty missional ideals. Hardly a simple task.

Tim has two options for ap-

even significant changes without causing the entire structure to collapse. Leaders must transform the “structure” one small piece at a time. By this approach Tim has sought to value *people* over efficiency—to invite his congregation on a journey

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# The Prodigal Church

## A Narrative Plea from a Seeker-Sensitive Pastor

Tim Parsley  
New Hope Christian Church  
Visalia, CA

*There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' And the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living...*

There was a God who had two churches. One was older and steeped in the traditions of the past. The other, discontent with the past, wanted to seize the future.

Taking our “share,” many of us who serve in younger, “seeker-style” churches originally set out with a desire to see God’s community flourish in a “distant country.” We began with a heart-felt desire to reach a lost generation of people who had become disillusioned with church and its politics, self-focused priorities, and spiritual superiority. The “unchurched” represented a distant country where the gospel could be shared in new and exciting ways.

We did not realize that the “wealth” of the Gospel was being squandered by compromising the distinctiveness of the message with the values of the distant country. But then, we don’t often recognize our living as “wild living” until the next morning when we wake up and see the mess we’ve made.

*After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to feed pigs...*

People today are suffering a famine for a genuine experience of God. Within this culture of spiritual famine, the seeker-church tries desperately to stay alive. Wild living has produced a standard of living that is proving hard to maintain in a barren land.

The result has been a “hiring out” of the seeker-church to the powers of the distant country. The church has gone from the role of “party host” to “cultural slave,” reduced to the feeding of pigs. The seeker-church is beginning to feel hunger pains.

*When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will go back to my father and say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son..."'*

While not all in the seeker movement recognize their enslavement, some younger sons and daughters are “coming to their senses.” For them, the smells of the father’s table bring the pain of conviction and the need for

repentance. Our hunger draws us out of the slop. Our eyes look homeward. And even as we stagger in that direction, we find ourselves rehearsing our repentance speech, “Father, we have sinned against heaven and against you. We turned a calling to a distant country into a joy ride of compromising growth.”

*His father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate!'*

The question is, will we face the condemnation of our father? Does the father want to punish his wayward sons and daughters as they come straggling up the drive?

Thankfully, no. Some of us are discovering again the wonderful arms of grace that turn our most sincere penances into runny-nosed mumbles pressed close. True, many of our seeker-sensitive, wayward brothers and sisters are a long way from anything that resembles repentance. But some are coming home... realizing that their hunger will only be satisfied at their Father’s table.

What will they find? A graceful, forgiving father? Or something else?

*Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. He heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied. The older son became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But the son answered, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat. But when this son of yours comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'*

The missional conversation is long overdue. Through it, God seems to be bringing about a profound transformation in how the church lives out its calling in the world.

Responding to this call, a once proud, now scraggly figure makes his way up the driveway – the seeker-church, the younger brother, come home. And if the story still rings true, the father races down to embrace it, while an older brother sulks in the background.

Writing from the perspective of the returning son, I have come to sense the “sulking brother” in some of the writing and dialogue of missional thinkers. I remember not too long ago sitting in a classroom setting with a dozen or so ministry students, picking the brain of one of them and

feeling distinct “older brother” resentments directed at those of us involved in seeker-style ministries.

Older brothers have never understood why the father embraces wayward sons and throws a huge party at their return.

*‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive*

*again; he was lost and is found.’*

For the missional conversation to be *God’s* conversation, it must also race to embrace the wayward sons who are coming home. God loves both churches – the one that is emerging with a fresh awakening of the mission of God, and the one whose head is still pounding from a hangover. His table is large enough to include us all, so please, scoot over and make some room. And pass the gravy.... ■

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### ***NEW HOPE continued from page 2***

ing of missional seeds. By the time its senior pastorate came open two years ago, most of its elders and a handful of members were sensing that “something needed to change.” Their experiences had left them disillusioned with market-driven techniques, discontent with the lack of connectedness amongst church members, and hungry for a way of “being church” that focused less on Sunday services and more on what it means holistically to live as people in transformative relationship with God.

The leadership finally chose to hire Tim because they recognized in him a similar desire for change. Unlike other candidates, Tim had no pre-packaged program he wanted to implement, but rather a way of articulating the disillusionment many leaders already felt, and a new, intriguing language describing more deeply what it means to be the church.

The last two years subsequently became a season of re-education, during which Tim has introduced the language and concepts of missional church to a team of leaders ready to learn. With their support, Tim has slowly worked missional language into sermons, and invited parishioners to participate in free car washes and coffee give-aways as first steps at helping them think in “embodiment” terms – bringing God’s free love tangibly into the community, rather than limiting witness to Sunday services alone. To leaders’ joy and surprise, a handful of members have independently initiated incarnational ministries that have seemingly little to do with Tim’s missional education efforts and mostly to do with the movement of God in their own imaginations. Such has been the fertile soil into which Tim has scattered missional seeds.

As with most fields, however, New Hope has not been without rocks, weeds and hardpan – issues posing threats to the growth and maturation of conversional seeds. In his description of the missional church, E. Dixon Junkin hints at some of these barriers: “What we need most of all is a church membership that is determined to be church in the fullest sense of the word, and resolved to be church whether its leaders lead or not. And what we need is a leadership that has resolved to place its energies and talents at the service of that determination and resolve. Our goal should

not be that a few make decisions on behalf of all, even if the decisions are good ones, but rather that all might become reacquainted with the gospel, with scripture, with tradition, and with one another. Becoming ‘church from below’ is our calling in this world in transition.” (*The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 312)

In a church founded on seeker-sensitivity and the charismatic, CEO-type leadership of its original senior pastor, few in the church are capable yet of owning a missional ecclesiology and the shared responsibility for church leadership that this implies. The majority are new Christians, used to “experts” running their Sunday morning show, offering bite-sized morsels of Christian faith and biblical interpretation that un-trained Christian ears can quickly

***“Our goal should not be that a few make decisions on behalf of all, even if the decisions are good ones, but rather that all might become reacquainted with the gospel, with scripture, with tradition, and with one another.” (Junkin)***

understand. Those responsible for hiring Tim and with whom Tim has been in open dialogue about missional conversion are few: the elder board and a handful of members. And though consistently supportive of missional ideas, even these continue to look to Tim as their primary “articulator” – as the person by whom missional language continues to be taught and generated. Combined with his naturally strong, directive personality, these factors have continually challenged Tim’s desire to foster a “church from below” – driven not by a few “at the top,” but by a larger body of leaders and congregants learning and envisioning

together what it means to embody God's reign in their particular context.

What seems necessary for true conversion to occur in New Hope is mindfulness on the part of pastors and leaders of the direction their leadership will ultimately take the congregation. Nurturing a missional environment means allowing seeds to sprout and grow roots of their own. Leaders are invited to help every member begin to own a missional ecclesiology, assisting congregants to recognize, accept, and capably fulfill the responsibilities (and joys!) that this places on their shoulders. The missional task involves a gradual conversion of hierarchical leadership structures to an increasingly communal sharing of responsibility.

Much needs to be considered if seeker-focused churches are to make this type of shift. It seems pastors and leaders must begin, however, by reflecting honestly on their own commitments and leadership styles. Questions like the

slick marketing of conservative evangelical theology in seeker-driven churches often tries to remove doubt and ambiguity, presenting instead a tidy, orderly religious package. And this package "sells"; it offers "signs" to counter doubts, and "wisdom" to counter life's inherent ambiguities.

Missional ecclesiology, on the other hand, finds voice from a different theological perspective. "[It] must be centered on the hope, the message, and the demonstration of the in-breaking reign of God in Jesus Christ" (*Missional Church*, 10). Understood missionally, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ display God's fundamental commitment to bring transformation through relationship. They are God's restorative attempt to relate with humanity and to help humans relate with one other in loving and peace-filled ways. This gospel is marked by the tension and ambiguity that characterize human relationships; God's desire for right relationships cannot be reduced to nicely

*It seems pastors and leaders must begin, however, by reflecting honestly on their own commitments and leadership styles.*

following can prove useful: What will be the likely results among current leaders and laity one year from now if I/we continue leading as I am/we are? Five years from now? Will church members develop skills in leadership, vision setting, scriptural interpretation, discernment of cultural contexts? Will they still be following *my/our* lead, or will I/we be facilitating theirs? Whose vision will ultimately be the missional church? Such questions highlight again the significant need for further discussion of concrete steps that pastors can take in pursuit of missional change.

Though working with a team sympathetic to missional concerns, Tim knows well that significant barriers accompany the best attempts at transition from hierarchy to collective responsibility. The process is slow. Pragmatic implications are complex. But if true missional conversion is to transform seeker-focused churches, pastors and leaders must mindfully consider whether and how their own top-down leadership is itself moving towards conversion.

### **Theology in Tension**

In the midst of a church in transition, Tim is discovering that missional "yeast" will not be contained. Through deepening layers of church life it moves beyond issues of leadership to promote change in theology as well. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom" (1 Cor. 1.22). In his book *Religious No More*, Mark Baker gives contemporary voice to Paul's words, "[H]umans do not like ambiguity; therefore, as a human construct religion offers a package of information that removes doubt and ambiguity" (68). In a similar way, the tight packaging and

packaged products.

The sermon delivered the Sunday we visited New Hope gives evidence of the unsettling marriage of missional and conservative evangelical theology. It argued the need to understand God as both courtroom judge and parent. As judge, God is a distant, courtroom figure, whose ready death sentence can be circumvented only through the advocacy of Christ. The image is nice and neat; it emphasizes God's impartiality, governed by the rule of law, rather than emotions. The parent image, on the other hand, stresses God's love and care for us as children. As parent, God displays emotions such as love, mercy, tenderness, and concern, and is interested in restoring and maintaining good relationships. This image is inherently ambiguous; relationships do not operate by clearly defined, rational principles.

In congregations transitioning from seeker-sensitive to missional ecclesiology, the presence of oppositions like these presents an ongoing challenge to undertake serious theological reflection and re-education. Churches like New Hope have the opportunity to reconsider their image of God and to allow a renewed picture to give birth to missional structures. Simply tinkering on the external, programmatic level will not be enough. Based on experiences at New Hope, effective leaders in this transition can begin by re-thinking foundational theological convictions, recognizing that oppositions at this level serve as barriers to missional transformation.

And thus issues of *process* are raised again. How can pastors like Tim begin to re-orient their theology in a missional direction?

Tim's own work suggests a starting point. A glance at his bookshelves reveals a man who has read deeply and widely across a variety of subjects and perspectives. Tim admits that his education in a conservative, evangelical seminary trained him to approach theology with reductionistic categories. So part of Tim's personal transformation in years since has involved open-minded/hearted study of philosophy, theology, culture, and the biblical text itself. Intentional study and reflection have pointed him further away from theological over-simplifications and awakened his imagination to a more missional way.

In the same way, pastors seeking theological conversion must embrace "theologian-in-residence" as an indispensable part of their call. "Theologian-in-residence" does not imply a lofty academician, but rather one whose

congregations are further explored, "theologians-in-residence," whose theological insights and effectiveness as communicators are deepened by on-going study and reflection, may appropriately lead the way.

## Conclusions

We have highlighted two of many tensions raised by efforts at missional transformation in a seeker-sensitive context. Neither is easily or readily resolved. Both point toward need for further concrete discussion of process- and compromise-related issues faced by pastors like Tim.

We leave the complexities of New Hope wondering whether missional transformation is possible in established, seeker-sensitive congregations. Is true missional transformation destined for church planting or church restart situations

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sustained and humble reflection on the nature of life and God translates into poetic and prophetic invitations to churches in transition to live within the tension and ambiguity that, biblically and experientially, constitute life with God.

"Prophetic invitations." What might this mean practically?

Many New Hope congregants and others in seeker-sensitive contexts are recent converts. Thus, pre-packaged, simplified versions of theology – 5 steps to creating a healthy marriage, or 6 biblical principles to manage your money – feel familiar, like a business seminar or a self-help book. So while pastors are challenged to introduce missionally-oriented theology of their on-going discovery, they must do so in ways their listeners can understand. Pastors act as translators who try to maintain a delicate balance between clarity and content.

Questions like the following might aid in these attempts: In relation to this week's sermon, what ways do I feel tempted to remove tension and ambiguity? What fears drive me to this point? What theological ideas or images am I trying to evoke – overtly and in illustrations? How might these compare with what I know of missional theology? How can I communicate them in ways that connect with people used to pre-packaged versions of theology, yet avoid the dangers of reductionism and over-simplification? How might I use story, imagery and testimony to evoke these theological ideas and images?

The process of missional conversion is multi-layered. But *theological* conversion lies at its core. As the complexities of transition from seeker-sensitive to missional

alone? Many involved in these conversations are asking the question, and the jury is still out. And yet...

Are not we as the greater Christian community called to help every church experience transformation – no matter what the make-up of its congregational "members"? The missional church community has excelled in critiquing market-driven Christianity, but how might we offer constructive resources to help effect change?

Consider Paul on the road to Damascus, struck down and blinded by his encounter with the risen Christ. Conversion, transformation, *metanoia*; bewilderment and loss of identity. Tim repeatedly gives voice to a similar sense of blindness – of not knowing whether his work at New Hope will end in failure. Yet at the root of Christian confession stands the conviction that no matter how hopeless the situation, conversion is indeed possible. Let the missional church community diligently and prayerfully consider what it means *practically* to foster communities of people who authentically proclaim the reign of God. ■

*The authors welcome conversation growing out of this article and its companion article, "The Prodigal Church."*

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# Global Variations

conversation among partners in the gospel and Western culture movement

*GOCN 2002 Consultation, October 17-19*

The annual GOCN consultation is a place to stretch one's vision for vital, missional renewal for the church. The consultation is the place where a movement gathers, a movement that takes seriously our contemporary North American secular and postmodern culture, listens to the accents of the gospel that address our culture, and calls for the church's continuing conversion in light of that.

In this year's consultation, vision for this "encounter of the gospel with our culture" will be kindled by partners from other Western societies and from third world societies affected by the West. They will give us the possibility of a new angle of reflection from which to see ourselves, and their companionship will encourage us on the way.

## ***Major presentations will be made by...***

**H. Jurgens Hendriks**, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

**David Kettle**, GOCN in the U.K., Cambridge, England

**Ross Langmead**, Whitley College, Melbourne, Australia

## ***Responses from third world vantage points will be made by...***

**Amon Kasambala**, Justo Mwale Theological College, Lusaka, Zambia

**Paul Satari**, Wesley Methodist Church, Singapore

*This event will take place at the  
Divine Word International Conference Center, Techny, Illinois*

*The consultation will begin with dinner at 6:00  
on Thursday evening, Oct. 17 and end with lunch on Saturday, Oct. 19.  
The registration fee of \$210 includes meals and lodging. Discounts are available for  
students, groups and early registration.*

*Registration brochures will be mailed to GOCN members and the  
same information can be found on the website at [www.gocn.org](http://www.gocn.org).*

*For additional information contact Judy Bos, [judy.bos@westernsem.org](mailto:judy.bos@westernsem.org) or 616-392-8555.*

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Intensive study of the New Testament will become missionally incisive if one approaches the task asking, How did this text prepare the early church for its mission, and how does it prepare us for ours? What does this text tell us about the gospel? What makes it good news? What does this text tell us about ourselves? about our world? What does this text show us about the way in which the gospel is to be made known? How does this text challenge our organizational forms and functions? How should our organizational practices change in light of this text? How does this text challenge us to be converted?

*Missional Church, p. 246*