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## The Seed-Planting, Nurturing Church: Changing Church Leaders from Maintenance Harvesters to Missional Seed-Planters, and Members from Donors to Disciples

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**The Seed-Planting, Nurturing Church:  
Changing Church Leaders from Maintenance  
Harvesters to Missional Seed-Planters, and  
Members from Donors to Disciples**

**Waldo J. Werning**

(Editor's note: This article is excerpted from Dr. Werning's forthcoming book to be published by ChurchSmart, 3830 Ohio Ave., St. Charles, IL)

There is no lack of teaching in the church. Yet, learning is scarce. There is no dearth of books, seminars, and conferences on the subject of revitalizing the church. Yet, struggling churches abound. The situation is compounded by the multitude of pastors who find themselves over-burdened and simply burned out.

A quick glance at several recent book titles echoes great concern regarding the traditional, institutional church: *The Perfectly Imperfect Church*, *UnLearning Church*, and *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: and How to Fix it*. Discontent is obvious. Something is not right.

*The Seed-Planting, Nurturing Church* proposes that there is a need for more than change in leadership, that there needs to be a change to the correct design—growing out of biblical principles. The problem lies in the failure to have the correct design. The design is often that of a programmatic maintenance harvesting church instead of a missional, seed-planting, nurturing church. This traditional, institutional church tries to renew itself with visionary leaders who mold the church in programmatic or organizational ways. But the church will not be revitalized outside God's design.

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God's design is a biblical model. It is the organic, natural body of Christ. It becomes a "community of faith" church. It is led by ordinary gifted leaders who adopt a *missional seed-planting* model in the place of a *maintenance harvesting* style of the church.

The institutional and organizational Christianity, established by Constantine 1700 years ago, has handicapped the church. It has demanded too high a cost. Luther's biblical emphasis on the priesthood of all believers changed the church landscape drastically. There were so many traditional and cultural barriers, however, that the biblical redesign of the church was never completed.

When the Christian church came to America, it was independent of the State. It was completely free to introduce biblical practices. Programmatic innovations were introduced while some European habits and traditions were dropped. American Protestant churches developed their own forms and traditions. Renewal and revitalization of organizational, traditional churches came as a result of evangelical creativity. About eighty per cent of American churches today are hampered by being basically harvesting models that depend on bigger and better programs, projects, budgets and institutional achievements.

Today, around twenty per cent of all American Protestant churches possess most of the ingredients of the nurturing New Testament church. However, while the specific components of these vibrant, biblical churches are present, few have been structurally redesigned or have included or assimilated all the necessary renewal ingredients. Some of the influences of the harvesting church are still present. Few are an organic, natural body of Christ, community of faith nurturing church without some institutional and programmatic components and activities which are a drag on the church under grace.

Renewal will never happen by the ordinary practice of the many organizational and traditional churches which remold the forms and activities by some new program from time to time. What is needed is a redesign of church strategy based on biblical principles and examples –a new and different design than the church of the last 17 centuries. Call it the Apostolic Church or whatever you wish to name it, the design grows clearly out of biblical texts to be freed from all institutional and programmatic constraints.

The seed-planting, nurturing, missional church will be a creation of God by the Holy Spirit through men and women of

faith—leaders who embody and live in close relationship and communion with the living God in Jesus Christ, who multiply themselves by the Holy Spirit through the Word in the body of Christ, the Christian community of faith.

The more than twenty per cent of effective, growing churches which have visionary leaders with strong faith will eagerly make certain that all the components and modules are in place, and will recognize themselves as a seed-planting rather than a harvesting church. The 80% of churches which are struggling in maintenance or even survival, which have plateaued or stagnated, find it difficult to gain adequately equipped and mobile leaders and members. The success of the church is not dependent upon what we can bring to a harvesting church, but what God gives to us in the seed-planting, nurturing church.

The 80% of churches that are traditional, harvesting churches have a primary ministry to members, usually one entry point—Sunday morning worship. They repeat basically the same programs and activities and focus on traditional programs, treating symptoms while going from crisis to crisis. The 20% create multiple entry points for people to be involved, seek creative ways to nurture relationships, focus on outreach, minister to the hurts and hopes of people, and experience growth in ministry and mission. Harvesting churches exist with traditional rituals, legalisms and maintenance routines with considerable individualism and disconnected members, while seed-planting churches are grace-based with people connected and related to each other in ministry. The first is churchianity-oriented and the second is Christianity-oriented.

My ultimate goal is to help you see that this “agricultural project” of the church, in which we are God’s partners, is first and foremost the Lord’s field, not ours. The vision is worthy and workable, for it comes from God and His Word. Only when we see this will we be able to grow healthy, nurturing churches. So let’s get started. It’s time to go survey the fields, seeds, plants, fertilizer, and necessary water in the seed-planting nurturing, missional church. It is this Church in which we are God’s co-workers and managers—God’s “farmers,” if you will. This is His spiritual enterprise in which He alone gives the increase. To Him be the glory.

*A Satellite View of Productive Agriculture*

Agriculture is closely related to Jesus’ teaching and ministry

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from the physical and spiritual viewpoints. Food, wheat, grapes, and figs are familiar topics integrally connected to His messages. Jesus taught that God's Word is the seed (Luke 8:11-15). The Holy Spirit enables His people to plant, fertilize, and water that seed in order to produce bountiful fruit. His parables reveal that He fully expected healthy plants to grow and be nurtured to productivity.

The Bible is full of agricultural and food imagery that richly intermingles with both physical and spiritual applications of plants, vines, and trees. 2 Corinthians 9:10 makes it clear, "God gives seed to the farmer and food to those who need to eat. God will also give you seed and multiply it. In your lives He will increase the things you do that have His approval."

The Scriptures show Jesus to be spiritual food, and the Word to be the seed. We read, "You have been born again, not from a seed that can be destroyed, but through God's everlasting word that can't be destroyed" (1 Peter 1:23). Isaiah tells how the Word as Seed brings forth fruit, "Like the ground that brings forth its crops and like a garden that makes the seed in it grow, so the Almighty Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up in front of all nations" (61:11).

Not surprising is Jesus' teaching that a farmer went to plant seed. Some of that seed went on rocky ground and some on good ground. Paul refers to "the spiritual seed" that has been planted (1 Corinthians 9:11). In teaching how the dead will come back to life on the final day, Paul says, "The seed you plant doesn't come to life unless it dies first. What you plant, whether it's wheat or something else, is only a seed. It doesn't have the form that the plant will have. God gives the plant the form he wants it to have. Each kind of seed grows into its own form...When the body is planted, it decays. When it comes back to life, it cannot decay. When the body is planted, it doesn't have any splendor and is weak. When it comes back to life, it has splendor and is strong. It is planted as a physical body. It comes back to life as a spiritual body. As there is a physical body, so there is also a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:36-38, 42-44). This teaching ends with the great shout, "Thank God that he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

*Nurturing Vines and Trees for Productivity*

In John 15: 1-9, Jesus teaches that He is the Vine and we are

the branches. Living in Him, disciples will produce much fruit. Without Him there will be no harvest. More, production of fruit is a sign of true discipleship. Jesus tells His disciples that the Father “removes every one of my branches that doesn’t produce fruit. He also prunes every branch that does produce fruit to make it produce more fruit.” In fact, whoever does not live in Him is “thrown away like a branch and dries up. Branches like this are gathered, thrown in to a fire, and burned.” Such non-productivity is a tragedy. When the branch is connected to the Vine, the branch is shown to be a disciple productively connected to Christ. Fruit-bearing branches of vines and trees are God’s requirement in the kingdom of Christ and of the Church. Jesus concludes, “You give glory to my Father when you produce a lot of fruit.”

*Satellite Precision Maximizes Crop Productivity*

As an Iowa farm youth 60 years ago, typical corn yield was around 50-60 bushels to the acre with the help of some fertilizer. A whole new world in agriculture was opened to me in the summer of 2002—the Global Positioning System. Visiting the Iowa farm of my niece and her husband, I learned about a precision system that, with the aid of a computer and software, maximizes crop potentials.

Looking at a satellite view of the farm on the computer screen, I was shown the yield map of the corn harvest of a 142 acre field that averaged 190 bushels per acre. A click on the computer to one specific area showed the lowest yield of 140 bushels, while a click on another area showed that 245 bushels was the highest.

There was more to learn. The satellite map revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the soil in each portion of the field. Jim had done sample testing for nutrient minerals throughout the field. On the basis of that testing, satellite positioning showed the specific strengths and deficiencies of each particular section. Another satellite image revealed the chemical spraying operation which helped increase crop yield productivity by eliminating destructive weeds and insects.

Jim then showed me the chip that is inserted into the computer on his tractor. This chip has a prescription for precise placement of what food is needed in the soil. A fertilizing implement meters the requirements of each specific area of the ground. The computer chip, the tractor’s “brain,” controls what

the fertilizer spreader, planter, or sprayer applies. It enables the farmer to skillfully administer seed, fertilizer, or chemicals appropriate for each acre. The result? Vital soil nutrients and food needed by the seeds for maximum growth and fruitfulness are supplied.

Jim tells that the Global Positioning System guides him throughout every step of the process. This guidance comes from what is called a "light bar." "I test for nutrients at each specific site," he says. "On the basis of those results, the light bar on the tractor guides me to feed the soil precisely what it needs, or to spray the correct applications in order to thwart weeds and insects. I track yield on every inch of ground and use satellite imaging to continually monitor the crops throughout the process." This is how every acre with every plant is nurtured and monitored for maximum care and productivity.

Because of soil type and fertility differences, some plants need more food and some less. The ground needs a proper balance of fertilizers—nitrogen, phosphorous and potash. Lime is needed to neutralize soil acidity. Zinc and sulfur may be needed at times for balance. Some plants may need certain additional nutrients due to specific soil deficiencies. This type of individualized application is a nutritionally sound way to maximize cropland potential. For accurate evaluation, infrared technology assesses and details the health of the crop.

The global positioning and guidance system is an almost "supernatural" aid. With GPS, tractors are less like a machine and more like a moving computer. It allows the farmer to care for his acreage in a way that would be humanly impossible, if it were left to his own resources. The unique system unlocks the potential of huge tracts of land, of farms spreading across hundreds of acres. All summed up, it helps farmers have the most efficient production possible. All of this is accomplished without even mentioning agronomic services, superior crop genetics, water management and irrigation systems, and the elimination of pollution. Using an old idiom, the sky is the limit.

*Every Acre and Plant is Cultivated, Tended, and Nurtured*

Farmers and agricultural workers will not survive in their business unless every acre is carefully cultivated, nurtured, and managed. A successful farmer does everything possible in order to have healthy plants, vines, and branches. Every possible means of maximizing cropland potential is on his mind every

day. Cultivation, nurture, food, protection, management of every resource on every acre and every plant he owns is his aim. No matter the effort, the goal is a healthy crop. If he does anything less, he will fail in his enterprise. That is the reason agriculturists today use modern technology and science. That is the reason they employ a global guidance system. That is the reason they pay attention to every detail, making certain their entire farm, vineyard or orchard is carefully watched from above.

*A Seed-Planting, Nurturing, not Harvesting Mindset*

The flourishing farmer has a seed-planting, fertilizing, watering, feeding, and caring mindset, not one of sitting around waiting for the harvest in order to enjoy the reward of selling a crop. He does not have a harvest mindset which focuses on the most profitable acres, while ignoring those acres with plants and fruit trees which are less productive, because he does not have the time to tend all of them or he does not need the money from the least of them.

After the harvest when he looks at the computer yield map, the nurturing farmer will not decide to ignore or dismiss 20% of the acreage and plants and fruit trees because they are less productive. Rather, he studies carefully how by gaining better genetics, providing stronger nutrients, applying chemical and spraying more widely. This assures that even the lesser crops will be more fruitful.

*A Satellite View of the Traditional "Harvesting" Church*

How often has our church vision been clouded and blinded by foggy lenses? When we look through "institutional" lenses of our church experiences, we do not see what God sees. Human and pragmatic considerations of maintenance and harvesting often blind us. We actually cheat ourselves. The fact is, God sees much more than we do.

What does God see? On one hand, He sees churches proclaiming the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. He sees believers committed to the call to minister to people at the point of need. He sees equipping churches that consistently plant and water. He sees churches that cultivate and fertilize to enjoy a good harvest.

On the other hand, God sees institutional churches, ones often marked by their imposing structure and traditions. The "ecclesiastical satellite" sees churches striving to maintain members,

workers, and programs. The heavenly view sees the body of Christ struggling to produce a harvest from fields that have too often been neglected.

*A Parable of a Harvester and His Orchard*

The traditional harvesting church is like a farmer and his four hundred fruit trees. In the middle of the orchard is a cathedral-barn filled with enough nutrients to nurture the trees. From the divine satellite the 400 trees represent 400 members of a traditional, institutional, harvesting church. The farmer and his helpers have a harvesting mentality and outlook. What the satellite sees is 400 fruit trees of which 200 are regular producers, 100 are slight producers, and 100 are non-producers.

The farmer with the harvesting mindset has weekly contact with the productive trees. They visit the nurturing barn each Sunday to be watered, nourished, and encouraged to bear much fruit. Despite personal encouragement to gather more frequently, many less productive trees come only periodically. They seem to have little concern for nutrition. The non-productive trees simply never come. Once a year, more or less, the farmer sends a farm-worker to the unfruitful trees and reminds them that they should be coming to the barn for their nutrition.

The weekly gathering at the cathedral-barn provides beneficial encouragement. Messages and songs focus the trees' hearts on the temporary nature of this earthly farm and that the Lord of the Universe will one day take them to the eternal Garden. The farmer and workers, however, find it necessary to remind the trees regularly that fertilizer here on earth is costly. In order for nutrition to be available through the year, the trees will need to contribute to continual maintenance costs.

The harvesting mentality is a long-standing tradition in which the trees find purpose in the fruit that they provide for the farmer. It is a tradition in which the farmer is basically a harvester, not one whose focus is to leave the cathedral-barn to plant seeds, cultivate, fertilize and water the fields and the trees.

*The Harvesting Church Contrasted with the Nurturing Church*

The parable of the fruit trees shows us in stark terms what the "Divine Satellite" might observe in a harvest-minded church. The organizationally structured church is often focused on rituals and traditions it believes must be kept. It is geared to relig-

ious regulations and often views periodically attending worship as a means of being a good church member or even “staying in favor with God.” Though never stated as such, knowledge is expected more in such a church than is living faith. Even though it may not be recognized, the emphasis is very much on external deeds that God “rewards.” Certain procedures or ways of doing things are considered “right” while others may be considered “wrong.”

In contrast, the church focused on cultivating and nurturing offers a type of spirituality that involves relationships—a living relationship with God and with His people. People are growing not only in grace, but in knowledge and faith. The cultivating mindset results in true worship of the Almighty living God, active service toward God and people, and accountability to each other in the body of Christ. All of this is a natural response to God’s love as shown in Christ Jesus.

The harvest-minded church has little transparency. Relationships center around duties to be performed. The pastor and members concern themselves with questions like, “What needs to be done in order to maintain this institution? What can we do to assure it will survive? How can we fill pews and how will bills be paid?” Intimacy is rare.

On the other hand, the church focused on cultivation is geared to the Great Commission and mission outreach. It asks, “What is our purpose here at this time? What is God’s call and assignment for us?” The will of God is actively sought in all matters. The concern is not for what the *institution* wants, but rather what *God* desires. Its primary commitment is the increase of the kingdom of God, making disciples of those who are a part of the Body. It fosters a living Christian community. Relationships thrive.

Harvesting and institutionalism are present when people want to be served, more than to serve. It is seen when obedience to church practices is emphasized to the neglect of biblical sanctification and the spiritual quality of life. The harvesting mode is to invite people to exalt Christ but then allow them to accept comfortable church membership, cultural morality and salvation by performing the right rituals.

The church focused on nurturing, however, provides spiritual food to strengthen them for service and ministry. The church’s purposes are recognized as being the very purposes of God. His purposes are kept at the center of everything the corpo-

rate Body says and does. They understand the concept of sanctification, that what each Christian says and does in the Body flows out of the grace given by Christ's sacrifice for them on the cross.

The institutional church is focused considerably on forms and technologies. Its eyes are on statistics and its concerns are about plans, programs and budgets. New programs and by-laws often seem to give great hope for the future. "Cosmetic" approaches touch up forms and methods that supposedly will add new life to the church. But in reality, ministry and mission are still bound by institutional restrictions.

By contrast, the nurturing church has the distinguishing mark of seeking the Holy Spirit's leading for more effective ministry. It models the mission of the church by Scriptural principles. The powerful Word of God enables it to engage in new and growing ministries. This kind of cultivating church creatively changes forms and functions in a way that allows God's grace to be expressed without human restrictions.

The maintenance-oriented church is overly concerned with harvesting fruit. It "shakes trees" in order to reap finances and workers. Fruit pickers are critically dependent upon these workers and dollars in order to survive. Out of sheer survival instinct, a pressure-cooker attitude causes them to panic at the thought of not meeting goals and budgets. "How will the church fill positions?" they ask. "How can we complete tasks so that the work gets done? How will it all be financed?" The church becomes emotionally and physically controlled by urgent demands of human goals for fruit. Even worse is the fact that these needs are proclaimed through programs that are often equated as being God's will.

The cultivating church, however, concentrates on the roots of the plants and the pruning, just like Jesus did. That church holds itself responsible, by the power of the Spirit, to cultivate, nourish, and water the ground. After all, there can be no healthy or abundant fruit without nourished roots. Members understand their call to nourish and be nourished and that God promises to provide the increase.

The harvesting church has a microwave mentality by which a button is to be pushed so that soon a successful program is produced. This places pressure on leaders to contrive successful programs rather than conducting an educational process with biblical goals which effectively penetrates minds and hearts.

They actually find themselves having to force a superficial or structured sort of Christianity, one that produces results in an artificial way. The result sometimes is that the church is soliciting “cut-flower” commitments for the tasks at hand.

This is not true of the nurturing church. Its members have been fed by God’s Word in a way that effectively penetrates their minds and hearts. Leaders commit themselves to Scriptural principles throughout the entire course of growth. They look for spiritual results, from seed-time to harvest. These leaders develop a systematic educational process for growing fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ. Members are involved in Bible study ranging from the very basic ones to the challenging—all of it profitable for meaningful life change (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The harvesting church thinks in terms of converts and donors, emphasizing membership and the duties of church members. The nurturing church sees every member as a disciple of Christ, recognizing that conversion is but a first step to be followed by a lifetime of Christian growth, maturity and discipleship. Christian nurture and education are offered as the central part of all of life through small groups meeting for interactive Bible studies and support for specific needs. Only disciple-making will assure care of all believers and lead to world evangelization.

The vital sign of a congregation is not the numbers and the dollars, but the changed lives of those who have become active disciples by the teaching of the Word. Maturing the saints is the congregation’s mission, and it occurs only through the Word.

Maintenance, harvesting churches have in reality replaced the Word with programs and other creative ways of trying to maintain the church. The problem with their members is that they are not where instruction in the Word is happening. The seed stays in the bin.

The nurturing missional church knows, as the old Broadway song reminds, that “A song is not a song until you sing it. A bell is not a bell until you ring it.” A seed is no good until you plant it. The Word in a person’s life is not effective until it is proclaimed and taught. The nurturing church sings the song, rings the bell, plants the seed, and makes certain that the people are where instruction in the Word happens.

God’s grace raises the church beyond the mediocrity of programmatic, harvesting methodologies to be a seed-planting, nurturing, missional church.

The question remains: "What does the divine satellite see in our church?"

*God Expects His Church to Plant Seeds and Nurture His Field*

Just as a satellite map helps to accurately assess the productivity of an Iowa cornfield, the parable of the farmer and the fruit farm helps to assess productivity in the church. It prompts Christians and churches to take a look at the Word of God and see it as the seed, fertilizer, and water needed to produce fruit. The almighty Word itself is what nourishes spiritual plants in the kingdom of Christ and His Church.

That Word is the seed that brings growth to the people of God. Jesus told His disciples the story of a farmer who went to plant seeds (Luke 8:4-15). "Some seeds were planted along the road, were trampled, and were devoured by birds," He said. "Others were planted on rocky soil. When the plants came up, they withered because they had no moisture. Others were planted among thornbushes. The thornbushes grew up with them and choked them. Others were planted on good ground. When they came up, they produced a hundred times as much as was planted."

His disciples asked Him what the story meant. "This is what the story illustrates," Jesus answered. "The seed is God's Word. Some people are like the seeds that were planted along the road. They heard the Word, but then the devil comes. He takes the Word away from them so that they don't believe and become saved. Some people are like seeds on rocky soil. They welcome the Word with joy whenever they hear it, but they don't develop any roots. They believe for a while, but when their faith is tested, they abandon it. The seeds that were planted among thornbushes are people who hear the Word, but as life goes on the worries, riches, and pleasures of life choke them. So they don't produce anything good. The seeds that were planted on good ground are people who also hear the Word. But they keep it in their good and honest hearts and produce what is good despite what life may bring."

The Word sown on the edge of the field is rejected by those who hear it. They simply do not believe God's saving message. Those persons on rocky soil seem to like what they hear but are without roots. Their faith dies. Faith begun among thornbushes is squeezed out and choked by worries and the materialistic aspects of life. As a result, it becomes unproductive. Those who

have received the Word on cultivated ground have strong faith and produce good fruit under all conditions.

A farmer with a *harvesting* mentality would choose only good ground. But that would cause much land and plants or trees to be ignored and relegated as useless. The wise church planter tends the entire acreage—all believers in the Church. Throughout Scripture, spiritual leaders are encouraged to plant seeds and nurture them to maturity, not simply look for a harvest. More, the church farmer is to concentrate on the entire field, not just the productive acres.

*The Seed of Faith*

The Seed-Word is the essence of Christian life: “Life is spiritual,” Jesus said. “Your physical existence doesn’t contribute to that life. The words that I have spoken to you are spiritual. They are life” (John 6:63). All spiritual renewal begins and ends with the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, through the Word, who reveals truth and enables a person to respond to it. Paul writes about the Father’s ability to produce Christian desires and actions that please Him. He says that believers will not only grow, but shine like stars in the world as they “hold firmly to the Word of life” (Philippians 2:13-16).

The seed of God’s Word is in every believer’s heart. Each Christian is to become part of God’s field, the Church. Scripture nourishes and waters the plant as it grows in the strength supplied by the Holy Spirit. The seed of the Word finds reception in the heart and develops. Germination is followed by growth. Growth culminates in fruit. Jesus said, “First the green blade appears, then the head, then the head full of grain” (Mark 4:28).

It is only by faith that minds, hearts, and lives—as well as personalities, abilities, voices, and time—can be implanted with this Word. Everything that a person is and does as a Christian is planted by faith into this life-filled ground. Its health is expressed through witness and service to Christ through the Word. Like a grain of wheat, it will produce a hundredfold. If the Word is not planted on fertile soil, if it does not have the opportunity to become healthy, it will die without reproduction of any sort. It will die as a life that shows little or no purpose.

God wants His seed planted everywhere. The Holy Spirit alone causes that seed to sprout and grow (Mark 4:26-27). Paul says that neither he nor any other human is the one who causes it to sprout. God alone is the one who makes it grow (1 Corinthe-

ans 3:6-8). He is the one who gives the seed and the increase (2 Corinthians 9:10). The life-giving Word is powerful and productive. It will not go out without results. It accomplishes whatever God wants. It achieves whatever He sends it to do (Isaiah 55:10-11).

*The Organic Essence of the Church*

It is important to consider the organic nature of the Christian faith, both individually and in the Church. Jesus' parables about nature and agriculture do exactly that: He tells about seeds that grow and of different types of soils. He talks about good and bad fruit and uses illustrations that revolve around the seasons of sowing and reaping. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks His disciples to notice how the flowers grow in the field (Matthew 6:28). He was directing them to observe how God was more than capable of caring for everything in nature, as He does in His church.

In another story, Jesus tells of a man who planted good seed in his field (Matthew 13:24-30). However, in that same field the man's enemy had planted weeds and secretly went away. This parable of nature becomes the believer's life story of grace. "The one who plants the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world. The good seeds are those who belong to the Kingdom" (Matthew 13:37-38). Jesus says that these people have God's approval—by His grace! They will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom.

Jesus explained to them, "The weeds are those who belong to the evil one. The enemy who planted them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world" (Matthew 13:38-39). At the end of all time the angels will gather these to be burned. The harvest belongs to One alone. All that is not of God will be rendered useless for eternity. On the other hand, those holding to faith in Jesus Christ will stand victoriously before the Throne of God.

*Growth is the Nature of the Church*

Growth is characteristic of and essential to the Church. Scripture is ripe with its growth analogies. After all, the nature and function of the Word is growth. Paul said, "The Good News...is producing results and spreading all over the world as it did among you from the first day you heard it." Paul testified that growth exhibits itself in lives that prove the Lord's ownership. "You will want to please Him in every way as you grow in

producing every kind of good work by the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1: 6,10). This growth is true not only of the individual believer, but also of the entire Church. "Christ makes the whole body grow as God wants it to, through support and unity given by the joints and ligaments" (Colossians 2:19).

Paul acknowledged the spoken Word as an agent of growth. It is a necessary ingredient in the nurturing process. "When a person speaks what God has revealed," he said, "he speaks to people to help them grow, to encourage them, and to comfort them...When he speaks what God has revealed, he helps the church grow" (1 Corinthians 14: 3-4). This Word is powerful and able to produce results. When Paul recognized Christians who were bearing fruit, he was quick to commend their growth. "Your faith is active, your love is working hard, and your confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ is enduring" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). This was living evidence of growth!

Paul speaks of building up the body of Christ until it is mature, until it measures up to Christ, who is the standard. He says, "Then we will no longer be like children...Instead...we will grow up completely in our relationship to Christ, who is the head" (Ephesians 4: 13-15). This is God's will, that believers grow to full maturity in Christ. Peter says, "Desire God's pure Word as newborn babies desire milk. Then you will grow in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). In his second letter he says, "But grow in the good will and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

The Book of Acts also provides many illustrations of growth. The Church grew in quality and quantity. Luke tells of its continual expansion. "The word of God continued to spread, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem grew very large" (Acts 6:7). Even hardship led to growth. "The believers who were scattered went from place to place, where they spread the Word" (Acts 8:4). They boldly spread the Good News of the Lord (Acts 8:25).

#### *The "Automatic Growth" Principle*

"Remember this," Paul said. "The farmer who plants a few seeds will have a very small harvest. But the farmer who plants because he has received God's blessings will receive a harvest of God's blessings in return" (2 Corinthians 9:6). Paul expected growth! He was certain that believers were entrusted to God and to His message of grace. "That message can help you grow," he said, "and can give you the inheritance that is shared by all of

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God's holy people" (Acts 20:32). Through the seed of the Word, the Church is planted, nurtured, and is constantly renewed so that it might grow. Through growth in that Word, the church performs its mission task confidently.

In his book, *Natural Church Development*,<sup>1</sup> Christian Schwarz speaks of the organic nature of the Kingdom of God. Schwarz, who has studied over one thousand churches in thirty-two countries, calls it the *biotic* nature. "The biotic potential," he says, "is a concept designed by God the Creator Himself." Each local congregation has this natural capability. "We should not attempt to 'manufacture' church growth," he explains, "but rather to release the biotic potential which God has put into every church. It is our task to minimize the obstacles to church growth...both inside and outside the church"<sup>2</sup> "The release of God's growth automatisms is a strategic secret of growing churches."<sup>3</sup>

Schwarz calls Jesus' parable the "all by itself," or automatic growth principle. "The Kingdom of God is like a man who scattered seeds on the ground," Jesus said. "He sleeps at night and is awake during the day. The seeds sprout and grow, although the man doesn't know how. The ground produces grain by itself. First the green blade appears, then the head, then the head full of grain. As soon as the grain is ready, he cuts it with a sickle, because harvest time has come" (Mark 4:26-29).

While the farmer's task is to plant and dutifully care for the field, it is God who gives the increase. Servants of Christ cannot produce fruit. They cannot force growth. They only do what the Master has asked them to do—plant seeds, cultivate and fertilize. The servant must be patient as he awaits the harvest. Spiritual growth is a continual, gradual process that leads to maturity. The faith of each believer is to mature and multiply just as seeds are to sprout and grow. Only then does it bring forth an eternal harvest.

#### *Christians and Churches that are Both Healthy and Productive*

Paul's letters show the organic nature of the church. This organic nature is the spirituality of the body of Christ. It does not need the bureaucracy or technology of a modern corporation. For the processes of planting seeds and nurture, Paul links growth with Christian calling and mission. He tells of healthy churches, unlike church systems in decline. They strive for ministry that relies on discipling and spiritual formation. They hold a solid commitment to biblical beliefs and values. These

churches have a strong sense of the vision and mission to which God has called them. In Paul's eyes, servants of Christ and His Church are persons with a clearly articulated faith and spiritual life.

Were Paul here today, undoubtedly he would not be comfortable with declining church systems that are preoccupied with institutional membership. These types of churches are absorbed with *prescriptive thinking* that focuses on producing rites, committee formulas, and complex job descriptions. Rather, Paul's letters reveal leaders who demonstrate *descriptive thinking*. These leaders carefully balance both their productivity and accountability. They seek to grow permission-giving churches, ones that see a broad spectrum of ways in which God can work. Paul exemplified this type of strong spiritual leadership, not anything resembling the "machine management" of many traditional churches of our day.

Yes, ministries must be planted, cultivated and nurtured by Christ's servants. But Paul makes it clear that the work is not to glorify ourselves, but to glorify Christ. We do this as God's co-workers, doing God's work. "When some of you say, 'I follow Paul' and others say, 'I follow Apollos,' aren't you acting like sinful human beings?" Paul asks. "Who is Apollos? Who is Paul? They are servants who help you come to faith. Each did what the Lord gave him to do. I planted, and Apollos watered, but God made it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is important because only God makes it grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have the same goal, each will receive a reward for his own work. We are God's coworkers. You are God's field" (1 Corinthians 3:4-9). No matter which contribution is made to the whole of the work, "everything must be done to help each other grow" (1 Corinthians 14:26). Both the field and work are God's. They are fully of His doing.

Jesus named fruit as the criteria for measuring whether a person believed. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven," he said, "but only the person who does what My Father in heaven wants" (Matthew 7:21). "You will know them by what they produce," he said. "People don't pick grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles, do they? In the same way every good tree produces good fruit, but a rotten tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a rotten tree cannot produce good fruit. Any tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into a fire. So

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you will know them by what they produce" (verses 16-19).

*Planted to Bear Fruit*

Through the Word, Jesus demonstrates that Christians will be able to bear fruit as they live in Him. "Live in me, and I will live in you. A branch cannot produce any fruit by itself. It has to stay attached to the vine. In the same way, you cannot produce fruit unless you live in me. I am the vine. You are the branch. Those who live in me while I live in them will produce a lot of fruit, but you cannot produce anything without me. Whoever doesn't live in me is thrown away like a branch and dries up. Branches like this are gathered, thrown into a fire and burned. If you live in me and what I say lives in you, then ask for anything you want and it will be yours. You give glory to my Father when you produce a lot of fruit and therefore show that you are my disciples" (John 15: 4-8).

Paul, addressing the Christians at Galatia, impressed upon them the importance of planting good seeds in their daily lives. "Make no mistake about this: You can never make a fool out of God. Whatever you plant is what you will harvest. If you plant in the soil of your corrupt nature, you will harvest destruction. But if you plant in the soil of your spiritual nature, you will harvest eternal life" (Galatians 6:7-0). Paul reminds each Christian to be productive in ministry. Each believer is a planter responsible for the individual seed he or she sows.

Jesus taught a lesson to those preparing the way for the Gospel. As their pay, those who sow and harvest will see new believers enter the Kingdom. "The person who harvests the crop is already getting paid. He is gathering grain for Eternal Life. So the person who plants the grain and the person who harvests it are to be together. In this respect, the saying is true: 'One person plants, and another person harvests.' I have sent you to harvest a crop you have not worked for. Other people have done the hard work and you have followed them in their work" (John 4:36-38).

*Spiritual Formation — Shaped By the Word*

What is the nature and purpose of God's Seed, the Word? Unless we understand major obstacles in reading and understanding the Word, the message may not be received. These obstacles may cause mere information to be transmitted without the Word doing its work of spiritual formation. It is so easy to settle for head knowledge that does not reach the heart. It is

God's desire that those who read His Word receive His personal message. He wants to address and heal real needs.

Obstacles can hinder readers from receiving the full message God wants to deliver. They can cause the reading of Scripture to merely "tinker" with a present system of understanding and values. On the surface, structures of life may be reordered and the dynamics of the ways things are done may be modified, but the Christian still remains locked into the old self-generated self. The possibility of miraculous spiritual formation is removed.

The purpose of the Bible is not merely to provide information for doctrine and salvation. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 does not stop at the words, "Every Scripture passage is inspired by God." It goes on to say, "All of them are useful for teaching, pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God's approval. They equip God's servants so that they are completely prepared to do good things." Doctrinal truths are not to be learned at the expense of growing in maturity. The Christian demonstrates Scripture's effect by modeling a trust-filled faith and a faith-filled life.

The Word is to transform minds and lives! Paul lifts the Word as actually having an incarnational attribute that makes Christians "living letters." Romans 12: 1-2 says that because of God's compassion toward them, believers are to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, dedicated to Him and pleasing to Him. They are to change the way they think so that they "will always be able to determine what God really wants—what is good, pleasing and perfect." To be formed in Christ is a gift of God. God gave His Word to call us into relationship with its author and, in so doing, to form His people in the image of Christ. Yes, information is vital for spiritual formation, but only when clearly and properly presented as the work of the Holy Spirit. It is He who transforms.

It is a fact that many persons interpret Scripture through the lens of traditional thought patterns and church practices. Information-seeking and behavior dynamics are deeply ingrained into the human nature. These patterns and dynamics automatically take over and blind many who hear or read the Word. The focus, however, must be on the transformation through the Word, on how the Master desires to change His servants to be more and more like Him. Raw human nature wants the rights of the Kingdom without obedience to the King. The King sees the reverse to be true.

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The use of information and methods in the present culture facilitates regulation and control. It does so for the church as well as for all of life. It causes a church to be seen as a personal structure, in personal terms. God's grace, however, seeks to liberate His people from this destructive bondage. His Holy Spirit seeks to create in them, in their being and character, a whole new structure of habits, attitudes, and relationships. He seeks to create in them new responses to His Word. His grace powerfully works through His Word. Yes, they learn of inconsistencies in their Christian character. But they also learn that they are offered loving nurture into the holiness so much needed—and the grace to change and act.

*Proper Nutrition and Nurture Raises Christians Who Produce*

Flourishing farms and flourishing churches run on the same principles. Whether farmer's field or God's field, each plant is to be cultivated, fertilized, and nurtured. If healthy formation and growth are desired, each believer needs to be fed.

Like farmer Jim's motivation in planting, the apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of church leaders motivating members to be productive. "Remember this," Paul says. "The farmer who plants a few seeds will have a very small harvest. But the farmer who plants because he has received God's blessings will receive a harvest of God's blessings in return...God will give you His constantly overflowing kindness. Then, when you always have everything you need, you can do more and more things...God gives seed to the farmer and food to those who need to eat. God will also give you seed and multiply it. In your lives you will increase the things you do that have His approval. God will make you rich enough so that you will always be generous" (2 Corinthians 9: 6, 8, 10-11).

Paul's words illustrate the intimate relationship between God and His spiritual "farmers," His people. He speaks to them candidly about the use of their God-given resources. God has given these resources to be used for His purposes, to His glory. What He gives is to be carefully invested—not hidden, consumed, misused or thrown away. God's resources, whether physical or spiritual, are to be used as He intended—to produce abundantly more crops and fruit.

*The Dimensions and Goals of a Seed-Planting, Nurturing Church*

Each church has a choice whether it wants to have church

“ala carte”—growing piece by piece, committee by committee, program by program—or whether it wants to be Christ’s natural community of faith. Does the church leader want a “plastic” organization built by various boards in the church? Does he want to follow years, even centuries, of traditions and program formation? Or does the leader want an organic, “elastic” church guided creatively by the Holy Spirit through the Word?

*The Dimensions of an Organic Church*

How are the dimensions of an organic church defined, driven, developed, directed and distinguished?

1. *The nurturing church is **defined** by its planting and nurturing.* Farmer Jim concentrated intensely on every aspect of planting and nurturing. Likewise, Jesus and Paul proclaimed and expounded on the same. The healthy church is defined by them. The Church is basically about seeding and nurturing, not harvesting.

The nurturing congregation determines its essential nature (DNA) and knows it well. It understands every aspect of this DNA and communicates it clearly. It tends its members with quality and purpose through the Word and Sacraments. The organic church recognizes that Jesus alone is the divine Harvester on the Last Day.

2. *The nurturing church is **driven** by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.* Its message is God’s grace, balanced with His loving expectations, proclaimed in repentance and forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself described the intensity of the Gospel message (Luke 24:46-47).

The healthy congregation is inspired, compelled, and empowered by Jesus Christ Himself. It is He who sends every believer to work in the Father’s field. It is His compassionate love that is the driving power of the mission. “Clearly, Christ’s love guides us...He died for all people so that those who live will no longer live for themselves but for the man who died and was brought back to life for them... So from now on we don’t think of anyone from a human point of view...God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with Him through Christ and has given us this ministry of restoring relationships” (2 Corinthians 5: 14-16, 18). It is this Gospel that drives the nurturing church.

3. *The nurturing church is **developed** by the Seed as food and water.* The ministry of the church is spiritually built and formed

through the use of God's Word. That Seed brings the congregation into being, expands it, and continually influences it in its ministry of discipling. Instead of saying that the *churches* grew in Acts 6:7, Paul states, "The word of God continued to spread, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem grew very large." He relates the same fact in Acts 12:24, "But God's word continued to spread and win many followers." Bible study as well as leaders who are trained on the basis of the Word are key factors in developing a healthy church.

4. *The nurturing church is directed by the Great Commission.* Jesus Christ sends His people out into the field. The healthy congregation carries out the mandate of His Commission.: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So wherever you go, make disciples of all nations: Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to do everything I have commanded you. And remember that I am always with you until the end of time" (Matthew 28: 18-20). This is a task of disciple-making, teaching and evangelizing.

The absence of disciple-making and evangelizing is a fatal defect in any church. People are not classified as disciples just because they go to church and are involved in a Christian activity. The call to discipleship is not a "week-end hobby," but rather a life-long commitment to obey the Great Commission. The disciple's vision is to work together to share Christ's love with a Great Commission passion.

5. *The nurturing church is distinguished by its biblical "delivery system."* The healthy church conveys its spiritual resources effectively to every point of need. It is an "equipping church" that prepares leaders and members for their individual ministries. This church looks for every opportunity to plant, feed, and water. It has a delivery team comprised of biblically equipped leaders and workers. Each person is trained, encouraging all believers to "bloom where he or she is planted." The church's basic strategy is founded on God's principle of nurture. The healthy church creates intentional pathways to growth. It concentrates on the congregation's mission, not the size of the parish.

The nurturing church employs a Scripture-centered system that is conducive to disciple-making. The leadership team is thoroughly equipped to sow and cultivate. It has the task to tend and nourish all persons in the field. Leaders are not satisfied until the congregation is transformed into a seed-planting, nurtur-

ing church. They make certain that the biblical delivery system is constructed to promote life-bearing multiplication.

Leaders in the healthy church seek to grow a Body that is spiritually alive at the same time as being culturally relevant. They mobilize it for a ministry that is united in Spirit. The leaders plant and grow workers who express compassion for each person while being sensitive to the needs of all people. They move the ministry forward in aggressive outreach. The leaders are bold to evangelize the lost and to plant churches. They select and gather leaders, equipping and empowering them for God's mission. They integrate and align God's resources for new and growing ministries.

*The Biblical Basis for a Nurturing, Equipping Church*

The healthy church is built upon the equipping principles found in Paul's letters to Timothy and Ephesians. The leadership principle found in 2 Timothy 2:2 is basic to a healthy, functioning church: "You've heard my message," Paul says, "and it's been confirmed by many witnesses. Entrust this message to faithful individuals who will be competent to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). The task of faithful leaders is to develop disciples who are able to disciple others. Making disciples is the first principle of leadership development and membership maturation. It is the foundational precept of the *divine system*.

Built upon the principle he had written to Timothy, Paul further expounds the *divine system* of disciple-making to the Ephesians: "I...encourage you to live the kind of life that proves that God has called you...God's favor [grace] has been given to each of us. It is measured out by Christ who gave it...He also gave...pastors and teachers as gifts to His church. Their purpose is to prepare God's people, to serve, and to build up the body of Christ. This is to continue until all of us are united in our faith and in our knowledge about God's Son, until we become mature, until we measure up to Christ, who is the standard. Then we will no longer be little children, tossed and carried about by all kinds of teachings that change like the wind. We will no longer be influenced by people who use cunning and clever strategies to lead us astray. Instead, as we lovingly speak the truth, we will grow up completely in our relationship with Christ, who is the head. He makes the whole body fit together and unites it through the support of every joint. As each and every part does its job, He makes the body grow so that it builds

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itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:1,7,11-16).

The nurturing, equipping church recognizes and employs Ephesians 4 as the basis for growing productive and fruit-bearing Christians. What exactly is this *divine system*? What does it entail? Upon what is it based? Scripture highlights six principles that define the system as ordained by God.

1. *God calls His people to life-long ministry.* God's call is actually two-fold—first to salvation, then to sanctification. "You will know the confidence that He calls you to have," Paul writes, "and the glorious wealth that God's people will inherit" (Ephesians 1:18). This amazing call to salvation is rich with present and eternal benefits: "We were dead because of our failures," Paul goes on, "but He made us alive together with Christ. (It is God's kindness that saved you.)"

The call to sanctification is clearly stated in God's Word. Ephesians 2:10 says, "God has made us what we are. He has created us in Christ Jesus to live lives filled with good works that He has prepared for us to do." Paul's encouragement is direct in telling that you and I are to "live the kind of life which proves that God has called you" (Ephesians 4:1). God's call is not to church voluntarism or helping to meet a budget, but to answer His call to be a faithful servant and witness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. *God's people minister on the basis of grace and the gifts He has given.* God is not asking His people to do or give anything that He has not already supplied. "God's favor [grace] has been given to each of us. It was measured out to us by Christ who gave it" (Ephesians 4:7). When God calls persons to ministry, He gives the resources for them to be able to minister and serve.

Grace, even in the midst of doctrinal orthodoxy, has been distorted in church practice. biblical knowledge has often been allowed to remain merely a mental process, rather than something applied or related to life. People are left with head knowledge that does not touch the heart. Sanctification and good works become confused when the churches and leaders allow various negative factors to be present. In a faulty response to the Word, rituals can easily replace Christian love and action. Church members may replace personal piety with church activities. They may not understand the proper linkage between justification and sanctification. There may actually be a fear of the words "obey" and "obedience," believing that they connote some sort of legalism. This is in spite of the fact that Jesus said, if

anyone loves Him, that person would *obey* His commandments.

Use of the Spirit's gifts results in healthy Christians and healthy churches. Paul said, "I don't want there to be any misunderstanding concerning spiritual gifts" (1 Corinthians 12:1). Still, many churches know little or nothing about this grace given by God for ministry. Every Christian should know that there "are different spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, yet the same Lord is served. There are different types of work to do, but the same God produces every gift in every person. The evidence of the Spirit's presence is given to each person for the common good of everyone" (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7).

Healthy, nurturing churches assist Christians to serve in their area of giftedness. They help each "priest" to identify and develop his or her specific gifts. In doing so, they enable them to function as servants of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. God's calling and spiritual giftedness are essential elements of the Christian's life in the Church. Each is to do his or her work as a minister of God—whether pastoral or in a lay capacity. Simply stated, it is each believer's task to discover, develop and use all spiritual gifts for service in Christ's kingdom.

God's Word does not outline a definite plan on how to discover spiritual gifts. It does, however, instruct the believer to discover, develop, and use them for the building of His church. A careful use of a gifts discovery inventory can be effective to assist the congregation to fulfill its mission. The spiritual gifts tool GRASP is one of those that can help to identify unique gifts, callings, and passion in the church. Applying the words of Jesus Christ to daily living, believers are enabled to find meaning and God-given purpose in life. GRASP is a tool for believers to discern God's call on their lives and to discover the skills and resources they possess.

Pastors and leaders must lay a proper foundation and cast the vision for spiritual gifts. This can be done by a series of sermons on the subject. Some of the specific aspects covered would be (1) The fact that every Christian has a gift and is to use it—1 Peter 4:10; Ephesians 4:7, (2) that people have different gifts—Romans 12: 6 and 1 Corinthians 12:28-30, (3) that all gifts are important for ministry—1 Corinthians 12:4-11, (4) that the church is a Body where all parts are to work together—1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Ephesians 4:16, and (5) that pastors and teachers equip people for ministry— Ephesians 4:11-12.

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3. *Leaders are to fulfill their God-given purpose of preparing people to serve.* God's call to pastors and teachers is to teach and instruct. They must know that in order to serve, God's call on members is first a call to learn and be taught in the Word. "Their purpose is to prepare God's people, to serve, and to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12).

The traditional, harvesting church has built a volunteer system without adequate concern for fully preparing the people for ministry. This volunteer system is based primarily on matching skills with tasks, not spiritual gifts with ministries. It is characterized by leaders giving an appeal for church workers rather than a distinct call from God. As a result, enthusiasts use their skills well while the majority of persons are spectators who watch them. The major problem is that few of God's people are anywhere near the place where true preparation is happening. They simply are not where the teaching and training is occurring (Ephesians 4:12). True, a church can be maintained and survive with half its members active, one-quarter of them marginal, the other quarter inactive. But under such conditions, the body of Christ can not be built, nor is the divine system embraced.

When the teaching and equipping principles of Ephesians 4:12 are practiced, the church will be an active seed-planting, nurturing church. When these discipling principles are ignored, it will be a maintenance, harvesting church. Pastors and church leaders have a choice—follow God's design or the traditional road.

4. *Intensive discipling is to continue until there is unity of faith and spiritual maturity.* How long are God's people to be nurtured and equipped for ministry? "This is to continue until all of us are united in our faith and in our knowledge about God's Son. Until we become mature, until we measure up to Christ, who is the standard" (4:13).

This spiritual reality is faithfully practiced by healthy churches. The harvesting church, however, or any church that ignores the basic discipling function found in Paul's letter, will have too many immature members. These persons fit the description found in Ephesians 4:14. They will be "little children, tossed and carried about by all kinds of teachings that change like the wind." They will be "influenced by people who use cunning and clever strategies" and be led astray.

5. *The believer's relationship to Christ grows as all lovingly speak the truth.*

“As we lovingly speak the truth, we will grow up completely in our relationship to Christ, who is the head” (4:15). Lovingly speak the truth to another person? When Jesus taught deep truths about Himself as food and bread for believers, many of His disciples said, “What He says is hard to accept. Who wants to listen to Him anymore?” (John 6:60).

This exhortation to speak the truth is given to all believers in a congregation, not solely to their pastors or elders and deacons. This failure becomes a fatal flaw in the life of the congregation. An important part of living “the kind of life which proves that God has called you,” (4:1) is to lovingly speak the truth (verse 4:15).

6. *In God’s divine equipping and discipling system, every believer is involved in ministry.* This *divine system* is described in Ephesians 4:16. “He makes the whole body fit together and unites it through the support of every joint. As each and every part does its job, he makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Effective ministry is not engineered by church leaders. The church does not grow because some gifted church leader organized a master plan. Ephesians 4 shows that *God* makes the church grow. Verse 16 tells that it is *He* who makes the whole Body fit together and unites it through the support of believers whom He has called and gifted for ministry. Focusing on the church as the body of Christ, God says this fitting together and working together is accomplished through the support of every joint-member—not 35% or 60% of the members. It is the cooperation of every member that makes everyone fit for service.

In most congregations, only a small percentage of believers use their God-given, grace-bestowed spiritual gifts. Very few give support to the whole Body through any type of ministry. When we consider that fact, it is literally a miracle that the Church, as the body of Christ, has not been crippled to the point of non-function. It is amazing to see the good that does happen in traditional, harvesting churches operating under a more human approach. This gives credit to the power of the Gospel and the Spirit of God even in spite of a church’s endeavors to do the job through too many human efforts.

Jesus and Paul taught by using pictures of life and growth. Their messages often made analogies to farmers and crops. They echoed the same organic type of Body-life found in Ephesians 4:16. The entire chapter reveals the true characteristic of the seed-

planting, nurturing church. This scriptural teaching, of course, is in stark contrast to the human “synthetic” approach found in many harvesting churches.

After careful study of Ephesians 4, especially verse sixteen, there is one primary encouragement: *Don't try to beat the system!* For the seventeen centuries since Constantine institutionalized the church, the traditional harvesting church has basically been “trying to beat the system.”

The equipping and nurturing church has Ephesians 4 as its operating plan. It functions on the basis of the divine ministry system. God calls. God gives grace and gifts to act. He supplies pastors and teachers to prepare His people for ministry. He continues to grow people until they measure up to the standard of Christ. God makes the whole Body fit together and unites it through the ministry of every believer, as each one uses his or her gifts. God makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Has our congregation heard God's call? Is ours the *divine system* or our system?

*The Seed Planting, Nurturing Church Cares for the Entire Field*

Farmer Jim concentrates his time and efforts on raising healthy plants in his field. In the same way, pastors and church leaders are called to build healthy members and relationships in the church. The church is God's field. Growing healthy relationships enables all persons to be cared for in God's field.

An unhealthy pastor or leader hurts the congregation by manipulating, over-controlling, or by neglecting those over which he has been placed. On the other hand, healthy pastors and healthy leaders grow healthy people. Healthy pastors minister grace and healing to the people. They give them much needed nourishment and direction. They nurture healthy relationships that grow healthy members.

The Trinity itself is relational. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in a functional, integral relationship for eternity. The relationships found in the Church are to be a model and extension of the Trinity. They are possible only because of the health that exists in the Trinity itself. The Triune God builds His relationships with His people through the Sacraments and the Word. By His grace He forgives their sins, restores their relationship with Him, and communicates with them by His love—in His Church, the community of faith.

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Relationships are the foundation of pastoral and lay ministry. Christian relationships impact the ministries of the Church at every point. What believers do flows out of their being rightly connected to one another in Christ. This requires biblical integrity in all relationships. It must be recognized that the body of Christ precedes and actually directs the church organization and its programs. When bureaucracy rules or structures get out of control, the community of faith suffers. It becomes institutionalized. Church organization must never overpower the organism, the body of Christ.

Since Paul's day, the historic struggle of the church (related to function and form) has been the tension between the body of Christ and its institutional form. Jesus made one simple announcement: "I will build My Church" (Matthew 16:18). It is not my church or yours. The Church, after all, is not a human organization, but one divinely planned and called into being.

God called the Church together in Christ to be "...a spiritual house that is being built into a holy priesthood..." (1 Peter 2:5). It is the community of Christ's believers on earth. "God has put everything under the control of Christ. He has made Christ the Head of everything for the good of the Church" (Ephesians 1:22).

Believers are together identified as the family of God. "I will be your Father, and you will be My sons and daughters" (2 Corinthians 6:18). Their highest title is not as church members, but as God's children. "He gave the right to become God's children to everyone who believed in Him" (John 1:12).

Each member of the Church—the body of Christ—is valuable and interdependent. Each member is united by the Spirit and thereby committed to truth. He or she is equipped to serve, motivated and filled by Christ's love. Each member of the Body functions according to his or her sanctified design. To be true to the Head, no person can live as though he or she is the whole Body. Believers cannot be uninvolved in the needs and suffering of those in the Church or in the world.

No person is complete by oneself and no one has been entrusted with all. Completeness is found only in mutual sharing and caring through the Christian community. The Church exists only in community.

It is also true, though, that no Christian community can be fully healthy and have no spiritually sick members. If the Christian community is to be a safe place for even the weakest, it must be a place where persons are safe to express pain and hurt. The

church must be a place where people can get help and support for heartache and abuse. No one should be left in despair. No one should be left to believe that they themselves are the problem because they do not have enough faith. No wrongs or pains should be ignored. The healthy community of faith addresses hurts and wrongs in people's lives rather than "wallpapering" over them or hiding them under a rug.

*Special Feeding and Care for the Weak*

Churches that tend to wholesale their communications—using mainly written letters, or e-mail, neglecting individual contacts—fail in their Scriptural responsibilities. The care with which the sender conveys the message is a factor that critically affects how well the Word will be received. From a biblical standpoint, the failure to foster love, to give careful attention to the weak and troubled, is a scandal to the Gospel. Pastors and spiritual leaders far too often become defeated in their attempts to reach marginal members effectively. In fact, traditional attempts are usually to send a letter or an elder with a reminder that they need to attend church. After awhile, these persons are simply dropped from the church roster. Does this not grieve the Good Shepherd of the flock?

The seed-planting, nurturing church will acknowledge the situation, face the facts, and begin with building healthy leaders. It will begin with those who are spiritually strong and able to tend the field properly. What will such spiritual leaders offer "helpless" members and their anemic spirituality? They must learn to adopt the biblical pattern of tending and caring for fragile plants in God's field. The spiritually powerless need the loving support and encouragement of strong spiritual leaders.

*The Need for Restraint or Correction*

Jesus gave instructions on how to deal with situations that require correction and restraint (sometimes called "church discipline"). He told His disciples how to deal with erring or straying members (Matthew 18:15-18). The purpose of such spiritual correction and redirection is positive. It should express the grace of God and restore the errant member. Every Christian congregation should practice such loving guidance. Why?

1. *To restore* a person who is doing wrong (Galatians 6:1, Matthew 6:14-15).
2. *To correct* an offense and remove temptation (1 Corin-

ans 8:9).

3. *To maintain* the Christian testimony of the church (1 Timothy 3:7).
4. *To encourage* every member to remain faithful (1 Corinthians 5:6-7).

Any church that compromises at this point denies the perfect character of God and does not fulfill His purpose for the fellowship of the church. That church then loses its testimony to the world. The church community is required to establish certain standards as a response to God's Word. Compromise opens the door to divisions and separations, and to offense in the church and outside. The fellowship of the church must center on a living relationship with God and each other, the kind of relationship God intended.

Hurting people in the church need to experience the love of God. They need to experience the incarnational ministries of compassionate listening and caring presence. They must be shown grace and forgiveness. The seed-planting, nurturing church cares for the entire field, including those persons who have been inactive. It has a passion to bring all persons to a vibrant, living relationship with Jesus that is evidenced in growing healthy relationships with His people. All together will celebrate with joy as many are touched with the healing and restoration of God's love.

#### *Healthy Churches Use Quality Control Systems*

Factories and businesses use them for good production. Farmer Jim uses them for healthy productivity. Both employ quality control systems for designing and monitoring their businesses for better yield. In the same way, those who understand the teachings of Jesus and Paul know they are applying a biblical strategy and quality control system in their churches.

In order to employ a biblical quality control system, a "monitor" (one that recognizes whether the church is utilizing an effective strategy) needs to be developed and adopted. This monitor detects whether the church is pursuing the right path toward health. A quality control system or "guide" becomes the tool that oversees and accomplishes the equipping strategy in the church.

There are at least three available tools that can serve as quality control systems for churches today. One is *Natural Church Development* by Christian Schwarz<sup>4</sup>. This tool measures the ef-

fective characteristics of a church. Related to this, *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*<sup>5</sup> provides a quality strategic system for guiding congregations in building healthy characteristics and monitoring them for quality control. Together, *Natural Church Development* and *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church* offer a new equation and framework that proposes biblical principles to replace traditional programmatic, harvesting paradigms. Rick Warren offers a third strategic system in *The Purpose Driven Church*<sup>6</sup>. He demonstrates in his book how members can be purposefully guided from membership to maturity to ministry to mission.

#### *Natural Church Development*

Christian Schwarz offers a most natural biblical approach as he applies growth concepts of nature to the church. Laws of organic growth look at the roots and health of a plant, not just at the fruit. Harvesting churches characteristically look only for fruit seen on the surface. Schwarz points out, "See the lilies of the field, *how they grow*" (Matthew 6:18). Churches must intensely and diligently learn, observe, study, and research this growth. He emphasizes the *growth mechanisms*, not the beauty of the lilies. This is important in understanding the principles of Kingdom work.

*Natural Church Development* stresses principles of biological growth. God has created all living organisms with the capacity to grow and reproduce "automatically." It is a natural process. These natural principles also apply to the body of Christ and the Christian community of faith. Jesus used many illustrations from nature to describe the kingdom of God. Schwarz says leaders can learn from all forms of life and transfer those concepts to the living organism called the Church.

The eight quality characteristics of a healthy church are:

- Empowering Leadership
- Gift-Oriented Service/Ministry
- Passionate Spirituality
- Functional-Structures/ Administration/ Servant Leadership
- Inspiring/High Impact/God-Exalting Worship Services
- Multiplied Small/Groups/Intentional Disciple-Making/Growing in Community
- Witnessing/Fruitful Evangelism/Mission
- Loving Relationships.

*12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*

*12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*<sup>7</sup> offers two approaches, that of the twelve pillars (the eight quality characteristics and four additional leading indicators of healthy churches) and that of the ball-field (Rick Warren's illustration in *The Purpose-Driven Church*).

Added to the eight quality characteristics are four additional leading indicators of healthy churches: the centrality of God's Word, the Gospel, and grace, the fact that a church must be mission and vision driven, the truth of biblical financial stewardship, and the commitment to church planting.

These stress the 2 Timothy discipling model of life-giving churches. They result in a balance of inreach and outreach.

Each characteristic in *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church* includes a "Reality Check" that allows leaders and members to measure or assess the strengths and weaknesses of the congregation. A practical facet of the book is the proposal for "Maximum and Minimum Level Activities" for each characteristic. These are all based on biblical references and insights. Also included is a helpful listing of primary and secondary resources, books that are vital for a better understanding of the issues.

Local congregations are living organisms, created and designed by God to grow and reproduce. Churches grown according to these strategies are positioned to engage in ministry that births new life. To revitalize a congregation, God first transforms the lives of the pastor and church leaders. These in turn create, by God's power, new biblical strategies that produce more and stronger disciples. A church life system is created based upon biblical belief.

The twelve basic pillars are the life system or process that grows out of the Word of Life. Each of the twelve pillars of a healthy church interacts with each other to increase the capacity for ministry impact. They help a church to restructure and revitalize its established style, structure, and strategy. Isaiah 43:18-19 states a principle relevant for this process: "Forget what happened in the past, and do not dwell on events from long ago. I am going to do something new. It is already happening. Don't you recognize it?"

The approach of the twelve pillars is that of a ministry of transformation, not a ministry of new programs. Introducing layers of new and innovative procedures cannot change tradi-

tional systems. Neither can making mechanical or structural adjustments. These only meekly attempt to restructure the church. Such "changes" still retain mediocrity. The focus must be on a holistic strategy in which *God* transforms the church. It is only the Word and its "grace system" that can shape anything the church is able to do.

*Rick Warren's "Purpose-Driven Church"*

The third strategy, serving as a quality control system, is found in Rick Warren's book *The Purpose-Driven Church*.<sup>8</sup> His "ball-field illustration" is reproduced in *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*. This diagram illustrates members, taken from the start of their relationship with the church, to bases one, two, three, and all the way "home."

*The Development of a Seed-Planting, Nurturing Vision*

This book, *The Seed-Planting, Nurturing Church*, together with the books *Natural Church Development* and *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*, should be read and studied for direction. They outline the necessary components for growing a biblical church that plants seeds and nurtures its members. A vision task force or leadership group should be enlisted to discern and develop the vision for the ministry. This task force should include the pastor, church chairperson, and representatives of each ministry group, board, or committee. It should also include several potential leaders, both men and women, gifted in leadership. Each person on this task force should read these three books.

*Discerning, Developing, and Applying the Vision*

The process of discerning the vision might begin with a series of sermons and Bible studies on the *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*. Each week worshipers might be given a sheet of paper to answer the following questions (regarding each of the twelve pillars):

1. In your view, how are we doing in this area?
2. Where do you believe God wants us to go?
3. What strengths do you see in our congregation in this area?
4. What weaknesses do you see in our congregation in this area?
5. What advances would you like to see us make?
6. What insights can you offer for growth in this area?

In order to discern the vision, sufficient time must be allowed for persons to respond with their reflections and insights. The significant responses from those answering the above questions should then be recorded. A group should study these responses and begin to develop the church's unique vision.

Vision leaders should allow one year for such studies and responses. During this time, any barriers to health can be recognized and identified. New strength can be gained, new direction taken—a new determination to follow God and His Word. The church can recommit and revision to “Catch the Vision of Christ's Mission.”

During this year of visioning, the Word needs to be richly sowed. It is the Word that produces results. Over time, more persons will grow to be disciples: “The churches were being strengthened in the faith, and grew in numbers every day” (Acts 16:5).

*A Vision Leads to Developing a Master Ministry Strategy*

As the vision is developed, a clearer direction comes into focus. The vision becomes the basis for a master ministry strategy. In order to develop this strategy, the vision task force must take the newly-formed vision to each individual ministry board and group in the congregation. Each group must connect their particular ministry responsibility to the church vision. In order to be adequately informed in the process, group members should be encouraged to read the resource books. This will enable them better to be prepared to develop the vision into a master vision strategy. By the end of the first year, this master ministry strategy should be completed.

If a church is committed to determining its purpose and vision, it must be intentional in planning its strategy. In order to plan this ministry strategy, each group should ask the questions, “What do we think God is calling our church to be and do?” “How will we do what He has asked us to do?” “How can we be what we believe He is asking us to be?” Steps in developing this master ministry strategy involve:

- analysis (where the church is now)
- understanding the situation (the statistics)
- vision (what God wants our church to be)
- goals (what the ministries of the church should be)
- programs (how the church moves ahead with its strategies)

- evaluation (making sure that we pursue and complete the ministry strategy)

It would be helpful to develop a forum where church members can discuss their place in the “priesthood of all believers.” Questions can be asked that encourage members to evaluate this position personally and corporately. “What is your purpose in life?” “Why do you think God placed you here on earth?” “Why do you think God placed you in this church at this time?” “How can our church be biblical in its ministries?”

Planning instruments from *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church* (the Rick Warren ball-field grid and the two forms on pages 117-118) help the leaders to take necessary steps toward transforming the church to be what God wants it to be. The development of a ministry strategy will give a deep sense of meaning and purpose to the daily activities of leaders. It will help them to periodically evaluate the thrust of their work and to determine the quality of their efforts.

*Applying the Vision and the Master Mission Strategy—a Three-Year Process*

When the vision and master mission strategy is completed—approximately one year into the process—the vision task force must motivate every ministry board and group in the congregation to activate productive ministry in their respective areas. This needs to be fully on the basis of the vision of Christ’s mission. The “Apply the Vision” activity is a three-year process. The pastor and vision leaders begin by educating the entire congregation through dynamic messages and attractive printed materials. The vision and master mission strategy should be duplicated and available for all members. The mission strategy with the grid is now the “map” that all leaders follow in applying the strategy to each specific area of ministry. It is crucial that fervent prayer undergird the entire effort. In order to meet ministry goals, all possible resources are to be used. In addition, leaders must be held accountable for targeting every individual of the congregation. Vision leaders should keep asking relevant questions:

- Have we reviewed long-standing methods, programs, and decisions to learn if they are still valid on the basis of biblical principles?
- Have we looked at all alternatives?
- Have we set the proper priorities?

- Do we see an opportunity in every difficulty or crisis?
- Do we face and make difficult decisions head-on?
- Are we keeping the main thing the main thing?
- Have we distinguished between constants and variables?
- Have the vision committee leaders and church board leaders done their homework by reading the three basic resource books?

*The Defining Moment*

There are defining moments in the life of the church. Transforming a church from a harvesting church to a seed-planting church is not merely *a* defining moment, but *the* defining moment in the entire history of a congregation. Church leaders can discern the vision—and even develop a general plan—but still fail to adopt a master mission strategy that can be aggressively introduced to church members. The defining moment of transformation pierces to the very heart of the life and reality of the congregation.

Assuming that the spiritual leaders and task force group have adopted a master mission strategy, the *defining moment* becomes reality when steps are taken to *apply the vision* during a three-year process. When this is done, all the criticisms, excuses, and defenses of the previous maintenance and programmatic experiences have been set aside. The choices, events, and people once enslaved to institutional, harvesting forms and functions are history. The Holy Spirit is able to give spiritual leaders a clear vision in this defining moment. They know how they will aggressively apply the seed-planting strategy biblically and practically.

Vision leaders will let the seed-planting and nurturing principles be enlarged and deepened throughout the ministries of the church. Every man, woman, and child needs to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Let the Gospel trumpet of Christ's vision of His mission be heard—so every church will be a healthy church!

*If You Want Spiritual Fruit, You Have to Get Out of the Cathedral-Barn*

John Ortberg's *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*<sup>9</sup> challenges spiritual leaders to take the big step of faith. He invites them to walk where Jesus calls. While fear of

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inadequacy may visit their lives and ministries, they still experience God's powerful presence and promise. As they discern God's call, they will choose to go beyond their fears, get out of the cathedral-barn, and walk by faith into God's field.

In fear, eleven disciples remained in the boat. By faith, Peter walked on the water. He walked toward Jesus, "but when he noticed how strong the wind was, he became afraid and started to sink. He shouted, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus reached out, caught hold of him and said, 'You have so little faith! Why did you doubt?'" (Matthew 14:30-31)? The fact is, if anyone wants to walk on water, they must get out of the boat—despite doubts.

Winds and storms are no surprise. Neither are hesitating, faltering leaders—nor dull, weak members. The question is whether spiritual leaders will reach out to Jesus in faith. Will they ask the Holy Spirit for strength to get out of the cathedral-barn? At times they may walk into stiff winds of opposition. But do they recognize that these winds blow them onto paths leading directly to members in great spiritual need? Will they focus on the storm or on Jesus—on the problem or on the Word?

There is more to life than sitting in a boat. There is more to Christ's mission than sitting in church worship services and meetings. Jesus wants leaders to be leading their people into God's field, not merely meet in the cathedral-barn. In God's field they will find acres of plants to tend, where they will experience His abundant growth and blessing.

#### *The Business of the Church is Growing*

A nursery sells plants and trees by telling the public, "Our business is *growing*." Its future depends on growing healthy plants and trees. The biblical church can also claim, "Our business is *growing*." This is God's directive for the Church! Acts 20:32—The Word makes God's people *grow*. 1 Corinthians 14:3—Speaking God's Word helps people *grow*.

Indeed, both nurseries and churches are in the growth business. Forces of growth are positive! Growth changes the scenery. It changes the yield. The decision to view growth—and change—as a positive force in ministry unleashes needed energy! Explosive energy! Seed-planting churches thrive on this kind of energy.

Seeds do not grow in the bin. Members do not grow when the cathedral-barn is in a maintenance or survival mode. Harvesting churches have wandered far too long in the wilderness

of programs and institutionalism. After forty years of wilderness life, God told Israel it had stayed at Mount Horeb long enough. He said, "Break camp, and get ready!" (Deuteronomy 1:6-7). He told them to enter and take possession of the land that He had promised them. Moses said, "The Lord your God is giving you this land. Go ahead! Take possession of it...Don't be afraid or terrified" (1:21). Likewise, it's time for pastors and spiritual leaders to announce to their congregations that they are leaving the mountain of maintenance and harvesting. They are entering the land of seed-planting and nurturing!

Seed-planting leaders will no longer struggle to function in stale traditional maintenance modes or to depend on a bureaucracy of complex rules and guidelines. They will not depend on programs entrenched in traditions which stifle creativity. Rather, they will choose to create paths and roads that will reach all people in God's field. Living faith is the fuel that will hold them up and keep them focused on Jesus. They know that, whenever Jesus calls someone out of the cathedral-barn, He gives power to go out to the fields. They go out to reach people. Living faith is patient, disciplined, confident, waiting for God to guide. Leaders must actively trust God in their discussion, planning, and strategizing. They must walk—perhaps slowly at first, ever determined—gaining momentum as they nurture the field.

It does not take genius leadership to form and facilitate a seed-planting community of faith. The Holy Spirit has already bestowed required gifts of leadership upon exactly those whom He has chosen to use. A new sense of story is needed—the Gospel narrative—that instructs the ministry of the congregation. The church is a nurturing, mission community with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ! It exists, locally and worldwide, to make disciples. The Gospel message is not merely one of gaining. The mission is to live in Christian community here on earth, in a way that extends to eternity.

The seeds grow! The Word works! "Listen! A farmer went to plant seed" (Mark 4:3). Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seeds on the ground" (Mark 4:26). Jesus asked, "How can we show what the kingdom of God is like? To what can we compare it? It's like a mustard seed planted in the ground (Mark 4:30-31). "The farmer plants the Word" (Mark 4:14). Be a seed-planter! Be a seed-planting church!

So, don't put your dreams away for another day! Walk where Jesus calls. Be a seed-planter that changes lives! Be a spiri-

tual leader that no longer hangs around the cathedral-barn, but hangs around hurting persons in God's field. Be an outward-focused church that demonstrates love for God's people. Be a visionary church that risks itself and its resources to nurture every member. Be an effective church that pursues its goal with prayer and passion. Be a church determined to fully explore its vision. Be a Christ-focused church determined to display the glory of God!

#### Writer

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#### NOTES

1. Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (ChurchSmart Resources, 3830 Ohio Avenue, St. Charles, IL 60174-5462, 1996, ISBN 1-889638-00-S).
2. Ibid. p. 10
3. Ibid. p. 12
4. Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, p. 40.
5. Waldo J. Werning, *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church* (ChurchSmart Resources, 3830 Ohio Avenue, St. Charles, IL 60174-5462, 2001).
6. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI 49530, 1995).
7. Werning, Ibid.
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