

TRANSFORMING CHURCH

Bringing out the good to get to great

KEVIN G. FORD

Foreword by Billy Graham


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Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to Great

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FOREWORD

Since the beginning of our ministry, my team and I were convinced of the importance of the local church, and we committed ourselves to do all we could to work with the church. In fact, when Kevin Ford's father, Leighton Ford—my longtime associate and brother-in-law—joined our team, I asked him to be director of church relations for our first New York City crusade. He spent many months working with the churches to ensure that the crusade's results would last. This became a pattern for all our crusades.

And yet repeatedly over the years I have encountered discouraged pastors, dispirited church members, and ineffective churches. Only a transformed church can make an impact for Christ. But why do so many churches fail in this? And how can they change?

These are the questions Kevin Ford seeks to answer in this important and insightful book. Drawing on his intensive research and wide experience with churches, and with a clear vision of what the local church should be, Kevin delves into the deeper issues pastors and congregations must face. He promises no easy answers or quick fixes, but he does set forth a blueprint for church renewal that cannot help but transform our churches—and our lives. This book is “must reading” for every pastor and church leader, and I pray for its widest circulation.

—Billy Graham
Montreat, North Carolina
August 15, 2006

Getting Started

If you're like me, you are always tempted to skip a book's introduction. I hope you don't. This is a book about the transforming church, and it describes a journey that takes years. Likewise, this book is not a quick read. It is best to take your time. Don't try to hurry ahead. Read and reread.

If you are looking for easy answers or seven steps, stop now. You will be disappointed. We live in a world of quick fixes, instant diets, thirty-minute delivery guarantees, and great abs in seven minutes a day. Yet we all know the best things in life take time. If you have the courage to begin the journey, I encourage you to keep reading.

GRASS AND SOIL

When my family moved into a planned community in northern Virginia several years ago, I set my sights upon the perfect lawn. I didn't have a lot to work with; new construction left my lawn looking like it had endured an elephant stampede.

After clearing brush, barbed wire, and remnants of Civil War-era fences, I decided to plant grass seed. Somehow, it worked. My lawn became lush green, and I was impressed with myself. In my self-induced grandiosity, I imagined receiving a call from one of those home makeover shows on the Home & Garden Television. To keep the place looking like a fairway at Augusta National, I carefully followed a list of suggestions from a local nursery for proper fertilization, moisture, and weed control.

And then came our first summer. Within weeks, our yard was overrun with crabgrass and other ugly weeds. Splotches of brown replaced the lush green. By the time freezing temperatures had put it—and me—out of

our misery, my lawn had become more spotted than a leopard, and I had a hard time looking my neighbors in the eye. But I refused to surrender.

I hired a lawn company to kill the weeds, and by early November things were starting to look better. Through the winter and spring my hopes rose, and by early June, the lawn was actually looking pretty good again. I imagined myself dispensing grilled brats and lawn-care advice to my admiring neighbors.

But then came the heat wave. Less than halfway through the summer, I was on a first-name basis with most of the workers from the lawn-care company. I put their numbers on the speed dial of my cell phone. They treated the lawn again and again, but soon it looked worse than ever.

At the end of my rope and nearly broke, I asked a friend for advice. He recommended that I call a guy named Mark. Mark wasn't a flashy guy, but after twenty years of living and working in the area, he knew the lay of the land. When he came over to look at my lawn, I shared my sad story, with a few conspiracy theories about lawn-care companies sprinkled in.

When I finished, Mark looked at me and said, "Kevin, the problem is not the grass. The problem is the soil." Pointing to the brush and cedars behind my property, he continued, "Those ugly shrubs and trees grow best in bad soil. If you want a good lawn, you have to start with good soil. You've been applying chemicals to the grass. But the only way to prevent crabgrass and weeds is for your good grass to be thick and lush. You can't have thick, lush grass without good soil—and that will take at least five years to develop." His tips for me concerned improving the soil, not the grass: He told me to stop bagging the clippings, mulch the grass, apply a topdressing every two years, and make sure I aerated the soil at least once a year.

At first, I didn't like what Mark said. Surely in this age of advanced technology, there was a quick-fix chemical or a miracle treatment that would restore my grass to green splendor in a week or so. Waiting through a long process of growth and health didn't appeal to me. I had neighbors to impress, after all. And my dreams of being on the Home & Garden Television network were fading fast.

But Mark was right. Today, gazing at a mostly healthy lawn, I real-

ize how much money, time, and energy I would have saved had I started with Mark's strategy. It takes years to grow a healthy lawn.

And it takes years to grow a healthy church. But too often, pastors and church leaders focus on the wrong issues—the grass rather than the soil. Their tendency is to focus on what Harvard leadership experts Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky call “technical problems” as opposed to the more important and underlying “adaptive issues.”¹

Think of it this way. My lawn represented an adaptive issue. I needed to focus on the soil over a period of years. But my tactic was to focus on the sparse grass—the technical problem, or the symptom. No matter how many chemicals I applied, I couldn't make progress because I was trying to solve the wrong problem. In fact, the more I treated the symptom, the more problems I created: lost time, wasted money, irritated neighbors, and more chemicals in the environment.

Solving my lawn problems was a process. But if I hadn't committed to that process—started on that journey, if you will—I never would have made progress. My lawn wouldn't have changed.

Every church needs transformation. Those that don't change die. Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating change for the sake of change. The wrong kind of change can be toxic. Healthy change, however, is required for growth, maturity, and adaptation. Like any organization, churches can become stagnant, complacent, irrelevant, or ineffective without transformational change to keep them focused on their mission. But without a clear understanding of the nature of change, the chances of growing a healthy church are diminished.

This book is about churches that have the courage to embrace change and to confront adaptive issues head-on—what I call *transforming churches*. These courageous churches help transform people into God's image. They transform the communities in which they minister. And as organizations, they are continually transforming how they lead, operate, and minister.

Because change is a journey, our study of transforming churches will take the form of a journey. As part of the trip, I will introduce you to the Transforming Church Index, a congregational survey developed by our consulting firm, TAG. TAG has consulted with hundreds of businesses, organizations, government agencies, and churches across

the years. We have worked with the largest employers in the nation and with family-owned businesses. But we have a unique passion for the local church. The Transforming Church Index is the centerpiece of the Transforming Church Institute, an ongoing forum where pastors receive professional coaching and strategic planning in a collaborative environment. This survey has taught us much about transforming churches and what it takes for a church to thrive, not only in our present culture but for years to come. Based on this research, I will introduce you to the five key indicators of church health. Each indicator represents a fork in the road in the journey of change. They are not sequential, yet they cannot be separated. In fact, by concentrating on one, you will address them all.

Throughout our journey, I will tell stories of real churches in the real world. Some are small and some are large. Some are inner-city, some suburban, and some rural. Some are traditional, and some are contemporary. Some are well-known, but most are not household names. They represent, in many respects, the complexity of the church in America.

For the five primary narratives, I use the churches' real names and locations. For two or three of the shorter anecdotes, I mask the churches' identities out of respect for previous leaders and pastors.

Each of these churches is on a transforming journey, but each is at a different point in the process. We will hear the stories of these five congregations:

- Community Church of Joy, Glendale, Arizona (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
- Heritage Church, Moultrie, Georgia (nondenominational)
- Tenth Avenue Church, Vancouver, British Columbia (Christian and Missionary Alliance)
- The Garden, Indianapolis, Indiana (United Methodist Church)
- Fairfax Community Church, Fairfax, Virginia (Church of God, Anderson)

While this book is firmly rooted in solid research and tells the sto-

ries of real churches and real people, it also reflects the experiences of my own journey—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Context always impacts us, sometimes for the better and sometimes not. I press on, trusting that God is using the sum of my life experiences to transform me into His image. After all, a transforming church is one that, with God’s help, transforms people. And I am one of those people.

It’s clear that whether or not a church is effective has much to do with God and how He works through us. I acknowledge that and would never minimize God’s role—but how that plays out is a bit of a mystery. We can’t measure, predict, or control God’s work, but we can measure, predict, and control (to a certain extent) human work. As a result, my focus throughout the book really is on what humans can and should be doing as we continually seek God’s will. This book presents universal principles that could be used in any organization, but uniquely applies them to the church.

The journey to become a transforming church is not an easy one. Obstacles and challenges exist at each stage. However, whether you’re a pastor, or a lay leader, or a church staff member, this is the most rewarding journey you will ever experience.

Are you ready to start?

1

Fake Bananas

TRANSFORMING CHURCH CHECKUP

Look for these lists throughout the book. The questions are intended to help you evaluate your church in light of the five key indicators of church health.

1. Are members at your church experiencing authentic life change?
 2. Does your church have a clear sense of mission and a compelling vision for the future?
 3. Does your church embrace change to fulfill its mission more effectively?
 4. Are your leaders successfully mentoring and mobilizing your members for ministry?
 5. Is your church effective in transforming your local community, town, or city?
-

Rod Stafford looks out over the sparse congregation gathered in the high school auditorium and feels his spirits sink again. The people sit in quiet clumps, separated by a sea of chairs. This is not how Rod had envisioned things would be.

Rod became the pastor of Fairfax Community Church in 1986. He led the church through gradual yet consistent change to reach out to its community, develop internal leadership, and deploy its members in a wide variety of ministries. In less than ten years, the church had adopted a more contemporary worship style and seen an increase in worship attendance from one hundred to three hundred.

For nearly fifty years, the congregation had met in an old building on a dead-end street. It faced a tough decision about managing its

growth: stay or go. Instead of starting a third service in a cramped facility, they made the bold move to relocate to the auditorium at Fairfax High School. The leaders were fully confident that they would fill the auditorium in no time.

Now, less than two years later, Rod opens his Bible in front of a shrunken and dispirited congregation.

An hour later, Rod closes the service in prayer, knowing it will be another red-sweatshirt day. As he shakes hands with the departing congregation, he can picture himself repeating his Sunday-afternoon ritual: parking the car, unlocking and opening his front door, climbing slowly up the staircase of his house, opening his bedroom closet, selecting the red sweatshirt, putting it on and flipping up the hood, pulling the drawstring so tightly that only his eyes and nose are exposed, heading downstairs, turning on the television, and letting the afternoon stretch into evening, the evening into night, the night into morning. His family knows better than to intrude.

THE JOURNEY

I read J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* in high school and fell in love with it again through the film series in more recent years. At points in the book I will connect this story—about the epic journey of the hobbit Frodo and his companions—with the journey to becoming a transforming church. The trilogy, which Tolkien described as “fundamentally a religious work,” tells the story of the quest to destroy a powerful magic Ring in the fires of Mount Doom to save the world from an evil lord. The destination is critical, but the power of *The Lord of the Rings* occurs in the transforming nature of the journey itself.

A group made up of two men, four hobbits, a wizard, a dwarf, and an elf is named the Fellowship. Confronted with nearly hopeless odds, virtually resigned to defeat, and focused on a cause greater than self-fulfillment, the Fellowship commits itself to the journey together. They will be faithful to their calling, to their mission, and to their love for one another.

It is not just any kind of journey. Tolkien was careful to distinguish between *adventure* and *quest*. The great wizard Gandalf describes an adventure as a matter of choice. It's an undertaking designed primarily

as a means to relieve boredom or satisfy a specific lust. Once the particular treasure is found, the adventure is over, and one returns home essentially unchanged by the experience—a “there-and-back-again” affair. A quest, on the other hand, is primarily a response to a compelling call. This kind of journey is risky, uncomfortable, and sometimes simply dreadful. But it is also full of unexpected joy.

The apostle Paul, choosing a parallel metaphor, describes our lives on earth as a pilgrimage to our true home in heaven. The journey lasts from our births to our deaths and, at least on earth, carries no guarantee of “success” or even a final destination. What matters is the transformation in faith that happens along the way.

In my mind, the Fellowship can represent the church in transforming motion. We have no guarantee of success, but if we are faithful to our calling and mission, we will be changed through the journey.

DEAD-END CHURCHES

Why is it, then, that so many churches seem stuck at a dead end? As a consultant to hundreds of churches, I hear the same story over and over again. The names and circumstances change, but church leaders ask the same despairing questions: *Why are we stuck? Why can't we change? Why aren't lives being changed? Why aren't we going anywhere?*

I run into dead-end churches all the time.

It's not that churches deny the need to change—to move out into a transforming journey. Church members frequently invoke the need for transformation when they hire new pastors or ministry leaders. But these same leaders face a paradox: The churches resist the very change they claim to need.

THE AGE OF RAPID CHANGE

We live in an age where change has become the only certainty. Before the advent of the Internet, the amount of information in our world was doubling every two hundred years. Today, the amount of information doubles every eighteen months. While providing more choices, information overload also creates a cynical society. The average American receives 4,200 advertising messages per week—not counting spam or Internet advertising! The rapidly changing landscape has accelerated

the breaking up of the modern era; so quickly, in fact, we haven't yet been able to name what will replace it. For the time being, "postmodern" is the best we can do. Boundaries are rapidly disappearing. We live in a global village; we can send e-mails to Thailand in a nanosecond.

In the rush of overwhelming information and new friends, old loyalties break down. Replacing the old geographical boundaries are new "virtual boundaries" for community, such as mission, values, common focus, and vision. In other words, some people feel more connected to an online group—made up of people they have never met and may live very far away from, but who share the same perspective, struggles, or interests—than they do to their family, neighbors, or local church.

In the world's new economy, the value of tangible assets is replaced by intangible assets—knowledge, information, name recognition (brand), market share, and innovation. A virtually unlimited number of consumers can purchase the same knowledge on a Web site at any one point in time, something that's impossible in one physical location. Imagine thousands of people walking into one Barnes & Noble store to purchase John Grisham's latest novel at the same time, and you get the picture. Concurrently, the rise of new generations, all of whom resist conformity, has created an increasing demand for products and services that are custom-tailored to individual needs. This demand has led to a mass-customized economy in which choices among options, sizes, shapes, and colors abound.

New leaps in technology are making it possible for unique products to be produced in response to individual tastes at lower costs. "Build to order" has become the new standard of production. Beau Jo's Pizza in Colorado, for example, allows consumers to choose between two types of crust, four levels of thickness, ten sauces, nine varieties of cheese, and dozens of ingredients.

The world has evolved from an agrarian economy (preindustrial) to a production economy (the Industrial Revolution) to a service economy (post-World War II) to the experience economy of today. In the twenty-first century, consumers look for the experience rather than the service. That is why companies such as Starbucks and Nordstrom offer not just products and services, but also a sensory experience. Take a cup of coffee, for example. In the production economy of the industrial age, coffee

beans were a raw commodity, ground and packed in tin cans and sold on the grocery shelf for the equivalent of a few cents for a cup of coffee. In the service economy just after World War II, that same cup of coffee could be had at a diner for just a few cents more as customers paid for the production and the service. But today, in the experience economy, that same cup of coffee is now premium roasted, exotically flavored, converted into latte or espresso, and sold in fine dining establishments and java hangouts for three dollars a cup.

The bottom line is that today's consumers don't buy a product; they buy an experience. Young consumers will scrimp on the staples of life to have more money to spend on a weekend snowboarding in Vail or mountain biking in the Andes. They crave the *experience*. Companies like Barnes & Noble and Borders have successfully reshaped the book-selling business—not just by discounting prices, but by offering an enjoyable ambience with *caffè latte* and elegant lounges. In short, they have turned book browsing into an *experience*.

In the new economy, where people flow in and out of organizations according to changing conditions, hiring and pay are based on the ability to adapt, think, communicate, lead, flex, and innovate. With unemployment at historically low levels, employees can pick and choose jobs. If compensation and interest are basically the same, they will choose the better environment. Even if compensation and job interest are slightly lacking, they will choose the experiential environment. The old model of the paternalistic corporation offering lifelong jobs, guaranteed advances, and a testimonial dinner and gold watch at age sixty-five is a thing of the past. In the new model, companies are flexible, offering employees an opportunity for personal and professional growth in an environment that is open and honest and that treats them fairly. Today's employees no longer build loyalty, they build résumés—and employers accept this. After channel surfing and Web surfing, the next logical step was job surfing.

And this is the context in which the transforming church must thrive.

The church has the ability to influence the culture and shape the future. We have an important and life-changing message to share. But can we find a way to remain relevant, to change where needed yet still hold to our essential values? How do healthy churches do that?

THE CHURCH'S PRIMARY STRUGGLE

Our company, TAG, has consulted with hundreds of businesses and organizations, including several of the largest employers in the nation. While we see resistance to change in many industries, it seems somehow more pronounced in churches. Our company has done national research through the Transforming Church Index, a congregational survey. We discovered that the statement “Changes are readily embraced by our congregation” received the sixth lowest affirmative score out of the 110 questions asked. In fact, nine of the ten lowest scoring questions in the national database were somehow related to the process of change.

Leading change in a change-resistant subculture is a tough gig. It is made even tougher by the fact that most pastors, by their own admission, lack change-leadership skills.

A Barna study (2001) revealed that while 63 percent of Protestant pastors believe they have the gift of teaching, only 11 percent believe they have the gift of leadership.² Another Barna study suggests that only 14 percent believe they are good at thinking and acting strategically. Other studies suggest that 80 percent of pastors feel frustrated in their roles and 95 percent have experienced significant conflict in their ministries. A poll by *Christianity Today* asked church leaders, “What’s your strongest leadership trait?” Only one percent of pastors surveyed cited conflict management as their strongest trait while, at the same time, that skill ranked as the second most underrated.³

Strategic thinking, conflict-management skills, leadership savvy—these are all key ingredients in change-leadership and in transforming churches. Yet these are the very skills that pastors, by their own admission, are lacking.

The consequences are predictable. A Duke University study of major denominations discovered that 15 percent of pastors who were ordained in 1988 left the ministry within thirteen years. Those pastors cited lack of denominational support, burnout, discouragement, and conflict among the primary factors.

The recursive pattern of *desire change . . . resist change . . . desire change . . . resist change* becomes the formula for discouragement, burnout, and frustration among pastors, staff, leaders, and members.

Change is hard because change creates pain. But healthy churches—transforming churches—somehow manage to embrace change. Is there a magic pill?

THE TRANSFORMING CHURCH INDEX

During the first few years of our consulting work, members of TAG often operated like doctors forced to practice medicine with few diagnostic tools. In an effort to help churches identify the underlying causes of the problems they faced, we sorted through lists of symptoms. Mostly we were forced into calculated guesses about the deeper issues.

After a while, we began to see some of the same problems resurface in predictable patterns. Slowly, we began to develop the ability to frame questions to get at some critical issues, such as how well a church navigates change, resolves tough issues, defines and clarifies its identity and purpose, develops healthy community, equips members for ministry, mentors leaders, manages conflict, assimilates people, communicates with members, and impacts the local community.

The informal questions began to formalize over time, with input from management scholars, pastors, laypeople, and statisticians. We started collecting data, quantifying the results, running statistical reports, and analyzing the trends. Approximately 110 questions made the cut for the final survey, with about 50 providing the most significant information on church health. The survey is now called the Transforming Church Index, TCI for short.

We have collected more than 15,000 surveys in our database, which includes data from churches of all sizes, models, denominations, and national locations. We completed our study for this book in August 2004.

We found that the data “clustered” around five key indicators of church health. Each key indicator was a group of between ten and twenty questions from our survey. Based on those clusters, we were able to establish a norm for each key indicator.

We then queried the database for two types of churches: those that scored above the norm on at least four of the clusters and those that scored below the norm on four of the clusters. The national norm is not a perfect way of determining whether or not a church is healthy, since

that would presume that 50 percent of American churches are healthy, but it was the most useful way that we could think of to establish a norm.

Once we had our two sets (healthier churches and not-so-healthy churches), we collected trend information related to membership, worship attendance, giving, and member involvement in ministry.

Many of our findings didn't surprise us. We had assumed healthy churches would be growing churches, and that assumption proved true—posting, on average, 21 percent membership and 28 percent attendance growth over a five-year span. In contrast, the not-so-healthy churches declined by 2.4 percent in membership and 5.7 percent in worship attendance over a five-year period.

Similarly, we were not surprised to see a significant increase in giving among the healthy churches, while the less healthy churches barely kept up with inflation. This wasn't quantum physics. But it was important for us to demonstrate a basic correlation between core characteristics of health and positive growth trends.

What surprised us? For one, there were some very large and fast-growing churches that showed up on the list of not-so-healthy churches. Eventually, we came to the same conclusion as Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*. In a *Leadership* article titled “The Good to Great Pastor,” Collins said: “Greatness does not always equal bigness. Big is not great and great is not big. In fact, the bigger you become the harder it may be to remain great.”⁴

Healthy churches are usually growing churches, but growing churches are not always healthy churches.

Nothing could have prepared us for the biggest surprise from our data. We had expected a slight gap between the two sets in “members involved in ministry,” but what we found more closely resembled a canyon: Among healthy churches, 93 percent of members considered themselves to be involved in some form of ministry (though not necessarily at their church), compared to only 11 percent of members in the less healthy churches.

The picture was becoming a bit clearer. Church health, rather than church growth, was the primary indicator of a church's ability to transform its members, fulfill its mission, and reinvent itself.

THE FIVE KEY INDICATORS

As we continued to analyze the TCI results, we began to see the data organizing itself into patterns. We came to agree that the five key indicators of church health each had an underlying “problem” at one end of its dimension and a “solution” at the other end. The indicators have to do with:

1. How church members relate to each other. Unhealthy churches are a collection of people acting individually, while healthy churches relate as a community. We call this *consumerism vs. community*.
2. The church’s “genetic code.” Unhealthy churches lack a clear identity, while healthy churches have a clear sense of their DNA and take steps to align their ministries and culture with their code. We refer to this as *incongruence vs. code*.
3. The church’s leadership. Unhealthy churches tend to be overly autocratic or bureaucratic, while healthy churches view leadership as a shared function and as a ministry. The term we use is *autocracy vs. shared leadership*.
4. How the church relates to the local community. Unhealthy churches disengage from the world around them, while healthy churches are focused on their mission and have an outward orientation that starts with their own locale. We call this *cloister vs. missional*.
5. How church members think about the future. Unhealthy churches resist change and fear or deny the future, while healthy churches embrace change, even when it is painful. Our term is *inertia vs. reinvention*.

That’s when it hit us: The problem side of each indicator correlates directly to a dysfunction in modern Western culture. Our culture is all too often characterized as a collection of individuals disconnected from one another, drifting without an overarching story or unifying values, expecting someone else to solve our problems, largely self-serving, and resistant to change. The parallels between these symptoms and the problem sides of unhealthy churches were too striking to ignore.

The church desires to change the surrounding culture. The truth,

however, is that the church has been infected by the very culture it seeks to transform.

And this reality begs a question or three. How can we engage the culture without being co-opted? What would it look like to actually transform our culture rather than to simply talk about it? And what exactly constitutes meaningful change anyway?

Five Movements

The Bible is clear that God has a hope and dream for the church to be a living community. For example, the early church is described as generous, caring, devoted to prayer and teaching, outwardly focused, and united in purpose (see Acts 2:42-47). We were struck that each of the dysfunctions was in direct opposition to this description. The common thread running through all five dysfunctions is the overriding tendency to shift the focus from the biblical “we” to a cultural “me.” The real work of the church—what I will refer to as *adaptive change*—is largely a movement along each of the key indicators, from cultural dysfunction to biblical dynamic.

1. Consumerism/Community

In our culture, the consumer is the center. This is perhaps the culmination of our nation’s grand experiment with rampant individualism. Our economy and its attendant competition are designed to feed the ongoing cycle of consumption. Service industries have reached new heights in quality of service and attention, all with the goal of reaching more consumers and causing current consumers to consume more and more.

The church is not immune to the consumer mind-set. By focusing primarily on meeting “market” needs, the church often functions in production mode, looking to the endless creation of the best possible programs, products, and events. While such a search for excellence is, by itself, a positive—even biblical—pursuit, the machinery of endless production works against the development of community. Why is this? It’s rather simple: a continual focus on feeding “me” rarely creates the more biblical and unifying “us.”

2. Incongruence/Code

Who can forget the Enron scandal of the early twenty-first century? Whatever Enron’s problems, the cause was not the company’s stated

core values: *Excellence. Integrity. Communication. Respect.* The problem was the stark incongruence between Enron's core values and its actual operating culture.

Incongruence—the disconnection between what we say and what we do—is commonplace, almost expected, in our culture. But transforming churches have a clear sense of identity, or what I call the *code*. A church's code gives it a sense of collective personality and uniqueness. The code represents the unique DNA that makes each church one of a kind. Transforming churches work hard to bring their operating cultures into alignment with their codes.

Too many churches fall prey to formulaic approaches, becoming franchises of something else. If a Quarter Pounder, fries, and Diet Coke taste as good in Denver as they do in Dayton, then why can't a sermon, drama, or outreach from Charlotte always work in Tacoma? The tendency to import church models and styles in an attempt to reach the same results contrasts with God's desire for each church to be unique in its own cultural context—to have defining and aligning code.

3. Autocracy/Shared Leadership

In transforming churches, the task of leadership is a shared responsibility. This stands in contrast to much of American culture. Most American forms of leadership are based on the cultural notion that leadership equals power. The leader is the person with the most control. Sometimes power is rooted in position—the CEO, the president, the pastor, or the board. Sometimes power is the product of personal charisma or charm.

Leadership defined by power, through coercion and control, works against the biblical concept of *leadership defined as ministry*, through sacrifice and service. Jesus emptied Himself of His rights to power so that He could become one of us (see Philippians 2:1-11). Similarly, the leader is one who, by using authority appropriately, invites others to share responsibility for ministry. She asks the right questions rather than providing all—or any—of the answers. Leadership, in a transforming church, is much less about who gets to make decisions and much more about how best to fulfill the church's mission in an ever-changing context. A transforming church develops a multiplying group of leaders who lead by serving in this way.

4. Cloister/Missional

Transforming churches exist for those on the outside. Reaching out to others is clearly one of God's primary purposes for the church. All organizations, however, tend to become inwardly focused and narcissistic over time. We all tend to take a great thing and institutionalize it. An unhealthy church is one that exists for those on the inside—a cloister. Like the culture it is called to transform, such a church devotes an unhealthy amount of attention to meeting individual needs. When the understood role of church members is to consume the best “products,” the focus, whether intended or not, moves to excluding others.

Some churches “wall out” those who are unfamiliar with their traditions or dogma. Other churches offer programs and services to meet the consumer needs of people, without ever mobilizing them for outward ministry. Other churches are focused on creating a safe haven from the world.

By contrast, a transforming church is one that has a clear and focused sense of mission beyond its walls, regardless of its personality or worship style. Remember the most startling figure from the TCI results: 93 percent of members among healthy churches considered themselves to be involved in some form of ministry, compared to only 11 percent among unhealthy churches. In follow-up research, I discovered that the disparity was often the result of how churches defined ministry. Unhealthy churches tend to define ministry as what happens inside the church (ushers, committee members, Sunday school teachers, and greeters). Healthy churches define ministry in broader terms—ministering and glorifying God in their neighborhoods, workplaces, social circles, and schools.⁵

5. Inertia/Reinvention

A consumer is not a creator. Disconnected from any greater purpose, isolated from meaningful relationships, expecting others to solve problems, and focused inwardly, the religious consumer is passive and largely unmotivated to make a difference in the lives of others. Church, for the most part, becomes a spectator sport. As long as the season ticket holders are satisfied, there is little reason to reinvent the event being offered.

On the other hand, transforming churches struggle through the

process of reinvention to discover new ways of fulfilling their missions. Even the apostle Paul wrote that he was willing to change—or, as he put it, “become all things to all [people]”—to share the gospel with them (1 Corinthians 9:22, *NIV*). Similarly, at times, transforming churches are forced to recognize that their current forms are no longer relevant to those who need the church the most. And, seeing this, they are willing to embrace change, even when this change involves painful sacrifice.

Sounds simple, right? Linear and logical—just move along the continuum.

Not so much. The process of becoming a transforming church is messier and often feels something like going days without food while fighting through a dense jungle at night . . . hoping to find bananas.

MONKEY BUSINESS

Several years ago, I read about a university experiment. A group of laboratory scientists studying behavioral patterns put four monkeys together in a lab. After bringing in a tall pole with bananas on the top, they retreated to observe through a one-way mirror. Things went predictably at first. The monkeys competed against each other to reach the top of the pole and eat the bananas. The smartest and strongest got the bananas, while the others had to wait for the right moment.

Then the scientists changed the environment by putting a pail of water at the top of the pole. Every time a monkey climbed the pole to reach the bananas, he got doused with water. After several repeated episodes, the monkeys learned to stop going after the bananas. The environment had forced the monkeys to change their behavior.

Eventually the scientists took the water away. There was no reason for the monkeys not to climb the pole, but the monkeys had already been conditioned. Even with the threat removed, they didn’t attempt to climb the pole. The bananas were left untouched. The monkeys just stared longingly at them.

The third round of the experiment involved replacing one of the original monkeys. Not surprisingly, the new monkey scurried into the room, saw the bananas, and immediately started to climb the pole. What happened next shocked the scientists: The three original monkeys grabbed the newcomer by the tail, yanked his feet, and pulled him

down. They were trying to protect him from being doused by water, which wasn't even there!

Over time, the scientists gradually replaced each of the original monkeys with new monkeys, which were eventually replaced with other monkeys, and so on through several generations. For a while, there was more tail pulling and leg yanking. Over a few generations, however, another interesting phenomenon occurred: The newest monkeys crawled into the room, stared at the bananas, but never even tried to climb the pole! No competing. No water. No tail pulling. No leg yanking. Just an unspoken norm understood among the monkeys: The bananas are to be seen but not eaten.

The story of the monkeys illustrates the real power of cultural dysfunctions: They operate largely on subconscious, and therefore largely unrecognized, levels. Part of what makes church or any other place where people come together so difficult is that it constitutes a living system. In truly mysterious ways, an organization is influenced by unseen interactions with its surroundings and previously developed norms. As we reflect on the monkey illustration, we can begin to see how the system:

- Forces individuals—in good ways and bad—to adapt
- Develops its unspoken norms outside of conscious awareness
- Shapes itself through unseen forces
- Tends to perpetuate itself, regardless of the specific individuals involved
- Creates results that cannot be blamed on any one person
- Resists change, creating an environment where individuals resist change as well

Further complicating matters is the fact that a living system always exists in the context of other systems. Each human being, for example, is a living system within the larger systems of nuclear and extended family, which in turn exist within the contexts of community, nation, hemisphere, and planet.

Because we are so deeply interconnected by living systems, it is critical to understand how they function. And it is important to recognize that systemic change of living systems normally comes slowly and at a price. There are no quick fixes on the way to becoming a transforming church.

NO QUICK FIXES

We are all suckers for the quick fix. If you have a headache, you take two aspirin. If you have a bad marriage, you file for divorce. If your computer crashes, you buy a new one. If you don't feel like cooking dinner, you call for delivery. If you hate your boss, you get a new job. Easy, right?

Let's face it: Change is difficult. According to the TCI, and the experience of virtually every church leader in the country, churches resist change for one reason: It is painful. And most church leaders don't know what to do with that reality. If preaching about it doesn't work, the tendency is to preach about it more. If confronting the dissenters has not been effective, confront more. If people resist unilateral decisions, why not become more autocratic? More of the same never works.

In another *Christianity Today* poll, this question was posed to leaders: "What is the most important factor to consider when introducing change to a church?" Thirty-seven percent cited the internal culture of the church, 34 percent cited the leadership culture of the church, and only 7 percent pointed outside the church to the external culture.⁶ Yet our research shows how powerful the outside culture is and how much it affects us. By failing to come to grips with how cultural dysfunctions deeply impact the health of the church, our leaders will continue to fail to discern an essential reality concerning the nature of change: *Culture shapes churches, and churches shape people—often through the power of what remains unspoken.*

Unaware of any deeper or underlying cause, leaders begin to deal with the symptoms. They attack them from every angle and perspective. They attend conferences looking for solutions. They examine different models. They read the latest church growth books. They bring in the latest guru. They use flip charts to brainstorm options. But no matter what they do, the problems don't go away. If they solve one problem, two new ones seem to crop up to take its place.

Adaptive change—the journey from cultural dysfunction to biblical health—is never accomplished through technical fixes.⁷ An issue requiring adaptive change is much more complex, involving a set of interconnected problems, mutating over time, hidden within the human system of the church. The adaptive issue is usually outside of conscious awareness. It is the current state of unhealthy norms, behaviors, and attitudes. It resists adaptive change under the camouflage of the best of intentions.

Example: “If we change, we will lose some of our most significant members who are really invested in this church.”

Translation: “If we change, we will lose our biggest donors [i.e., financial security is the unspoken operating value] who aren’t supportive of our direction.”

When the leaders of a church sense the presence of these issues hidden under the surface, they usually consider two options: deny the problem or hire a consultant. Sometimes, they call someone like me or one of my colleagues at TAG. They usually envision the deal as something like this: We will pay you to fix our problem.

When I tell them that I can’t fix their problem, but I can help them work through it, many church leaders go back to option number one: deny there is a serious problem at all. But a surprising number of churches are willing to embrace and solve their own problems with some outside perspective, coaching, and guidance. They are committed to the journey. And those who commit to the journey are transforming churches.

CHALLENGING THE NORM

As I was writing this chapter, I was in Renton, Washington, consulting with St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church. Together over the past year or so, we had conducted an on-site assessment of the church, facilitating a strategic planning session with the leadership and helping the staff redefine their organizational culture. I thought we had made good progress. I was surprised when Pastor Kirby Unti called and asked me to return. Conflict among the staff, he told me, had escalated out of control.

I was aware that the staff had historic issues around managing conflict. The players changed, but the problems tended to follow a similar pattern: Two people would get embroiled in a conflict, Kirby would

try to mediate, and the other staff members would retreat. The conflict usually became personal but rarely fiery.

Recently, however, things had taken a turn for the worse. At a retreat, two staff members had gone for one another's jugular. Julie and Seth are both delightful, capable people, not the type to harm another or seek revenge. But they got into an argument over who should be involved in planning worship. The conflict escalated to name-calling, threats, and words not allowed on prime-time television.

Kirby asked if I could come back. I understood that we were dealing with adaptive issues, not a surface problem. How did I know? First, the intensity of the conflict was disproportionate to the stated issue (Who gets to plan worship?). This lack of proportion is always a sign of a lurking adaptive issue.

The second clue was that Julie and Seth were being blamed. We look for scapegoats when we are trying to solve the wrong problems. Scapegoats become convenient sacrifices so that groups don't have to deal with their adaptive issues. Sure, individuals always share some of the responsibility. But blaming individuals distracts the group from dealing with deeper issues. Think of it this way: Suppose the group focused on the problem between Julie and Seth until the "worship input" issue was worked out. It would then only be a matter of time before the same deeper problem would resurface with different players. Each time a new problem arises, it takes a different form and involves different players, but the underlying cause is always the same. The scapegoat problem invariably becomes a distraction from the deeper adaptive issues that need to be resolved.

I agreed to return. When I told the story about the monkeys, the staff seemed to get it. They knew they had some unspoken norms and patterns that were unhealthy. They knew they had to resolve the adaptive issues. But they didn't know exactly where to look. While we were discussing how the conflict emerged, what it was about, and how the system replicated the same patterns, Heather, the church's newest staff member, arrived. She apologized for being late and began to listen attentively. Feeling energized by having a safe environment to constructively discuss conflict, people began to open up. One staff member commented

about how sad the recent conflict was. Julie and Seth had once been best friends, “almost like brother and sister.”

In one of those rare “aha” moments of intuition, it hit me: The staff functioned too much like a family. The pastor, Kirby, was the father figure. The staff members related to one another like siblings.

As we discussed how a church should function differently from a family, some of the staff didn’t buy it. They raised important questions:

“You mean we can’t be friends anymore?”

“Can I still wear sweats to work on Friday?”

“If we’re not a family, what makes us any different than if we were working at any other office?”

I was having a hard time articulating to them that a church staff could be warm and caring without functioning just like a family. Then for the first time, Heather spoke up. Having been on staff for about two months, she was the newest “monkey” in the room. “When I first came here,” she said, “I expected this would be a place where I would share my gifts and talents—a place to grow and develop. I wanted to make a difference. But within a few days, I realized what I was really supposed to do was get to know each staff member at a very deep, personal level. I was uncomfortable sharing too much about my family and personal life, mainly because I’m more of an introvert. But I knew I had a lot to offer in my role with children’s ministry. I guess I just assumed that at some point after I really became part of this family, I would then start using my gifts in ministry.”

Everyone in the room was stunned. Even though Heather had missed the story about the monkeys, she had just shared why she did not feel free to go for the bananas. Before this meeting, she had never felt safe enough to raise the question. She assumed the unspoken norm was something that couldn’t be challenged. Her observation, now spoken, launched an invaluable discussion on the ways members of a church staff should relate differently from a family.

The office was not a place for free counseling, playing cards, or going to movies. The mission of the church was its top priority. The church staff had made their relationships primary rather than allowing church to be a place to live out a vocation. Although friendly relationships were important, they should be expressed in the context of a highly productive and caring team, not a surrogate family.

FAKE BANANAS

Like it or not, we are largely shaped by adaptive issues, the forces and unspoken norms largely invisible to us. Just because something is unseen, however, does not mean that it lacks power. In fact, the opposite is often true: If a thing is hidden, its power is greater. The hidden nature of the adaptive issue is precisely why individuals often fail to question the unhealthy norms, or dysfunctions, that exist in the church.

Let me risk a diagnosis: I believe that in many churches, the bananas have become off-limits.

The fruit we desire and talk about the most—intimacy with God and others, relevance, connection to a purpose larger than self—for some strange reason seem the very things we are most unable to achieve. We resort to strategies that end up creating more frustration. We preach and teach about bananas. We cast a vision for eating bananas. We develop pole-climbing training programs. We go to conferences about bananas. We make models of plastic bananas. We read lots of books about bananas. We conduct twelve-step support groups for people who are starving for bananas. We argue over which side of the pole the bananas should be on. We elect people who represent our side of the pole. But no matter what we do, nobody ever seems to get around to eating the bananas.

We risk going bananas over the bananas.

The problem is, we never question the central concerns: What are the adaptive issues? Are the bananas really forbidden? What norms need to be challenged? What hidden values need to be surfaced? What attitudes or behaviors prevent us from fulfilling our mission?

The five key indicators we identified through our research represent critical transitions—potential forks in the journey of transformation. It's not always easy to know which way to go. In fact, the smoothly paved path heading straight ahead is often a dead end in disguise.

Our journey does not require us to know what the adaptive issues are up front. In fact, our initial assessments tend to point toward technical problems rather than adaptive issues. But the journey of change does require us to have the courage to seek out the adaptive issues. It requires the tenacity to wrestle with them once we discover them. It requires the humility to admit that perhaps we have been wrong. And

it requires an honest acknowledgement that our churches may have been influenced by the very culture we are trying to transform.

When your church's health improves in the five key areas, you *will* improve in the way you deal with change. You will be on the way to becoming a transforming church—one that finds new ways to fulfill its mission and that sees people's lives being changed. Becoming a transforming church is not an easy journey, but it is one worth taking. It surely beats an endless succession of red-sweatshirt days.

Travel Tips

To prepare for the journey of becoming a transforming church, you will need to be well equipped. Bring the following:

1. Patience. The journey is long and hard. There are no shortcuts.
2. Servant attitude. Leadership requires self-sacrifice. It is rarely easy.
3. Humility. As you lead others on the journey, you must put self-interest aside.
4. Resolve. It is easy to take detours, but the journey requires you to move toward your mission without distraction.
5. Thick skin. Those who are on the journey will be attacked. You cannot take the attacks personally.
6. Fellowship. You cannot begin the journey alone. You need people who will be your friends and confidants along the way.
7. Openness. You may be surprised by what you find. A teachable spirit is one of the greatest tools a leader possesses.
8. Faith. There will be dark moments along the way. In these moments, know that God is with you.
9. Hope. While you may not know where this journey leads, you need to know that, for citizens of heaven, it will end well.
10. Love. You cannot be effective on the journey without motivation. Your ultimate incentive must be love for the church, the world, and God.

ENDNOTES

1. Heifetz and Linsky presented these ideas at the TAG Roundtable 2004 and 2005, where they were the featured speakers. Their principles are also outlined in their book *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) and Ron Heifetz's book *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998).
2. The Barna Research Group, "Awareness of Spiritual Gifts Is Changing," *The Barna Update*, February 5, 2001.
3. BuildingChurchLeaders.com, "Polls from 2003," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bcl/features/pollarchive.html>.
4. "The Good to Great Pastor: An Interview with Jim Collins," *Leadership* (Spring 2006): 48.
5. As I was analyzing the research from the Transforming Church Index, I struggled to find the best term to describe what we were finding. Evangelistic? Evangelical? Missionary? Mission-oriented? Outreaching? All of those terms, however, mean too many different things to various Christians. I arrived on "outward focused." Then people read the manuscript. They all said, "Boring!" In the postmodern world, the choice of words is absolutely critical because one word can mean so many different things to so many different people.

Toward the end of working on this book, I began consulting with an organization called Presbyterians for Renewal. They hired me to help them clarify their focus and purpose. The word *missional* kept popping up in our discussions. I interviewed Darrell Guder, a professor from Princeton, as part of the process. He evidently coined the term, which the Presbyterians for Renewal adopted as part of their mission statement. It resonated with me because it says that a church doesn't just do evangelism, missions, or outreach. A church should *be* missional. It's a state of being rather than simply an activity. Our research was much more about the church's state of being than it was about the church's activities. So, *missional* was the word.

The Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization (2004), which my father used to chair, defines missional this way: "those communities of Christ-followers who see the church as the people of God who are sent on a mission." In his article "The Missional Church," Jim Thomas says "this word implies at least two theological and ecclesiological course corrections. On the one hand, *missional* hints at moving from

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Ford is the chief visionary officer and managing partner of TAG. Kevin's expertise includes strategic planning, organizational development, market research, and leadership development. Kevin has facilitated the development of more than four hundred strategic plans throughout North America. He was the senior consultant for the redesign of the U.S. Army staff—the largest employer in the nation. He works with large organizations such as the Federal Aviation Administration and the Salvation Army, as well as small businesses, churches, and nonprofits. As a researcher, Kevin has provided tools, surveys, and software systems that are in use throughout North America.

Kevin has been quoted extensively in the press and has appeared on dozens of business-related television and radio programs. Interviews and quotes have included the *Los Angeles Times*, *Entrepreneur*, *Management Review*, *Employment Review*, *BusinessWeek*, *Financial Services Marketing*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Human Resource Executive*, and *HR Today*. Kevin earned a bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina and his master of divinity from Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Kevin has spoken publicly to thousands of people around the world and is in constant demand as a facilitator and speaker for various corporations and organizations. He has led CEO roundtables with Jim Collins, Ron Heifetz, and Margaret Wheatley, and was a speaker at the 2002 YPO Aspen gathering with Southwest Airlines executive chairman Herb Kelleher, *Time* editor-in-chief John Huey, and former United Airlines CEO Jerry Greenwald. Kevin was one of ten featured speakers at the 2002 Organizational Development Summit with Peter Senge and Phil Harkins.

In addition to his business experience, Kevin has a background in full-time Christian work. He has worked in local church settings and in parachurch organizations. His father is Leighton Ford, and his uncle is Billy Graham. Kevin and his wife, Caroline, live in northern Virginia with their daughters, Anabel and Leighton.