

## The Church Awake: Becoming the Missional People of God

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*The Episcopal Church has long been perceived as a church of the cultural elite, more concerned with gathering the privileged than participating in God's mission. This essay asks the questions, What would it take for the Episcopal Church to "wake up" to its original calling: being a community of "practitioners of the reign of God"? How can we engage our rapidly changing mission contexts, especially linking with those who traditionally and systematically have been marginalized, forgotten, and oppressed? The essay then offers the practice of relational organizing as an effective method for developing and leading "transformative, missional communities."*

The human heart can go to the lengths of God.  
Dark and cold we may be, but this  
Is no winter now. The frozen misery  
Of centuries, cracks, begins to move,  
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,  
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.  
Thank God our time is now when wrong  
Comes up to face us everywhere,  
Never to leave us till we take  
The longest stride of soul men ever took.  
Affairs are now soul size.  
The enterprise  
Is exploration into God.  
Where are you making for?  
It takes  
So many thousand years to wake,  
But will you wake for pity's sake?

—Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, Acting Edition (New York: Dramatists Play Service), 61–62.

When these words first came to my attention, it was December 2007. I was making Christmas cards for friends, including poems and quotations that sang urgently for the coming of Christ. Fry's words captured the Advent plea like nothing else.

The same words return to me as I consider God's calling upon the church today. Affairs are truly soul size. Has such great wealth ever been so available, yet concentrated in so few hands? Have we had the capacity to heal so many diseases, and so lacked the will to share life-saving cures with hurting and dying people at home and around the world? Have we ever been so connected on such a global scale, as we are in this virtual and digital world, where messages and images fly faster than our senses can take them in . . . and yet been so tragically isolated in the world of flesh and blood?

Where does the Episcopal Church stand in relation to this crisis? Through much of its history, ours has been known as the church of empire, the church of slaveholders, the church of the owning class, the protector of English-American tradition, the home of the privileged cultural elite. While every congregation and diocese has its own story, we remain statistically a niche church that is wealthier<sup>2</sup> and more educated<sup>3</sup> than any church in America, and among the oldest.<sup>4</sup> We are nearly all white,<sup>5</sup> and we lose our cradle members faster than

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 35 percent of Episcopal adults make \$100,000 or more, and 17 percent earn less than \$30,000 a year. Mainline Presbyterians come second, with 29 percent making over \$100,000. Only 18 percent of Americans make \$100,000 or more, while 31 percent earn under \$30,000. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation, Diverse and Dynamic* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2008), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Twenty-five percent of Episcopal adults have done graduate study, compared with 21 percent of Congregationalists and mainline Presbyterians (second most educated denominations), and 11 percent of the American population. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Only 12 percent of Episcopalians are age 18–34, which is half the 24 percent in the American populace. Meanwhile, 27 percent of Episcopalians are over 65—more than double the 13 percent of Americans in the same age bracket. See the report of the House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church, *Report to the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), 63.

<sup>5</sup> The Episcopal Church is 92 percent white, 5 percent black, 1 percent Latino/Hispanic, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent other. America is 70 percent white, 12 percent Latino/Hispanic, 11 percent black, 2 percent Asian, 3 percent other. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, 76.

nearly any church in the country.<sup>6</sup> Can a church like ours wake up? Will we foster Christian communities anchored in the dream of God and in the urgent, missional needs of our day? Will we bridge culture, race, generation, and class to build mutually transforming relationships with neighbors and mission partners?<sup>9</sup> Will we wake for pity's sake?<sup>9</sup> Or will we continue to sleep?

I ask these questions with a conviction that we can wake, and that in many places, we have. Half of my vocation is that of freelance consultant on radical welcome, and I travel the country working with Episcopal churches learning to embrace and be changed by the gifts, voices, power, and culture of The Other. As they engage in radical welcome, these congregations carefully reexamine and reconfigure their worship, leadership, ministries and external relationships, mission, and identity based on mutual relationships with groups systemically and historically marginalized by our church and/or society, including people of color, youth and young adults, poor and less educated people, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.<sup>7</sup> The vision of radically welcoming community moves far beyond good hospitality or political correctness to embodying the very dream of God. Archbishop Desmond Tutu paints this picture beautifully, when he writes of a church and society where “people matter more than things, more than possessions; where human life is not just respected but positively revered; where people will be secure and not suffer from the fear of hunger, from ignorance, from disease; where there will be more gentleness, more caring, more sharing, more compassion, more laughter; where there is peace and not war.”<sup>8</sup>

I have seen many Episcopal communities dedicated to this dream. In the other half of my vocation, I am humbled to serve as priest and lead organizer in one such church. The Crossing is a congregation born within the fold of St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Boston, which allows us to keep one foot in the Episcopal Church and the other in the

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<sup>6</sup> Of those raised Episcopalian, 20 percent say they now have no religious affiliation—the highest attrition rate of any church (tied with the Congregationalists). *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 63.

emergent stream.<sup>9</sup> We are a eucharistic, missional Christian community that seeks to proclaim, embody, and practice the love and justice of God for all people—and we are shaped by the voices, culture, and leadership of emerging generations and urban, postmodern America. The leadership is nearly all people in our twenties, thirties, and early forties. The main worship gathering—which features groove-based chant and time for community spiritual practice—happens on Thursday nights. We also have a community rule of life, small groups and justice ministries, and a love of Anglican contemplative traditions. And week after week, we receive power from Jesus to take our part in God’s love revolution. It is real church for real life.

As a consultant and as a priest in active congregational ministry, I witness transformation, hope, and new life on a nearly daily basis. I have seen congregations fearlessly pursue mutually transforming relationship within our neighborhoods and around the world, bringing the unique gifts of the Anglican tradition as we encounter and move with new realities, and all for the sake of God’s reign. So I have no doubt that the Episcopal Church can wake, that God is birthing a new church among us. I also have no illusions about the degree of change necessary for us to more fully embody this new church. The shift will need to take place on two fronts, each of which I will discuss in the pages that follow: reimagining our church’s ecclesiology with God’s mission at the center, and then engaging the practice of relational organizing as a method for leading transformative, missional communities.

### *Ecclesiology Reimagined*

How does a church with our history and our reality become missional? It begins with recovering the identity of the church. “An essential aspect of ‘church’ is its missionary nature—a fresh movement of the Spirit [as expressed in its] prayer, outgoing love, and evangelism in obedience to our Lord’s command. . . . If the Church is not missionary, it has denied itself and its calling, for it has departed from the very

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<sup>9</sup> There are many definitions of emergent or emerging churches. In their book *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, Ryan Bolger and Eddie Gibbs say “emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures” (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 44.

nature of God.”<sup>10</sup> The identity of the church is wrapped up in mission—praying, practicing, and going forth in love to heal, reconcile, and make known the always-breaking-in reign of God.

### *Missio Dei*

The scriptural record is clear: God is the one who created all that is, cares for that creation like a parent for her children, and will do anything in order to heal and restore her creation and draw all people back into relationship with herself. This dream of restoration, liberation, justice, peace, wholeness, and flourishing—a wondrous, comprehensive vision captured in the Hebrew word *shalom*—is God’s mission.

It is not too much to say that Jesus’ incarnation was the ultimate expression of the missional love of God: God so loved the world, and so wished to redeem the world, that God came among us to bring hope from despair, life from death (John 3:16–17). In the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus begins his public ministry by preaching that the reign of God has begun to break in (Matt. 4:17, 23; Mark 1:14–15). In response to this good news, Jesus urges people to “repent”—that is, literally to turn around and follow him in a new way of life. He then gathers followers, not to worship him, but to join him in proclaiming God’s reign and living the alternative gospel vision as a sign to the world. “Come with me,” the summons goes, “as we bear freedom to the captives, heal the wounded, reverse domination systems, and gather and teach a community of people who love God and God’s mission so much they will set aside everything to become signs and servants of God’s coming reign.”

The mission of the church should follow naturally from God’s mission. The word “church” traces to the Old English *cirice*, derived from the Greek *kuriakē*, meaning “of (or belonging to) the Lord.” Church is that which belongs to God and exists as an extension of God’s purposes and identity. Our very reason for being is rooted in God’s mission, but that calling has literally gotten lost in translation. Instead, “church” is a building, an assembly, an event, a family, or a set

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<sup>10</sup> Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church-Planting and Fresh Expressions in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 36, 41.

of culturally prescribed rituals. Meanwhile, God's mission is confined to the realm of evangelism or social action, is done by specialists, and usually takes place across town or overseas.

But if God's mission is the healing and restoration of all creation, if the good news of Jesus is that God's reign is being fulfilled now and that we can join him as bearers of God's power and peace, and that we need fear nothing, not even death—if this is true, then everything changes. The story of church as an insulated, kindhearted, cultural organization is dead. We must tell out the original story of the church as God's people on the move for the sake of God's reign.

George Hunsberger makes a strong case for reclaiming this vision. He explains that every part of the church's identity is defined by its relationship to the mission of God, realized in God's reign:

- First, the church is the *community of the reign of God*, “a distinctive community spawned by God's reign to show forth its tangible character in human, social form.”<sup>11</sup> When people wonder what the reconciling, boundary-breaking, compassionate, forgiving reign of God looks like on this earth, they should be able to look at Christian communities and see a sign of that reign come to life. They should see a body made up of many cultures and expressions, groups once divided by oppression and violence now reconciled and unselfishly seeking each other's well-being, living into the dream God longs to make real throughout the whole creation.
- The church is also the *messenger of the reign of God*, “announcing the reign of God . . . as a spontaneous expression of gratitude, humility, and joy”<sup>12</sup> and leaving no ambiguity about the identity of the God who is moving all of life toward divine *shalom*. To ensure this good news is compelling and palpable, it must be translated for the local culture. The gospel Jesus preached and manifested in first-century Palestine should come alive, not merely in forms generated in sixth-century Italy or sixteenth-century England or twentieth-century

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<sup>11</sup> George Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 103.

<sup>12</sup> Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation,” 107.

suburban America, but in the gritty, broken, beloved world we are blessed to walk in today.

- Finally, the church is the *servant of the reign of God*.<sup>13</sup> Jesus' ministry was an active one marked by healing the sick, liberating captives, facing down demons, standing with the least of these, going forth with compassion to actively heal all signs of brokenness. As his followers, our hands and our hearts and our resources simply must be devoted to action that participates in the justice and wholeness of God's reign. While the final realization of the reign of God may not depend solely on our limited efforts, God still needs us, as church, to offer our lives in the service of God's dream.

### *Episcopal Experience of the Missio Dei*

In the Catechism of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, we learn that “the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” and that “the Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel and promotes justice, peace, and love.”<sup>14</sup> The missional ecclesiology Hunsberger outlined grafts with almost uncanny precision onto the Catechism's definition of the church's mission. And it is already showing up in the lives of Episcopal congregations stretching to become missional Christian communities. In our tradition and in our experience, we have already taken steps toward this new way of being church.

*“The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships.”* If, as Hunsberger asserts, church is the community of the reign of God, then surely we can say that we become this community in the context of our prayer, worship, and Christian community life. The community gathering is not all there is to church. But to ignore the gathered body, or its prayer, worship, and related ministries as significant elements of how we live out God's mission, is to leap over a huge part of any church's life. How we gather, who we gather, our activities when we gather: all of these can and should be aligned with the mission of God.

<sup>13</sup> Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation,” 105.

<sup>14</sup> “An Outline of the Faith,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 855.

In The Crossing community most aspects of our community life draw on Anglican and Christian traditions in dialogue with the gifts, voices, wisdom, and presence of emerging generations and cultures marginalized in the wider Episcopal Church (particularly African-American, less educated, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered communities). We maintain this commitment in part because we hope to reflect the boundary-breaking, reconciling qualities of the reign of God. When our music director, Ashley, a young African-American Pentecostal woman, started at The Crossing, she admitted she had never been part of a church where LGBT people served as key leaders. Then our drummer, Penny—a white, transgendered woman—lost her grandmother. Ashley was the first in our community to call and pray with Penny, and the first to reassure Penny of how essential she is to our ministry. In their friendship, and in the music they make together for God, we all glimpse the reconciliation that is a hallmark of God's reign come to life on earth.

Every church can become a community of the reign of God. That is because every congregation has an Other, a group that has been historically and systemically cast to the margins because of oppressive systems that mar the body of Christ. We pursue God's mission whenever we move toward justice and mutuality in Christian community—oppressed and marginalized groups bringing new life to the center, tradition-bearers at the center bringing new life to the margins, both groups radically welcoming each other to bring our whole selves before God, God's justice reshaping our relationships as we tell a new story together.

*“The church pursues its mission as it proclaims the Gospel.”* According to Hunsberger, the church is the messenger of the reign of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim, preach, and evangelize (that is, share the good news) in all places. I am struck by how much time Jesus spent announcing healing, blessing, and the reality of God's reign. As the living Word of God, he proclaimed a new order and drew people into transforming relationships and action that would ultimately transform the world.

In many contexts, the Episcopal Church's proclamation sounds less like the good news of Jesus and more like speaking in tongues. Following Jesus' footsteps, we need to translate and interpret the message of God's reign so that the people can hear and join the revolution. The Church of the Apostles in Seattle serves in a community that is

overwhelmingly non-churched, so early in their life together they set about the work of translation. Their church doubles as a community arts center. They foster multiple intentional community houses where young, isolated postmoderns come together to follow the radical Jesus Way. They pray the Daily Office in person and online. They sing the *Agnus Dei* to electronica beats. The truth of the gospel and the wisdom and beauty of Anglican tradition meet the sounds and hopes and hurts of Seattle. The old story of redemption has been told so that emerging generations longing for new life can hear and be changed by it.

Whatever our context, if we are going to proclaim the gospel, we will need to listen with care and discern the best way to meet the situation on the ground. In some cases, the Prayer Book and the 1982 Hymnal and pew-sitting on a Sunday morning may speak the good news with utter clarity. In a growing number of contexts, our church's cultural packaging actually represents an impediment, inhibiting our proclamation and invitation to people to turn and join Jesus. The challenge before every church is to enter the real situation on the ground as Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making the "appeal through us," and to discover with the people around us a way to "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

*"The Church pursues its mission as it promotes justice, peace, and love."* Finally, how could we live as servants of the reign of God, as Hunsberger suggests, except by promoting justice, peace, and love? There is no room here to share all the Scripture passages that place justice-making at the heart of Christian life. From Micah 6:8 ("What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?") to John 21:17 ("Do you love me? . . . Feed my sheep"), the calling is clear. We play a central role in God's mission, and as God's dream extends to concrete conditions and relationships throughout the created order, so does God's calling upon us.

When my colleague Arrington Chambliss accepted the post of directing the new Relational Evangelism Project in the Diocese of Massachusetts, she got calls from angry and disappointed friends who thought she was turning her back on her career in activist and justice work. She tried to explain that she was building a disciplined community of young adults who would be trained and placed in various Episcopal ministries, where they would listen to stories and situations on the ground, build relationships within and beyond the ministry,

and then catalyze the ministry to engage in justice-based actions that would make a difference in their communities. These Relational Evangelists would grow the Episcopal Church. But far more importantly, they would grow the community of servants who are passionately and actively engaged in participating in the reign of God. The mission of the Episcopal Church, she insisted, cannot be separated from justice work.

There is no choice, for these young organizers or for the rest of us: the whole church is called to stand with those who are hungry, wounded, marginalized, and oppressed. We are defined as a community of people who are passionate about God's mission, not only within our church walls, not only in our spoken words, but in our actions in the world. Whenever we engage in the movement for transformation and healing in God's world, we pursue God's mission and thus live more deeply into our own.

### *Relational Organizing as Missional Leadership Practice*

This is the identity we proclaim in our Prayer Book, and it is the identity Episcopalians have lived and are living today in many places. That revolution could spread, but only if we learn to build relationships, get to know people and situations around our congregations and ministries, and discern together the countercultural dream of God in the contexts in which we are planted. Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew of "scribes who are trained for the kingdom" (Matt. 13:52). We need to form leaders who are trained for the kingdom, that is, trained to facilitate our collective development as missional communities devoted to the reign of God.

Our church is not consistently forming such leaders, certainly not for local mission contexts that are multicultural, post-Christian, and often anti-Christian. Of the church leaders I know who have successfully navigated these rocky shoals and helped their communities to become missional Christian communities, the single most significant common denominator is their practice of relational (or community) organizing: the art of building relationships in order to move groups into action around a common purpose.<sup>15</sup> These methods have

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<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth explanation of the intersection between organizing and congregational life, see Michael Gecan, *Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal* (Skokie, Ill.: ACTA Publications, 2008) and Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Con-*

provided many of us with the missing link between theological convictions and actual leadership that points communities toward the reign of God.

At the Episcopal Church's 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention in Anaheim, the entire gathered body took part in Mission Conversations shaped around Public Narrative, a method that is based on relational organizing.<sup>16</sup> Now thousands of Episcopalians have had a brief yet powerful experience with a method that could unlock our church's potential to serve and embody the mission of God in our diverse locations. Through relational organizing, we are equipped for six essential leadership practices:

1. Building a relational culture;
2. Practicing facilitative leadership;
3. Getting rooted in context and incarnational reality;
4. Recalling dangerous memories and envisioning the world-as-it-should-be;
5. Moving into action around the people's passions and gifts;
6. Embracing transformation.

In this final section, we will explore the shape of relational organizing and the specific practices this model suggests for the development of leaders for missional communities.

### *1. Building a Relational Culture*

The one-to-one relational meeting is the basic building block of all relational organizing. This intentional conversation looks benign on the surface, but it is a potent tool for community formation and movement building. Two people meet for an agreed-upon time—usually not more than an hour. During that time they do not engage in mere small talk; rather, both of them share stories of the deep passions that drive them into action. What do they care about and

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*gregations and Community Organizing* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> For information about the Public Narrative Project in the Episcopal Church, including resources by project founder Marshall Ganz, Professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, see [www.episcopalchurch.org/ge2009\\_100384\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/ge2009_100384_ENG_HTM.htm).

why? What issues keep them up at night? What injustices grieve their hearts and contradict God's will for all of creation? What hopes make their hearts sing and move them to act? When did they discover their passion for these situations? What happened? When have they seen their communities acting on their values in a way that made a difference? This is the substance of the one-to-one conversation.

One-to-ones are powerful because if I know your story and begin to care about you, I am willing to move into action around the problem that breaks your heart or the passion that animates your life. Because you know my story, you may be willing to trust and support my leadership when the going gets rough. As we hear each others' stories, we may find surprising areas of common ground.

Creating a team or a community this way takes time and effort. In the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, where I served as a leader early in my Christian journey, we grew accustomed to the press and other outsiders saying our group didn't "do" enough, because we spent too much time "talking." In fact, those conversations were the basis for our strength, bonding us across separations of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, education, neighborhood, political ideology, and so much more. Employed by missional leaders, these intentional conversations can knit together a true body of Christ. We would find ourselves united by something deeper than uniformity: trust in each other and a passion for the overarching reign of God.

## *2. Practicing Facilitative Leadership*

The relational organizer is rarely the sole leader out front or the chief spokesperson. She is dedicated to building a movement of people who know themselves individually and collectively as the leaders. They know how to look around the circle and see the powerful, creative children of a powerful, creating God. They follow the Kenyan adage, "If you want to go somewhere quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

And yet, this is no completely flat or leaderless movement. The organizer takes responsibility for growing others' leadership capacity and helping the group to discern vision and move into action. In their work on facilitative leadership, the Interaction Institute for Social Change trains leaders who "create the conditions for self-empowerment so that people work together to achieve a common

goal.”<sup>17</sup> Like the facilitative leader, a relational organizer understands that all people have power—that is, the ability to act effectively.<sup>18</sup> If we became these leaders, we would learn to create the conditions for people on the ground to thrive and experience themselves as disciples and apostles, and we would encourage them to create the conditions for others to make the same life-changing discovery.

### 3. *Getting Rooted in Context and Incarnational Reality*

Church folks naturally love some part of our church: its ritual, its history, its traditions, its people. Because of that attachment, it is not surprising that we enter new cultural situations offering a prepackaged deal: “Here is what we offer, the traditions and gifts and identity that have been most transformative for us—you may share them, too.” We are not trained to listen carefully to the people and cultural contexts we encounter. We do not have the skills to detect how Jesus has already become incarnate in this community. We do not ask about the gifts this community of single mothers, or yoga-loving students, or second-generation Mexican Americans has already developed and put to use for the reign of God, though they may never have named their efforts as holy. As church, we too often proceed based on anecdotes, piecing together assumptions about what “they” want, and then we do *for* them, instead of *with* them. Not surprisingly, many people feel objectified by Christian evangelism, social service, and action.

Relational organizers will never move into action without holding one-to-ones with people on the ground. After that stage, they hold house meetings: group gatherings where people share their stories with each other and discern common cause and begin to plan for action. They pursue this path in order to build community networks and discern self-interests, stories, and passions. This practice also ensures they are in touch with the context, familiar with people’s hurts and dreams, cognizant of the broken relationships and systemic injustices that plague the community. They also know the ways God’s reign has already been revealed in this place, so they are better positioned to join that movement in progress. The church’s leaders would do well

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<sup>17</sup> Interaction Institute for Social Change, *Facilitative Leadership* (Cambridge, Mass.: Interaction Associates LLC, 1997), Sec. 1–3.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobsen, *Doing Justice*, 38.

to become this conversant in our missional contexts, inviting our communities to be our partners instead of our projects.

#### *4. Recalling Dangerous Memories and Envisioning the World-as-it-Should-Be*

Political theologian Johann Baptist Metz writes of a powerful organizing tool known as “dangerous memory.” These are haunting memories of the world-as-it-should-be, and they stand in stark relief against the pain of the world-as-it-is. Most people—however dire their current situation—have some memory of a moment when their household had enough food and water, when schools educated and empowered children, when their family felt strong and safe, or when the church was deeply engaged in the neighborhood. This dangerous memory provides more than palliative relief and a hope for the sweet by-and-by. It is actually a discerning tool, one that helps to “illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh and steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with.”<sup>19</sup> Thanks to the dangerous memory, reality is unmasked and people finally admit things are not as they should or could be. Then they can take collective action to heal the brokenness in their current situation.

Missional leaders could help their communities to identify the gap between the world-as-it-is (our sinful world shot through with hints of God’s reign) and the world-as-it-should-be (the world to come, where God’s reign is complete). Then they could mobilize their communities toward transformation, repentance, and alignment with the reign of God. Make no mistake, “the gospel has to be heard within the culture of the day, but it always has to be heard as a call to appropriate repentance. It is the incarnation of the gospel, within a dominantly consumer society, that provides the Church . . . with its major missionary challenge.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, missional leaders cannot simply affirm the culture and align the church with the culture’s values. We bear the gospel of Jesus and the story of his life, death, and resurrection like a dangerous memory, a reminder that God’s will has not yet been done, that new life and a new order are still actively breaking in. All of which means we have work to do . . . together.

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<sup>19</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 109.

<sup>20</sup> *Mission-Shaped Church*, xiii.

### 5. *Moving into Action around the People's Passions and Gifts*

Organizers regularly point out that people act around self-interest.<sup>21</sup> This is simply another way of saying we are most likely to act around the situations that get lodged in our hearts and minds and will not leave us alone. Relational organizing takes this truth and makes it work for the reign of God. As we engage in one-to-one relational meetings, we listen for the story around the other person's deepest passions, hopes, and gifts. We hear what part of God's reconciling activity in the world they most hope to join, and what motivates them to action.

Why would organizers so emphasize self-interest? If people are driven by other motivations like guilt, obligation, fear of death, or faddish fascination, they may not stay the course. The commitment is too shallow. As a relational organizer and as a missional leader, I will listen to help you to identify the conditions and commitments that make you most creative, focused, and effective. Your action then rises from that place of passion and giftedness. Frederick Buechner understood the difference between obligation, self-indulgence, and vocation: "Neither the hair shirt or the soft birth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>22</sup> God's hunger for the world matters. But so does your gladness and hunger. The key is to marry these impulses so we can freely give our whole selves to God's dream.

### 6. *Embracing Transformation*

Long-time organizer Michael Gecan writes that "All organizing is dis-organizing and re-organizing."<sup>23</sup> It is the mantra of the Industrial Areas Foundation and other community organizing groups. Even after a successful public action that most would see as a victory, relational organizers go back to the practice of one-to-one meetings and listening to see what is next. They know there is always a horizon, always greater freedom, justice, and hope to claim for a wider circle of people. Organizers never sit still for long.

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<sup>21</sup> Jacobsen, *Doing Justice*, 50–51.

<sup>22</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperOne, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Gecan, *Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal*, 5.

This vision is the antithesis of the church most of us find ourselves in. We come looking for safe harbor in the storm, the one rock that will not move in a world that will not stop moving. But our God is a restless God,<sup>24</sup> seeking lost sheep and welcoming prodigals and pulling the mighty down from their thrones. God will not rest until all of creation is restored, and neither can we.

Missional leaders love God's people, and they value the traditions and witness of the communion of saints who have brought us thus far on the way. But they are also passionate about keeping God's people moving. They understand that we may have to dis-organize old patterns, systems, and relationships—not for the sake of change, but in order to re-organize our communities and our world in the shape God intends. They preach, teach, organize, facilitate, and embody a way of life that is not invested primarily in the preservation of institutions. Rather, they bring the fruits of tradition as they follow Jesus, forming missional Christian communities that can move as boldly as the God whose reign we anticipate.



Can the Episcopal Church become an incubator for relational organizers like this, and take concrete steps to foster the growth of missional Christian communities? Episcopal theologian Verna Dozier's words give me great hope: "The kingdoms of this world are not yet the kingdom of God, but they can become it. They are not yet the realm where God's sovereignty is acknowledged and lived out, but they can become it."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, our church may have a long history as the servant of empire and colonialism, and comparatively less experience as a radically welcoming community following Jesus' call to embody, proclaim, and serve the reign of God. But we have our own dangerous memories of being a daring, missional people set on God's purposes. Our hearts are breaking open, our traditions have prepared us for this calling, and by the grace of God, we are waking up. We *can* become practitioners of the reign of God.

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<sup>24</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *A Passion for God's Reign: Theology, Christian Learning and the Christian Self* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 31–32.

<sup>25</sup> Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2006), 106.