

# ***“Toward a Stronger Future”***

A White Paper by the Long Range Planning Committee of the EPC  
June 2006

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*Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. (Rev 3:2 NIV)*

The words of Jesus spoken to the church in Sardis may be stronger, even harder, than what we want to hear. Many of us in the EPC are quick to point out—and rightfully so—that we are among those Presbyterians who have reaffirmed our Biblical faith during an age of apostasy. Many of us care deeply about the Great Commission and its wide-ranging implications. We teach well, care for our flocks, and are engaged in missions, particularly among the Muslims. These are just some of the many things we have to celebrate . . . and celebrate we should.

Yet, for all the good news, Mike Glodo, our outgoing Stated Clerk, called our attention to a critical statistic in his 25<sup>th</sup> Assembly report: 63% of our churches have either “plateaued” or are declining in membership. Each year, as we gather at our General Assembly, we lament our lack of evangelistic growth. Therefore, isn’t it time to do more than merely be concerned? Would not an achievable and worthwhile goal be that we reverse this statistic? Because we are the *Evangelical* Presbyterian Church, it’s time to renew our commitment to the Great Commission. Until such time as a significant percentage of our churches are evangelistically effective (2/3 or more?), it would be hard for any of us to disagree that Jesus’ diagnosis of the church in Sardis has application for us in the EPC—“*. . . for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.*”

## **A Brief History of our Committee**

We, the Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC), were formed by you at the 25<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2005):

“That the 25<sup>th</sup> General Assembly approve an ad interim committee on strategic planning consisting of a minimum of four ruling elders and four teaching elders plus a chairman representing all the presbyteries which shall be appointed by the Moderator. Grounds: The observance of our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year as well as the approach of the end of the decade make it timely to evaluate our progress on Vision 2001 and to begin envisioning our mission beyond 2010.”

During the past year we have read voluminously, met several times by conference call and in Detroit, prayed, and spoken with many of you. In fact, the dialogue began at the 2005 General Assembly as “Future Focus Groups” opened up discussion on how we as pastors and elders perceived we were doing as a denomination. Those Focus Groups discussed two topics, “*Describe your church/presbytery/GA,*” and “*How can your church/presbytery/GA be more effective in evangelism and church planting?*”

Some were frustrated by those discussions, while many were energized. The comments were recorded and include honest statements such as, “*My presbytery is like an old steel mill and its operational priorities are rusting and decaying,*” and “*Our General Assembly is like a race horse, lots of fun and fanfare, but always ending up where we started.*” While many of the comments were mildly critical (occasionally more so), there were some very positive comments as well, “*My church is like a mission outpost and operational priorities are to reach the lost and grow fully devoted followers of Christ for His glory.*” (You can read all of the comments of the various Focus Groups at <http://epc.org/general-assembly/LRP.html>.)

Through it all, the frustrating as well as the exciting, we sense a deep love for the EPC, and we treasure both our orthodoxy and our very real successes. Still, there seems to be a holy discontent welling up within us. We are trying to figure out how to “do church” better. This is a good thing.

Against this backdrop, the LRPC has been tasked with painting a portrait of that preferred future. It was immediately clear to us that we could not engage in that task in isolation from you, the pastors and elders who actually lead our churches and church. During this past year we moved “Focus Group Discussions” into each of the Presbyteries, seeking to involve still more of you in a creative dialogue. Our conviction is that God leads the Church through her pastors and elders, and hence it is critical that we all “think together.” ***Our final goal is action based upon a shared conviction that the Gospel requires more from us than we are currently accomplishing. In order to maximize the opportunity for success, the LRPC will recommend a common vision with common goals, including changes in our operational priorities and practices to facilitate that vision and those goals.***

At the 26<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2006), we want to further expand the conversation as well as “dial you in” to what we have been learning, both from our study and from our conversations with your peers. More than anything, we are bullish on the church. We are rich in foundational Truth and creative leaders. While there will certainly be moments of disagreement—even sharp disagreement—we believe God is guiding us toward a stronger future wherein we may, in the sight of God, complete the deeds given to us.

## America Has Changed

Anyone paying attention to the American landscape clearly sees that our nation is changing. It is now commonly accepted that America has become both a “post-Christian” and “post-modern” nation. What does that mean? For many Americans, it means they no longer believe in absolutes. “Truth” is now “what is true *for you.*” As a result, Christians are increasingly dismissed as “intolerant” when we seek to speak with a prophetic voice to what is true and false and good and evil among our secular acquaintances. We all experience this on an almost daily basis.

At the same time, globalization and multiculturalism have further diluted what was once a strongly Judeo-Christian worldview. Americans have increasingly come into contact with other belief systems making their own claims of truth. In many ways, we are becoming a melting pot of ideas and beliefs with no clear-cut winner claiming the American mind and soul.

On the national scale, it means Americans no longer share a single “meta-narrative.” Once upon a time, Americans generally thought of themselves as a part of God’s story unfolding on the face of the earth. “God,” of course, meant the Judeo-Christian God. The Bible was a part of everyday life, even in the schools, and church was taken for granted.

We all know that has changed. While evangelicalism remains a potent force in America, Christians are now increasingly marginalized in the media, and the town square may no longer display the manger scene at Christmas. Why this drive to expunge Christian symbolism from our national public life? The answer is that increasingly the Judeo-Christian heritage is no longer widely accepted as the binding story of our nation—our “meta-narrative.” As a result, while many Americans are generally “religious” or “spiritually minded” in a very broad sense, the Church and her message no longer occupy the center of society. Our sense of being marginalized mirrors the cultural shift that has taken place in our country.<sup>1</sup>

At best we are keeping our heads above water. But the trends of Western Europe and Canada suggest more difficult times may be ahead. In his most recent book *Revolution*, George Barna projects that church attendance in America will drop by one half by 2025.<sup>2</sup> The World Christian Encyclopedia states that U.S. Christianity loses two million members a year. It further states that, once those folks leave, they generally don’t come back.<sup>3</sup> Much of the Church seems to be at a standstill in terms of reaching new people for Christ. The national stagnation of the Church that the World Christian Encyclopedia and Barna note parallels our own experience in the EPC. It seems that we are a microcosm of many trends in our nation. How are we to recover our Great Commission effectiveness in the midst of such enormous cultural change?

## Recovering Mission

As the status of the Church in society is changing, we in America increasingly find ourselves in the setting of the New Testament Church . . . outsiders speaking to a largely paganized culture. Tim Keller, senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and a key thinker on the subject of the Church and culture writes:

“The British Missionary Lesslie Newbigin went to India around 1950. There he was involved with a church living ‘in mission’ in a very non-Christian culture. When he returned to England some 30 years later, he discovered that now the Western Church, too, existed in a non-Christian society, **but it had not adapted to its new situation** . . . the Church in the West had not become completely ‘missional’—adapting and reformulating absolutely everything it did in worship, discipleship, community, and service—so as to

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<sup>1</sup> Even some evangelical Christians—even some of us in the EPC—see these developments as not entirely negative. After all, the Christendom of North America has produced tragic chapters that include the treatment of indigenous peoples, race relations and civil rights, and corruption in government at the highest levels. Some do see these shifts as a day of new opportunity for the Church to regain her pilgrim identity and express herself as an ethical people distinct (“peculiar”) among the peoples of the world. However, we don’t even have to agree on whether there is an up side in order to agree that this shift is clearly taking place.

<sup>2</sup> Barna, George. *Revolution*. Tyndale Publishing, Carol Stream, Ill, 2005. P. 49.

<sup>3</sup> *World Christian Encyclopedia (2nd edition)*. David Barrett, George Kurian and Todd Johnson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

be engaged with the non-Christian society around it. It had not developed a ‘missiology of western culture’ the way it had done so for other non-believing cultures.”<sup>4</sup>

Many believe that this is precisely the status of the Church in America. When many of us (or many of our churches) began ministry several decades ago, America was in many ways a largely “Christian” nation. Yet, especially over the last couple of decades, things have changed dramatically. ***The critical question now before the Church is whether or not we will grasp that we too are missionaries, albeit in our own country.*** Given this dramatic shift, it’s time—as leaders—to ask ourselves once again, “Why does my church exist?” Certainly our definitions come from Scripture, but the Bible has much to say about why the Church exists. Is there a “bottom line”? As members of the EPC, we have studied the Bible exhaustively and have stated the answer as to why the Church exists:

“In terms of its work, the first duty of the Church is to evangelize by extending the Gospel both at home and abroad, leading others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to provide for the nurture of that faith that all might grow in grace and in sanctification. . . . the Church must never confuse its primary task of evangelism (the Gospel) with the fruit of faith (good works).”  
(Book of Government, 4-3).

The LRPC believes that, initially, this is a discussion about the Church rediscovering her primary ***mission***. This is an enormous subject. The first thing to say is that terms must be clarified. Many of us, when we hear the word “mission,” think of foreign missions. A “missional” church, while affirming the work of foreign missions, defines each congregation as a local “mission” in its community. For Americans and Evangelical Presbyterians, the idea is that our local churches have been placed strategically by God in order to reach their increasingly secularizing and paganized communities for Christ.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Lesslie Newbigin considered North America to be “the most vital missionary frontier of our time.”<sup>6</sup>

Alan Roxburgh, another leading voice on the subject of the Church in Western culture, seeks to connect the local congregation back to the very nature and work of God. He writes about the “*missio dei*,” portraying God as the ultimate Missionary who works to bring the lost into living encounter with Himself through the Gospel of His Son Jesus Christ. It may seem obvious that this is what the Church is all about, but with great perceptivity Roxburgh comments that for many churches and Christians,

It is no longer about God and what God is about in the world; it is about how God serves and meets human need. More specifically, the God who encounters us in Jesus Christ has become the spiritual food court for the personal, private inner needs of expressive

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<sup>4</sup> Keller, Tim. “The Missional Church”, available at <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/index.cfm?fuseaction=tkeller>

<sup>5</sup> *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, a multi-author work edited by Darrell Guder is considered by many to be the best summation statement on the need for the Church in North America to recover her sense of mission in her own society. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

individuals. The result is a debased, compromised, Gnostic form of Christianity which is not the Gospel at all.

The biblical narratives are about God's mission in, through, and for the sake of the world. The focus of attention is toward God, not the other way around.<sup>7</sup>

The idea is this: The Church does not exist first and foremost for Christians to feel comfortable. The Church exists to join with God in His Mission of reaching the lost for Christ. Against this backdrop, the "plateaued" or declining membership of 63% of our EPC churches is an enormous problem. Even our own Book of Government, cited above, tells us that we are failing in our mission. But of far greater importance than theologians or our own Book of Order is whether or not our own sense of purpose lines up with the very purpose of Jesus Christ:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19:10)

For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matthew 9:13)

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (1 Timothy 1:15)

All of our beliefs about the sovereignty of God notwithstanding, an earnest discussion about reclaiming the Great Commission is a dialogue every Evangelical Presbyterian would be deeply interested in. Yes, we believe in election, but we also believe that the Church is God's ordinary instrumental means by which He calls people to salvation in Christ.

## More Than Evangelism

At this point, it's critical that we add yet another distinction. As important as evangelism is, the missional discussion is about more than evangelism. In short, "missional" is about coming to terms with the Church's fundamental identity as a "sent" people, a self-understanding which is absolutely critical in a culture that is increasingly distancing itself from the basics of belief in God. Being missional is about both studying our culture and dialoguing with it. This dialogue must translate the Gospel to an increasingly paganized America in such a way that non-believers can grasp Christ.

The story of Don Richardson and the "*Peace Child*" comes to mind. Sent to the Sawi people, cultural barriers kept the Sawi from grasping what this missionary was trying to tell them in Christ. The Sawis were hunters and cannibals who lived in a constant state of conflict with other headhunting cannibal tribes in their area. They could not understand Jesus as a Savior in the context of their culture. They saw Him only as a fool, because they valued betrayal as the highest expression of social skill. To their way of thinking, Judas was a hero and Jesus was a sap. Only when Richardson discovered the concept of the Peace Child was he able to actually translate the Gospel faithfully so that it could be understood culturally. The Peace Child, a swapping of two infants between warring tribes, was a means by which hostile tribes could trust each other. Jesus was God's "Peace Child" sent into this world by the ultimate tribal head, God

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<sup>7</sup> "The Missional Church," *Theology Matters* 10.4 (Sept/Oct 2004), p. 3.

Himself. Jesus' arrival meant that God wanted to end the warfare between Himself and man, reconciling His enemies to Himself. The Sawi people suddenly understood and trusted Christ as Savior.<sup>8 9</sup>

Yes, there is always the threat of accommodation—contextualizing to the degree that the Gospel is compromised. Richardson himself in other instances has been criticized for this. Yet we, your Long-Range Planning Committee, believe *it is time we heard God utter the other warning as well*—that the danger of not being faithful to our calling and identity as a sent people is as real as the danger of compromising the truth.

Increasingly, this is the task we face. With a culture that no longer shares our “meta-narrative” and does not believe in absolutes, how can we translate the Gospel in biblically faithful ways so that non-believers understand the Gospel and trust Christ? In other words, how can we be like Don Richardson or any effective missionary you would care to name?

Against this backdrop, the matter is further compounded when we grasp that the history of the evangelical church is that we have largely been able to successfully reach only those people who are already like ourselves (essentially conservative). Matters get still more complex when we realize that our culture is changing not only ideologically, but also ethnically, linguistically, and economically. As Tim Keller puts it:

One of the reasons much of the American evangelical church has not experienced the same precipitous decline as the Protestant churches of Europe and Canada is because in the U.S. there is still a “heartland” with the remnants of the old “Christendom” society. There the informal public culture (though not the formal public institutions) still stigmatizes non-Christian beliefs and behavior. “There is a fundamental schism in American cultural, political, and economic life. There’s the quick-growing, economically vibrant . . . morally relativist, urban-oriented, culturally adventuresome, sexually polymorphous, and ethnically diverse nation . . . and there’s the small town, nuclear-family, religiously-oriented, white-centric other America (with) . . . its diminishing cultural and economic force...two nations...” (Michael Wolff, *New York*, Feb 26, 2001, p. 19.) In conservative regions, it is still possible to see people profess faith and the church grow without becoming ‘missional.’ **Most traditional evangelical churches still can only win people to Christ who are temperamentally traditional and conservative. ‘But,’ as Wolff notes, ‘this is a shrinking market.’ And eventually evangelical churches ensconced in the declining, remaining enclaves of “Christendom” will have to learn how to become ‘missional.’ If it does not do that it will decline or die.**

*. . . we don’t simply need evangelistic churches, but missional churches.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Richardson, Don. *The Peace Child*. Regal Books, June, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Though it appears that it is very much ‘a work in progress’, it’s worth reading the story of College Hill Presbyterian Church as they tried to come to terms with becoming “Missional.” The connection to Don Richardson’s story of taking the Gospel to the Sawi people is drawn from College Hill’s own attempts to recover the Great Commission. You can read their story in the Sept/Oct 2004 issue of “Theology Matters” available at [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com).

We have all seen it and sense it, America is becoming two nations (if not more). Even people of our own ethnic backgrounds or socio-economic level look at the world very differently than we do. To be faithful to the Great Commission, we have to learn how to reach people for Christ who are increasingly quite different from ourselves.

## Changes in Operational Priorities and Practices

Thus far we've stated the obvious: The EPC must meaningfully come to terms with effective evangelism. We cannot allow this to be anything other than "Job One." We would hope that every pastor and elder in the EPC would sound a hearty "amen" to that. The "missional" side of the debate generates an awareness that we may need to become more thoughtful as we seek to reach our culture for Christ. We have to "get inside their heads" and figure out how best to present Christ. There's really nothing new about that either. Didn't Paul the Apostle make it his method to be "a Jew to the Jews" and "a Greek to the Greeks"? (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

***The next subject for serious consideration is how we do things. It has become a management truism that the system you currently have is perfectly designed to yield the results you are currently getting. Said differently, insanity is merely doing the same thing and expecting different results.***<sup>11</sup> The question we would want to pose is whether or not there are different ways to organize ourselves that might greatly enhance our effectiveness in ministry.

Lyle Schaller puts the same set of thoughts in a different light in *Geography to Affinity*. When is it time to leave things alone? When:

You are convinced the institutional and spiritual health of your denominational tradition is excellent. Your congregations are vital, healthy, and effective in reaching new generations of American-born residents as well as recent immigrants to America. Your denominational systems are producing the outcomes you desire and should not be changed.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, reviewing the comments made in our various Focus Groups makes it clear that a significant number of our pastors and elders are already frustrated by how we go about things and want to rethink our denomination's way of doing business. *Can't we be more efficient? Why do we waste so much time? Business gets in the way of prayer, worship, and relationships. Can't we just get on with the main business of reaching the lost and doing it well?* These are the kinds of questions many are asking. The LRPC believes that in many instances these are good questions and deserve serious consideration. Surely there is a way to protect our democratic and Presbyterian sense of process and still find operational effectiveness.

In the final analysis, reviewing our operational priorities and practices is part of our committee's task . . . and we're a bit nervous about it. We know that conversations like this are inherently threatening to some folks, invigorating to others. We are sure that we're not smart enough to

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<sup>10</sup> Keller, Tim. *The Missional Church*. <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.alban.org/weekly/2005/050606\\_MiddleJudicatories.asp](http://www.alban.org/weekly/2005/050606_MiddleJudicatories.asp)

<sup>12</sup> Schaller, Lyle. *From Geography to Affinity*. P. 21.

come up with a “silver bullet” able to penetrate our moments of ineffectiveness. The task is larger than we are. We are also concerned about thinking through merely “spiritual solutions” (such as “we just need to pray more”). No doubt we do, but why not both pray more *and* figure out more effective ways to handle the human side of doing church?

We do want to be clear that our task is to review our organization, *not our theology*. We take some comfort in the fact that many in our denomination seem open to rethinking how we do church. While we’re not sure how to reinvent in the midst of an established tradition, our outgoing Stated Clerk has challenged us with the same questions:

A biblical polity, or governance, is the application of biblical norms applied in a biblical way by taking into account the context. This is why I offer my support, encouragement, and contribution to our next phase of strategic long-range planning in order to examine our current polity. **Governance must be on the table if we are to be serious about strategic planning . . . (this means) an honest and wise assessment of the particulars so that our polity aids and empowers our mission as fully as possible.**<sup>13</sup>

**I believe the most pressing matter of our corporate life today is the relationship of two issues—governance and mission.**<sup>14</sup>

*As the LRPC has begun our work, we have learned that several other denominations are beginning to ask and answer the same questions.* For example, the Presbyterian Church in America appointed a “Strategic Planning Committee” in 2000. Their question was, “What are the signs of a healthy denomination and how can the PCA become more healthy?”<sup>15</sup> In 2005 their committee reported, “Following the 2003 GA, the SPC began Phase II of the Planning Process to consider what changes would be needed in the PCA’s structure, resources, and leadership to implement the Strategic Priorities identified . . .”<sup>16</sup> Studying the work of their committee, it seems that our sister denomination has begun the work of reorganization so as to become more effective.

On a presbytery level, we learned the story of the Central Florida presbytery of the PCA. Working together, the elders and pastors of that Presbytery have found a new and much more satisfying way of doing church. Noting the change, one pastor commented, “We were operating out of an old paradigm. We’d drive halfway across the state to get together, lazily drink coffee, call the roll, seat the visitors, worship with one song, hear a sermon by a pastoral candidate, and address ‘business matters’ in a not-very-efficient manner. There was a growing sentiment that not much was getting done.” The sense was that “The presbytery meetings had focused too much on church business, many pastors felt, and not enough on prayer, equipping, worship, or

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<sup>13</sup> Glodo, Mike. *Stated Clerk’s Annual Report to the EPC General Assembly*. P. SC-9. 2005.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> 2005 Report of the SPC to the Administrative Committee and 2005 Presbyterian Church in America General Assembly. P. 2201.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2205.

people just getting to know each other in more than a casual way.”<sup>17</sup> The Central Florida presbytery made a number of basic changes with a very positive effect:

- Spending hours, rather than minutes together in prayer and worship
- Making opportunities to hear each other’s stories
- Bring in the wider church staffs for significant portions of the meeting
- Developing cohort groups to meet together
- Streamlining business dealings<sup>18</sup>

The result? “There is a greater sense of trust and delight in being together.” Also, as the presbytery became more purposeful in meeting together, they realized that they became more purposeful in church planting efforts.<sup>19</sup> While this isn’t precisely the story of a local church or denomination becoming missional, it is the retelling of how a presbytery took some risks and reinvented themselves operationally with empowering results. Perhaps Presbyterians can change, after all.

Another powerful story of organizational change is told by Bishop Claude Payne of the Episcopal Church. Facing declining membership and increasing rejection by the unchurched, the Diocese of Texas returned to a first-century Christianity model of the missionary church. Beginning with seeing their chief officer as the “Chief Missionary,” they began to truly focus on the lost and began a complete organizational overhaul. Their goal was to move from maintenance to mission. The results were a significant turnaround in the evangelistic efforts and growth curve of many of the local churches in that diocese. Changing their collective mindset gave birth to real benefits for particular congregations.<sup>20</sup>

Increasing numbers of leaders in our own denomination have read the inspiring and challenging story of Paul Borden and the American Baptist Churches of the West. *Hit the Bullseye* focuses on making the difficult choices of organizational change. The subtitle of the book, “How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field,” captures the thought that each local church has her own immediate mission field—her community—to reach for Christ.

Borden’s story is that of leading a middle-level judicatory (in our system, the presbytery) to reorganize itself in such a way so as to transform itself from a largely maintenance group of churches into a powerful group of evangelistically effective churches. *Hit the Bullseye* is at moments startling in terms of the organizational accountability and change Paul Borden brought to the group of churches he led, but the results are hard to argue with. It is both an inspiring and a hard-nosed story of what can be accomplished when there is sufficient will for a group of churches to hold themselves accountable to the Great Commission.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “*We Trust and Delight in Being Together*,” Eileen O’Gorman, byfaithonline.com, [http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID323422|CHID664014|CIID2116846,00.html](http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID323422|CHID664014|CIID2116846,00.html)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Payne, Bishop Claude and Beazely, Hamilton. Reclaiming the Great Commission, Jossey-Bass Publishing, June 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Borden, Paul. Hit the Bullseye. Abingdon Press, Nashville. 2003.

The New Wineskins movement in the PCUSA has similar aspirations. “Envisioning a New Denominational Reality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” casts a vision for denomination that is more relational, less structured, based on minimal polity, and which is focused on the local church in order to foster mission there.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, these are the questions that many evangelicals serving in denominational settings are asking.

While the common thread in each of these stories is not the Reformed faith (to which we are committed), there is a keen sense among many that denominations should serve local churches as they accomplish the Great Commission. Sometimes denominations have hindered rather than helped—despite the best of intentions. We, along with many leaders in the EPC, envision a denomination that serves the local church rather than vice versa. This is precisely what was envisioned by Vision 21. *The question actively on the table is, “How can we build a denomination that not only envisions this, but accomplishes this?”* Because of that, we believe that it is critical for us to continually review our governance and operational structure to determine whether or not it is serving the larger purpose of the Great Commission.<sup>23</sup>

## Leadership

Leadership is critical to the process we have begun. As we have studied other denominations and churches that have been able to “turn the ship” (so as to effectively reach our culture for Christ), a key common thread is strong leaders who are personally gifted to engender change. In a penetrating analysis of middle-level judicatories (for us, the presbytery) Alban Weekly notes:

“Middle Judicatories commonly do not know what they are to produce. Most of our denominations have polity books that list in great detail what the middle judicatory, the middle judicatory staff, the local congregation, and the clergy of the congregation are supposed to do. Typically, these lists of functions, actions, and roles are long and exhaustive. But they are neither descriptions of outcomes nor job descriptions. They are lists of all of the possible things that these systems and people might do without any indication of what is important to do in a given place at a given time. Without clarity about what is to be produced, it is not possible to know what is important or unimportant to do.”<sup>24</sup>

While meaning no disrespect to our Presbyterian heritage, it’s clear from the Focus Group comments taken from the presbyteries of the EPC that many of us are frustrated by our own

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<sup>22</sup> *New Wineskins, PCUSA, August 02, 2004, “Envisioning a New Denominational Reality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”*

<sup>23</sup> We resonate with Lyle Shaller’s insight [From Geography to Affinity](#), that genuinely reviewing organizational effectiveness is difficult to the degree that we “. . . are convinced the policy-formulation and decision-making processes of your denomination should be driven by (a) precedents, (b) inputs such as budgets, (c) providing jobs for adults, and (d) ideology, not desired outcomes” (Shaller, p. 24). Shaller’s comments have an edge to them and may ruffle some feathers, but we believe that this ethos was at the heart of the original vision for the EPC and consistent with the spirit behind Vision 21. We believe that the shared heart of the EPC—both in national leadership and in local churches—is to build a genuinely effective family of churches and at all costs to avoid a self-perpetuating religious bureaucracy. We take it as a sign of our health that we are able to ask ourselves questions such as these.

<sup>24</sup> “Challenges of Middle Judicatories”, Alban Weekly. June 6, 2005. The Alban Institute, [www.alban.org/weekly/2005/050606\\_Rendle.asp](http://www.alban.org/weekly/2005/050606_Rendle.asp)

system. Leadership will be a key ingredient to answering the question as to how we can change or understand our system to make it work towards congregational and denominational effectiveness. The same Alban Institute newsletter notes, “Change begins with a very small percentage of leaders who are natural innovators and explorers.”<sup>25 26</sup>

We notice that there is a tension in the EPC between “a culture of theology vs. a culture of leadership” and a similar tension between “a culture of plurality vs. the culture of the leader.” For the moment, we do not know what to do with this other than make note of it.

## Our Method as a Committee

From Fall 2005 through Spring 2006, we sought to do three things:

1. Pray

2. Learn

Our bibliography is at the end of this paper. You can access some of our reading materials and executive summaries of what we’ve read at <http://epc.org/general-assembly/LRP.html>.

3. Listen and Dialogue

The Focus Groups that were a part of the 2005 General Assembly (and which were then carried into the presbyteries) were a part of that listening and learning process. More than anything else, we desire for this to be a “grassroots” discussion in the EPC. We believe that change and vision should be driven from the “bottom up.” This year we will again have Focus Groups at the General Assembly in order to keep the dialogue moving (you can access these on <http://epc.org/general-assembly/LRP.html>). We understand that opening up a dialogue like this can be a bit uncomfortable. But we also believe that we are family—and healthy families talk. Part of what we noticed regarding Vision 2001 was that a well thought out Vision Plan has largely stayed on the shelf. We think part of the problem is that the grassroots did not sufficiently get involved. We want to make sure this is not the case this time.

***We are also looking for a “test presbytery” within which to pilot change.*** The Mid-Atlantic Presbytery has begun an aggressive dialogue on how to become more effective. As an expression of that, Mid-Atlantic has put together a committee to study operational effectiveness and ethos change. That committee has already made a key recommendation which the presbytery has approved—to hire a consultant to review their structures and practices with an eye towards operational effectiveness. Part of their considerations will be whether or not to hire a Presbytery Executive with strong leadership and organizational skills.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> John Kotter writes in Leading Change, “Successful transformation is 70 to 90 percent leadership and only 10 to 30 percent management.” *Effective leadership promotes change; management usually maintains the status quo.*” Kotter also writes that leaders who innovate successful change have “a persistent sense of urgency.”

We hope that another presbytery or two will also “catch the vision” for missional church and the changes in our operational priorities and practices necessary to bring that about. Assuming that to be the case, we intend to work with those presbyteries both to learn from them and to resource them. We also hope very much to learn from presbyteries that feel they have made real breakthroughs in getting beyond mere bureaucracy to effective ministry. We hope to all learn from each other.

***Our process cannot be divorced from Vision 21, our previous strategic initiative.*** Reviewing Vision 21, it’s not surprising to learn that some of what we already sense in our work is consistent with our standing vision statement. That said, no matter how good Vision 21 is, it remains largely “on the shelf.” Determining the fundamental changes in our operational priorities and practices necessary to make good plans and see them implemented will be critical to our work. In that, the entire denomination will have to work together. We believe that many of our proposals will be consistent with Vision 21, yet we hope to speak to the kind of operational and ethos changes necessary to get Vision 21 “off the shelf,” as well as recommend any adjustments which seem prudent.

***We also have made a number of key assumptions*** that, to date, are guiding our committee. None of these are written in stone, and we may find as time goes by that we will need to change one or more of them. In order to fully communicate with you, the members of the General Assembly, we want to advise you as to what they are:

1. The LRPC (Long Range Planning Committee) will focus on developing missional ethos and practice in denominational life.
2. The local congregation is the focal point for mission. The EPC rises or falls depending on whether or not the local church succeeds in her mission. Developing missional practice means equipping local churches and developing operational flexibility.
3. The task of the General Assembly and presbytery is to help churches to be missionally successful.
4. The LRPC will initially use the Missional Leadership Institute (MLi) Change Model: (awareness, understanding, support, involvement, commitment).
5. The LRPC will work intentionally through presbyteries.
6. The LRPC feels it must challenge the assumption that a church can be a healthy, evangelical, Reformed congregation in a mission field without growing.
7. The LRPC will take the posture of giving voice to people in the denomination and leading a movement rather than imposing a will.
8. The EPC is at a moment when God’s Providence has given us a clear identity and yet we are still small enough—and relational enough—to effect meaningful change.

9. Ultimately, the LRPC needs to be prescriptive—but only after a process of careful listening. If the process is flawed, the prescription will flounder.

***Our model for leading change is taken from the Missional Leadership Institute and is known as the “MLi Change Model.”*** We’ve attached it as *Appendix A* for your information. The basic assumption of the MLI change model is that for real change to happen it must be owned from the bottom up. Indeed, what could be more Presbyterian? We believe that God speaks to us through the pastors and elders and, as we engage increasing numbers of our pastors and elders in this dialogue, we improve our ability both to hear from God and to put in place the necessary “community ownership” of our shared ideas to engender real change.

This “White Paper,” though already several pages long with appendices included, is really only a beginning. A quick look at our working bibliography (*Appendix B*—a document that will continue to grow) lets you know that the subject of this White Paper is huge. ***It’s simply not possible in the context of one paper to deal with all of the subjects at hand or their ramifications.*** This paper is meant simply to bring you in on the education process that we have started.

Finally, we want to be clear that we are only your servants. ***Our committee members (Appendix C) are committed to work hard, but we have no illusions of infallibility in our work.*** We are confident that we will make mistakes along the way, but we trust both in the Hand of God and your loving friendship to guide us as we seek to serve you and the Lord. Please talk to us and give us your feedback, not only at General Assembly, but at our various Presbytery meetings and throughout the year. Your ideas and insights are important to us, and we love the interchange—even if we don’t always agree.

One last note on disagreement: The journey we’re on guarantees that we’ll have moments where we differ—perhaps sharply. Yet, ***healthy families are not afraid of disagreement based on principle—and they still love and listen to each other.*** Given our conviction that God speaks through the process, we invite you to this kind of dialogue.

The EPC is the denomination that God has entrusted to us and we—all of us who are pastors and elders—are her leaders. Given our God-given leadership responsibility, let’s work together to shape the Church so that she might be ever more effective in her mission, completing the deeds Jesus Christ Himself has assigned to us.

# APPENDIX A

Missional Leadership Institute—Change Model



**missional leadership institute**

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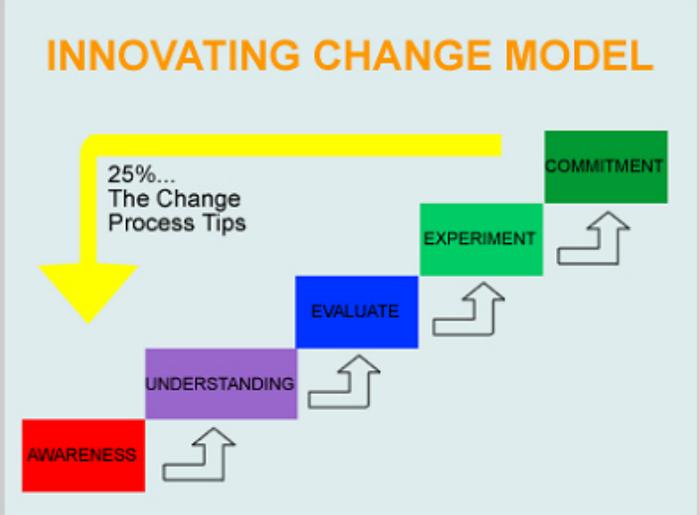
## MLi Change Model

Missional Leadership is about creating environments in which lasting missional change comes from among the people of God and is diffused throughout the community of God's people.

Missional Change must be a bottom-up process that creates an environment in which the people themselves discover the ways the Spirit is calling them into mission and ministry across the street and around the world.

MLi change process is designed to do this.

### INNOVATING CHANGE MODEL



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graph TD; A[AWARENESS] --> B[UNDERSTANDING]; B --> C[EVALUATE]; C --> D[EXPERIMENT]; D --> E[COMMITMENT]; E --> A; A -.->|25%... The Change Process Tips| A
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The Missional Change Model has five stages. Each builds on the one before. In one sense it is like climbing a set of stairs to reach another level of a building. In this sense the model is linear. We believe cultivating missional change requires leaders to learn each of these steps. Shortcutting one subverts the whole process.

At the same time the model is also like a continual loop. In this sense it repeatedly moves back and forth across all the steps. Once the process is initiated, it functions more like a set of spirals moving within one another rather than just a single, one-way, straight line.

For more information about the Missional change process please **contact us**.

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