



# CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1. Inward Versus Outward Churches . . . . .              | 1   |
| 2. Why Hospitality Matters. . . . .                      | 13  |
| 3. The Principles of Hospitality . . . . .               | 23  |
| 4. Creating a Digital Front Door. . . . .                | 45  |
| 5. Providing an Excellent In-Person Experience . . . . . | 57  |
| 6. Intentional Follow-Up . . . . .                       | 75  |
| 7. Creating a Culture of Hospitality . . . . .           | 95  |
| 8. Equipping the Congregation . . . . .                  | 123 |
| Notes . . . . .  | 133 |



# 1

## INWARD VERSUS OUTWARD CHURCHES

DEBI NIXON

We love the local church. We know its power. We both grew up in the church. It's the place where we were baptized, where we went to vacation Bible school and Sunday school as children. It's where we received our first Bibles, were confirmed, attended youth group, got married, and eventually brought our own children.

Some reading this book can relate. You grew up in the church and didn't stray far. You may now be in a church that is growing, adapting, and reaching new people and generations.

Some reading this book are in new churches preparing to launch, dreaming bold, visionary dreams as you prepare to reach a new community.

Yet, some of you who are reading may currently be in churches that are stuck, living in the past. Maybe your church is experiencing declining worship attendance, no children in Sunday school, fewer baptisms or professions of faith. Maybe you have dormant dreams, wondering if the status quo can be challenged and changed.

If that describes you and your church, we are here to tell you that, yes, it can change. It must change. It is time to revive dreams, ignite passions, and start a movement—a revival of the heart that breaks the hold of the status quo. It is time for a new vision to see the community through the eyes of Jesus. Jesus was outwardly focused, always giving his attention to the marginalized, the outcast, those in need, those with questions of faith. That kind of outward focus has the power to transform you and your church, and it is the path Jesus calls us to travel. The central message of Jesus was his proclamation of the kingdom of God. His message challenged the status quo, particularly the rigid church leaders who had different ideas, different standards. He awakened people to a new reality and ignited a movement. And as Jesus proclaimed this message, he invited others to join him.

As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.”

(Matthew 4:18-19)

Imagine Jesus saying, “You’ve been fishing for fish your whole lives. You are pretty good fishermen, and now I need you. Follow me, join me in this world-changing, status-quo-breaking movement, and I’ll make you fish for people.” What a mind-blowing message that must have been for these first disciples. They had to choose to leave behind much of what they knew to experience something new. Yet, they responded boldly and left everything to join in this movement.

Jesus was starting a movement. And we are invited into this movement today! The church is called to this kingdom work of being ambassadors, proclaiming the good news of Jesus to others. This is our Great Commission.

But how? Are we willing to have our assumptions of how to do church, our expectations, and our comforts challenged, laying them aside so we can be a part of this movement?

*The Art of Hospitality* is not a book written only to help a church grow. While our hope is that the messages, ideas, and tools provided are helpful in your planning for growth, this book comes from a restless passion and calling to see every local church relentlessly outwardly focused, yielded to the call of Jesus to be fishers of people. That's a big vision, and it's the heart that compels us to write this book.

While there are many strategies for achieving this vision, this book will focus on a few of the principles, practices, and tools used at the church where we serve, The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.

Not everything will work in your context exactly the way it works for us, but if you are open, we believe you will find ideas that work in your setting.

## Inward Focus

The Church of the Resurrection began in 1990 with four people and a dream. From the beginning, our senior pastor, Adam Hamilton, was clear that God was calling this church to reach nonreligious and nominally religious people. The church was focused not on reaching those who were already attending church in the community but instead on reaching those who had no church home and were not actively engaged in growing in their faith. That passion is still the driving force behind the church today as we have become a church of over 23,000 members worshipping in multiple locations across the Kansas City community. A simple yet powerful purpose statement keeps this passion always before us:

Our purpose is to build a Christian community where nonreligious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians.

Our purpose statement is prominently visible at each of our locations as you enter the building. It serves as a reminder that our purpose statement drives everything we do. It drives the sermons preached, the style of worship, the ministries and programs offered. We ask that every meeting agenda has the purpose statement printed at the top as a reminder that every decision made by our trustees, our finance committee, our women's ministry team, our children's team, and so on, should help us relentlessly pursue this purpose.

That purpose has guided us from the outset. In October of 1990, at the very first worship service of Church of the Resurrection, the young pastor of this church plant, Adam Hamilton, said in his sermon, "We're going to be a church focused on people outside of our doors. We're going to be more concerned about nonreligious and nominally religious people than on ourselves." For those in attendance that day, there was deep passion and excitement around this mission.

**And then it happened.**

Some months later, during a meeting of the leadership team, one of the charter members said, "Pastor Adam, I love our church the size we are now. I love how close we are. I hope we never get any bigger than this." As Adam looked around the room, he noticed other leaders nodding their head in gleeful agreement.

The leaders were saying, "Look at how we have grown since we first started. Isn't it wonderful how close we are? We are connected and know each person by name. Let's not get any larger or we will lose this sense of closeness."

Adam thought, *How did this happen?*

Just a few months earlier he had preached about our mission, had given us a compelling vision of reaching those outside our doors. Yet in just those few short months, the church was turning inward, focusing on the comfort and concerns of those on the inside.

Has this happened in your church as well? Perhaps you have discovered, as we have, how easy it is to become so close and comfortable with those on the inside of the walls of the church that we unintentionally lose concern for those outside. It's not that we don't want to reach new people. It's that we become comfortable, without realizing our comfort begins to build barriers that keep other people out. The primary unspoken question inwardly focused churches often ask is:

What can we do, or what can the church do, to make us (me) more comfortable?

What's interesting is that most often, we don't recognize that we are this church or, if we do recognize it, won't admit that we are inwardly focused. We think we are friendly enough. We often defend our friendliness while ignoring the fact that visitors cannot find a place within our community. In reality, most everything the church does is designed for the benefit and comfort of the members, and we invite new people into "what we are already doing for ourselves."

We say that we want to grow and that we want nonreligious and nominally religious people to experience God in our churches. But our actions don't always match our words. We want to grow, but we don't want to give up our seats. We want to welcome younger people, but we don't want to change the style or time of worship. Jesus calls us to reach deeper as his ambassadors, to be fishers of people, but a church that is focused on itself begins to lose its potential in the wider community to reach new people.

Has this happened in your church?

We love those we know, to the exclusion of those we don't know. Our actions and our inward focus create barriers we simply don't see.

A mother at our church shared the story of her daughter who went away to college and attempted to get connected in a local

congregation. The daughter took initiative and visited several local churches. Most never noticed she was there. There was no welcome, no follow-up. She felt invisible. While a few churches did notice she was there, she was treated like an outsider. Eventually, she simply gave up. Through tears the mother shared that her daughter has yet to find her way back to the church. Could this have been your church? Could this happen to your daughter?

An idiom you may have heard is, “you need to take off your blinders.” It comes from when blinders are put on the bridle of a horse to block their side view to keep them focused on only going in one direction. How many of our churches have on blinders that need to be removed? Blinders that keep us from seeing around us, from seeing the needs of others. Most churches likely do not recognize they are inward focused. It sneaks up on us. It blinds us.

If your church is not reaching and retaining new people, it is possible that some inwardly focused barriers exist. Taking off the blinders is hard. It requires us to admit that we struggle with seeking our own comfort first. It may require that we make some changes, and changes can be hard.

There are certain signs of an inward-focused church, and learning to recognize these characteristics can help us see whether and to what extent our church is inwardly focused. Thom Rainer, in his extensive research and survey of churches, found the following ten common traits among inwardly focused churches.

1. **Worship wars.** Inwardly focused churches experience members who demand that the order of worship and their preferred style of music take precedence over expressions and styles that might connect with unchurched people.
2. **Prolonged minutiae meetings.** Committee meetings focus on inconsequential items, while focus on

vision and strategy to reach new people and meet the needs of the community are rarely the topics of discussion.

3. **Facility focus.** A top priority of the church is keeping the building, furniture, and grounds intact as is.
4. **Program driven.** Programs are only focused on the desires and interest of the church's members, so no margin of time, budget, or building resources is available to focus on starting new ministry that meets the needs of the community.
5. **Inwardly focused budget.** "A disproportionate share of the budget is used to meet the needs and comforts of the members instead of reaching beyond the walls of the church."
6. **Inordinate demands for pastoral care.** "All church members deserve care and concern, especially in times of need and crisis. Problems develop, however, when church members have unreasonable expectations for even minor matters."
7. **Attitudes of entitlement.** "This issue could be a catch-all for many of the points named here. The overarching attitude is one of demanding and having a sense of deserving special treatment."
8. **Greater concern about change than about the gospel.** Change is hard for all, but when needed change meets resistance from members it becomes a barrier to participating in the work of sharing the gospel.
9. **Anger and hostility.** Some members' constant opposition toward church staff or other members can be felt throughout the church.
10. **Evangelistic apathy.** "Very few members [invite others or] share their faith on a regular basis."<sup>1</sup>



During the writing of this book, a local church leader called seeking advice. The church had committed to explore some of the action steps recommended in this book. After completing the study, some of the congregants declared that they were not interested in growing and didn't want to change. For example, the church was invited to have each member sit in a different seat on the following weekend, just to experience something new. This challenge was met with great ire, and future discussions abruptly ended. Change meant they had to give up too much. They were content with maintaining the status quo so that their own needs could be met.

You may read this with some disbelief, but let's be honest: every church, including Church of the Resurrection, will naturally tend to be inwardly focused. This is the human condition. We each have a predisposition to think of ourselves first. We admit this is in ourselves. We suspect you recognize it in yourself too.

## The Outwardly Focused Church

There is, however, a second approach to consider. One where we focus outwardly on others. To be outwardly focused is to be willing to set aside our own desires and comfort so that we can be a part of the kingdom work Christ has called us to.

The question outwardly focused churches ask is:

What can we do on the inside so that those on the outside will be comfortable from the moment they arrive?

In an outwardly focused church, every ministry and program is not based on our own comfort, but instead on finding ways to connect with those on the outside of the church so they feel comfortable. It calls us to know and meet the needs of the community.

The website, way finding, preparation of the facility, design

of the bulletins, hospitality, worship service, and next steps in mission and discipleship are each an important piece to help each guest feel welcomed and comfortable from the moment they encounter your church.

Far too many churches get focused on the comfort of their own members, keeping them happy so there is no tension, no conflict, no discomfort. An outwardly focused church disrupts the status quo and introduces discomfort. They have a servant mindset that champions Philippians 2:3-5: “Don’t do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.”

You can’t underestimate the importance of an outwardly focused vision. Most every church that is growing has overcome inward tendencies, embracing an outwardly focused vision. That kind of vision, of course, is the heart of the gospel.

Jesus never confused his purpose. His entire ministry was about seeking and saving lost people. Luke 19:10 tells us that “the Human One came to seek and save the lost.” He told parables about lost coins, lost sheep, and a lost son to reiterate his focus. We see a demonstration of his outwardly focused vision in what Jesus did. In Matthew 9:35-38 we are reminded that he not only focused on those who had already decided to follow him but also went out to the people where they were, taking the message of the good news to them.

Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but

there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.”

Jesus went out. He felt compassion when he saw the crowds in the community. And he calls us, his workers, to do the same.

Do you feel compassion? Does your church feel compassion? Does your church know the needs of the community?

If we take Jesus’s teaching, example, and commission seriously, as a church we must consider whether we are focused only inwardly on ourselves or outwardly on meeting and connecting with the needs of the community.

According to Thom Rainer, 90 percent of churches in North America are in decline.<sup>2</sup> Maybe you are in one of those churches. The good news is that this can be reversed. And adopting an outward focus is the most important step to take. Growing churches know the difference between inwardly and outwardly focused ministry, and they do something about it!

It takes leaders who remind the church why we exist. “This is where we are going,” they say. “This is our mission.” Growing churches are clear on their purpose. They know why they exist. They know where they are going, and they resolutely set out to work with God to accomplish that purpose.

What is the purpose of your church? Take a moment and write it down in the margin of this book. If you don’t know the purpose of your church, this might be a first action step. Take time this next year to pray, discuss, and gain clarity on what God is calling your church to be and to do in your community. Having a clear sense of your purpose will help your church do the hard, necessary things to turn your focus outward and keep your attention on those outside your doors.

At the heart of the distinction between inwardly and outwardly focused church is what we are willing to do, to risk, and to give up so that we can reach those outside the church.

Engaging worship and intentional follow-up processes are important, but what compels guests to return to our churches is the warmth of our welcome and hospitality that goes beyond their expectations.

**“Churches live or die by the quality of their hospitality. *The Art of Hospitality* is a field guide for helping your church to extend the radical welcome of Christ. Packed with important insights and practical ideas, this book has the potential to transform your church and, in the process, to transform the lives of all who are welcomed there!”**

**ADAM HAMILTON**, Senior Pastor, The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection

**“A must-read, how-to manual for leaders committed to growing healthy and vital churches in the 21st century. It’s filled with information and inspiration to guide teams and leaders to the next level in church excellence while modeling the heart of Christ.”**

**OLU BROWN**, Lead Pastor, Impact Church



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