

# **LEADERSHIP THAT'S ABLE TO PIVOT IN A CHANGING WORLD**

**A professional project submitted to the Theological School of  
Drew University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree,  
Doctor of Ministry**

**Advisors:**

**Dr. Kimberly K. Holmes**

**Jeffrey Bryan**

**Drew University**

**Madison, New Jersey**

**May 2026**

# Abstract

This dissertation argues that the ability to pivot is an essential expression of faithful leadership in a rapidly changing world. In the wake of cultural shifts, technological disruption, declining institutional trust, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the church faces a critical moment that demands adaptive, resilient, and theologically grounded leadership. Using the pandemic as a contemporary case study, this project contends that pivoting is not a departure from tradition, but a biblical and historical pattern embedded within the life of God's people.

Through scriptural analysis, this study demonstrates that figures such as Abraham, Moses, David, the Apostle Paul, and ultimately Jesus Christ modeled leadership that responded creatively to crisis while remaining rooted in divine mission. Their witness reveals that faithfulness requires discernment, courage, and flexibility. A historical survey further shows that the church has repeatedly adapted in response to persecution, reform movements, social upheaval, and technological change. From the early church to the Reformation and into the digital age, survival and vitality have depended upon the willingness to reimagine ministry without abandoning core theological convictions.

This dissertation proposes a framework for contemporary church leadership that integrates spiritual discernment, emotional intelligence, resilience, and justice-centered mission. It concludes that the church's future vitality depends not on preserving institutional forms but on cultivating leaders capable of faithful adaptation in service to God's redemptive work in the world.

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In an era marked by unprecedented change, navigating the shifting landscapes of culture, technology, and theology demands a new kind of leadership – one that is adaptive, resilient, and grounded in unwavering faith. This dissertation, “Navigating the Winds of Change: The Church’s Call to Pivot,” offers a timely and compelling exploration of this critical need, inviting readers to embark on a journey through the past, present, and future of the Church.

Before delving into the core arguments and practical frameworks presented in the following pages, it is essential to understand the genesis of this work. As a shepherd of a church, I have sought, and I seek to deepen the faith-inspired and values-driven mindsets and skills needed to effectively lead organizations and serve communities in contemporary society, while also building lifelong supporting peer and mentoring relationships. This dissertation stems directly from that transformative experience, born out of a desire to empower congregations and communities in ways that heal divides and disrupt injustice, as compelled by the Holy Spirit and the Gospel. The insights shared here are rooted in both rigorous academic research and practical experience. Inspired by my scholarly studies in addition to my practical experience as a Pastor, I offer a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing faith leaders today.

This dissertation aims to offer something of value to those seeking to navigate the complexities of leadership in a rapidly changing world, so that those communities can foster community rooted in love, acceptance, and radical liberation. By embracing the call to pivot, we can ensure that the Church not only endures but thrives as a beacon of hope, justice, and transformative love for generations to come.

## Introduction: The Necessity of Pivoting in a Changing World

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. (Isaiah 43:18-19 NIV).

The price of doing the same old thing is far higher than the price of change.<sup>1</sup> — Bill Clinton

Faithfulness is not about resisting change, but about responding creatively to the ever-unfolding call of God in history.<sup>2</sup> — Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

From the dawn of civilization, humanity’s survival has depended on its ability to adapt and pivot in response to change. Whether facing environmental shifts, societal upheavals, or technological advancements, individuals and communities alike have had to embrace new ways of thinking and leading. Humanity has had to pivot in the way we think, and the way that we lead. Throughout history, humanity has faced critical junctures that demanded significant pivots in societal structure, technology, and belief systems. Here are a few major examples:

1. **The Neolithic Revolution (c. 10,000 BCE):** The shift from nomadic hunter-gatherer societies to settled agricultural communities marked a profound change in human history. The development of agriculture allowed for surplus food production, leading to increased population densities, the rise of villages and, eventually, cities. This pivot involved not

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Clinton, “Address to a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” February 17, 1993, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1993, Book 1* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 1994), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1993-book1/html/PPP-1993-book1-doc-pg104-3.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005).

only new technologies, but also new social structures based on land ownership and hierarchical organization.<sup>3</sup>

2. **The Axial Age (c. 8th to 3rd centuries BCE):** This period witnessed the emergence of transformative philosophical and religious ideas across the globe, from Zoroastrianism in Persia to Buddhism in India to Confucianism and Daoism in China, and the rise of Greek philosophy. These new ethical and metaphysical frameworks challenged existing social norms and power structures, prompting individuals and societies to reconsider their place in the cosmos.<sup>4</sup>
3. **The Invention of the Printing Press (15th Century CE):** Johannes Gutenberg's printing press revolutionized communication and knowledge dissemination. The ability to mass-produce books led to increased literacy rates, the spread of new ideas, and the undermining of traditional authorities who controlled access to information. This pivot paved the way for the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution.<sup>5</sup>
4. **The Scientific Revolution (16th-18th Centuries CE):** This period saw a fundamental shift in the way knowledge was acquired and validated, with an emphasis on empirical observation, experimentation, and mathematical reasoning. Figures like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton challenged long-held beliefs about the universe and the natural world, laying the foundation for modern science and technology.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Bellwood, *First Farmers: The Origins of Agricultural Societies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

5. **The Industrial Revolution (18th-19th Centuries CE):** The invention of new machines, particularly the steam engine, and the organization of labor into factories led to unprecedented levels of economic productivity. This pivot resulted in massive urbanization, the rise of new social classes, and profound changes in the environment. It also spurred new ideologies, such as capitalism and socialism, to grapple with the social and economic consequences of industrialization. Later, the Second Industrial Revolution saw further advancements leading to further urbanization, the rise of large corporations, and a consumer culture driven by mass-produced goods. It also fueled imperialism and global competition for resources and markets.<sup>7</sup>

6. **The Digital Revolution (Late 20th Century - Present):** The development of computers, the internet, and mobile devices has fundamentally transformed communication, information access, and social interaction. This pivot has led to globalization, the rise of the knowledge economy, and new forms of social and political organization. It has also raised concerns about privacy, inequality, and the spread of misinformation.<sup>8</sup>

These examples demonstrate humanity's remarkable capacity for adaptation and innovation in the face of changing circumstances. Each pivot has brought both opportunities and challenges, shaping the course of human history and paving the way for the world we live in today. These historical shifts underscore a critical leadership skill: the ability to recognize the need for transformation and act decisively. This is the essence of the word pivot. The word pivot itself originates from the Old French *pivot*, meaning "hinge" or "axis," a central point around

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<sup>7</sup> Robert C. Allen, *The Industrial Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000).

which movement occurs.<sup>9</sup> Its etymological roots trace further back to Vulgar Latin *pivottum*, emphasizing its function as a point of rotation.<sup>10</sup> In modern leadership, to pivot means to recognize the need for transformation and act decisively in response to shifting circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

History is replete with examples of pivotal moments: instances when civilizations either adapted or collapsed, and when leaders adjusted their strategies to guide their people forward. In times of crisis, successful leaders do not merely react; they anticipate, adjust, and inspire. Today's world demands this same agility, as rapid globalization, technological disruptions, and unforeseen challenges continue to redefine leadership. Understanding the essence of pivoting is crucial for leaders who seek not only to survive but to thrive in an ever-changing landscape.

## Leadership & Change: Theological and Practical Reflections

Biblical history, theological scholarship, and practical leadership wisdom affirm that adaptability is not just a secular leadership principle but a divine mandate. The Prophet Isaiah shares:

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland (Isaiah 43:18-19 NIV).

as a reminder that God is always doing something new, requiring leaders to discern and embrace transformation rather than cling to past models. Theologically, pivoting aligns with a faithfulness that is open to God's movement in history. As Suchocki argues, faithfulness is not about resisting

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<sup>9</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "pivot," accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.oed.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Etymonline*, s.v. "pivot," accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/pivot>.

<sup>11</sup> David A. Nadler, Robert B. Shaw, and A. Elise Walton, *Discontinuous Change: Leading Organizational Transformation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995.)

change but responding creatively to it.<sup>12</sup>

Leadership scholars have long recognized the necessity of change. Bill Clinton famously said that the cost of maintaining the status quo is often far greater than the cost of transformation. The difference between thriving organizations and declining ones is often the ability of leaders to recognize when and how to pivot.

This dissertation argues that the ability to pivot is an essential characteristic of effective leadership, particularly within the church. As the world continues to shift, church leaders must be prepared not only to respond to change but to lead through it. It is this leadership imperative that became undeniably evident with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which serves as a case study for how both society and the church were forced to adapt in the face of unprecedented disruption.

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<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *GOD-CHRIST-CHURCH: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1982).

# Chapter 1: The COVID-19 Pivot – A Global and Ecclesial Shift

Don't revel only in the past or spend all your time recounting the victories of days gone by. Watch closely: I am preparing something new; it's happening now, even as I speak, and you're about to see it. I am preparing a way through the desert; Waters will flow where there had been none (Isaiah 43 18-19 VOICE).

The old ways have crumbled in an instant before our eyes, and the new ways are not yet clear. It is a time of great danger but also of great opportunity. - Anonymous

What began as a seemingly distant health crisis rapidly evolved into a global disruption. This forced a re-evaluation of leadership at every level and presented the church with both unprecedented challenges and unforeseen opportunities. On February 4, 2020, the world stood on the precipice of an unprecedented shift. Even at this early stage, the emergence of COVID-19 signaled more than just a localized health concern. It was worldwide as of that date, there were already over 20,000 confirmed cases globally, primarily concentrated in China, and over 400 deaths attributed to the virus.<sup>13</sup> This nascent outbreak would soon metastasize into a global pandemic, reaching its peak in early 2021 with daily cases soaring to over 800,000 worldwide.<sup>14</sup> While the acute phase of the pandemic has subsided, COVID-19 remains an endemic threat, with thousands of cases reported globally each week and the constant emergence of new variants necessitating ongoing vigilance.<sup>15</sup> This pandemic was more than just a global health crisis; it was a watershed moment that marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. It exposed

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<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," accessed February 21, 2025, <https://covid19.who.int/>.

<sup>14</sup> Worldometer, "COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic," accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

<sup>15</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "COVID Data Tracker," accessed February 21, 2025, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>.

vulnerabilities in interconnected global systems and accelerated pre-existing trends such as digital transformation and social fragmentation.<sup>16</sup> Several elements of modern life had long been taken for granted: unrestricted human interaction, in-person gatherings, and the perceived stability of institutions. These were suddenly and irrevocably disrupted. Governments worldwide issued lockdowns, with varying degrees of stringency. China implemented some of the most severe measures, including the lockdown of Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, in late January 2020.<sup>17</sup> The United States, in contrast to the unified national response seen in many other countries, pursued a more decentralized approach. This delegation of authority allowed individual states to implement their own unique sets of restrictions. For example, while New York and California enforced early and widespread business closures and mask mandates, states like Florida and South Dakota adopted more limited interventions and emphasized individual responsibility. This state-by-state autonomy led to a highly visible patchwork of policies across the country, with neighboring states often having vastly different rules regarding gatherings, travel, and business operations, creating challenges for national coordination and public health messaging.<sup>18</sup> Businesses across the globe shuttered, with particularly devastating effects on small and medium-sized enterprises. A study by the McKinsey Global Institute estimated that up to 30% of small businesses in Asia and Europe temporarily closed during the peak of the pandemic,

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<sup>16</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Chris Buckley et al., “As Coronavirus Fears Intensify, Effectiveness of Quarantines Is Questioned,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2020, accessed February 17, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/26/world/asia/coronavirus-wuhan-china-hubei.html>.

<sup>18</sup> “Coronavirus State Actions,” *National Governors Association*, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://www.nga.org/coronavirus-state-actions-all/#NY>.

while in the United States, the number of active small businesses decreased by 22% in 2020.<sup>19</sup> The church, too, found itself in an existential crisis. While precise global figures are difficult to obtain, anecdotal evidence and studies suggest that a significant number of churches temporarily or permanently closed their doors during the pandemic, while many others rapidly shifted to online and hybrid models of worship.<sup>20</sup> This pivot raised fundamental questions: how does a body founded on communal worship function when community itself is restricted? For church leaders, the pandemic presented a *kairos* moment: a crisis that also carried an opportunity to rediscover the church's identity beyond its physical walls, to reimagine ministry in a digital age, and to deepen their commitment to serving communities in new and innovative ways.

The pandemic was not merely an event; it was a crucible that tested the adaptability of humanity, the church, and leadership at every level. As leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz articulates, effective leadership, particularly in the face of adaptive challenges, necessitates a profound understanding of the present moment and a willingness to embrace change, acknowledging that “what people resist is not change per se, but loss.” He further emphasizes the importance of responding to the present situation with improvisational ability, rather than “importing the past into the present and laying it on the current situation like an imperfect template,” and recognizing that “the most common leadership failure stems from trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges.” This requires a keen awareness of the environmental forces at play, “knowing how the environment is pulling your strings and playing you is critical

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<sup>19</sup> Matt Craven, “Covid-19: Implications for Business,” *McKinsey & Company*, April 13, 2022, accessed February 19, 2025, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/covid-19-implications-for-business>.

<sup>20</sup> Scott Thumma and Warren Bird. *Leading Hybrid Churches: The Technical, Relational, and Missional Aspects of Ministering in a Digital Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

to making responsive rather than reactive moves,” and ultimately, “exercising adaptive leadership is about giving meaning to your life beyond your own ambition.”<sup>21</sup> As a church leader, I experienced firsthand the necessity of pivoting: rethinking ministry, reimagining community, and redefining what it means to be the church. Prior to the pandemic, many congregations relied heavily on traditional, in-person worship services, small groups, and outreach programs. However, with the imposition of social distancing measures, these established modes of engagement became untenable, necessitating a rapid shift to digital platforms and virtual interactions. A survey conducted at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic found that nearly 90% of U.S. congregations had ceased in-person services by late March, with many transitioning to online streaming or video conferencing.<sup>22</sup> This abrupt transition demanded that church leaders acquire new technological skills, adapt their communication strategies, and find innovative ways to foster connection and community in a virtual environment. COVID-19 forced leaders to reassess their strategies, not just in responding to the crisis but in shaping a new way forward. As Bolman and Deal argue, effective leaders are those who can reframe situations, seeing them from multiple perspectives and adapting their approaches accordingly.<sup>23</sup> The pandemic thus became an unexpected catalyst for innovation within the church, prompting a critical examination of its mission, methods, and modes of engagement. The insights gleaned from this period of intense adaptation offer valuable lessons for navigating future disruptions and fostering resilience within

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<sup>21</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow *Adaptive Leadership: The Heifetz Collection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009), 71, 195, 199, 224.

<sup>22</sup> Gallup News. “U.S. Church Attendance Still Lower Than Pre-Pandemic.” June 26, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/507692/church-attendance-lower-pre-pandemic.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. 6th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2017).

faith communities.

## The Church's Response: A Call to Pivot

As established, the COVID-19 pandemic created a transformative watershed moment, carving a new trajectory for global systems and demanding a radical reimagining of the church's role and function. Its rapid spread exposed vulnerabilities across global systems, compelling a re-evaluation of leadership at all levels, and underscoring the urgent need for faith communities to adapt. The church's response to COVID-19 varied across denominations and traditions, but a unifying theme emerged: the need to redefine presence, community, and mission in an era of physical distancing. Scholars have noted that the pandemic exposed both the strengths and weaknesses of modern Christianity, serving as a litmus test for institutional agility and theological flexibility.<sup>24</sup> Some churches adapted quickly, leveraging technology and community-based outreach to maintain spiritual connections and serve their congregations. For instance, a study by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that 86% of surveyed congregations had moved their services online by April 2020.<sup>25</sup> However, others struggled, and continue to struggle, to maintain relevance in a time of isolation, grappling with the theological implications of virtual communion, digital discipleship, and the nature of ecclesial community in the absence of physical gathering.<sup>26</sup>

Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff posits that significant societal crises, such as the

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<sup>24</sup> Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Christian Vision for the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Scott Thumma, "Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview." Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2021, [https://hirr.hartfordinternational.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Scott\\_Thumma\\_CV.pdf](https://hirr.hartfordinternational.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Scott_Thumma_CV.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, ed. *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation*. (Digital Religion Publications, 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic, act as powerful catalysts that expose the inherent vulnerabilities within traditional, hierarchical religious structures. These structures often concentrate authority, decision-making, and resources at the top, relying on established channels and physical infrastructure to disseminate guidance and maintain communal life. When a crisis disrupts these established norms through lockdowns, social distancing, or the physical inability to gather, the limitations of this top-down model become starkly apparent. Boff argues that in such moments, the reliance on centralized leadership can hinder swift and contextually relevant responses at the local level. The needs and realities of individual communities can vary greatly, and a rigid, hierarchical system may struggle to adapt its directives and support mechanisms quickly enough to address these diverse needs effectively.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, when physical gatherings are impossible, the traditional means of maintaining community and transmitting religious practice are undermined, revealing a potential over-dependence on these physical manifestations of faith.

In contrast, Boff advocates for a more “grassroots, community-based faith.”<sup>28</sup> This model emphasizes the agency and resources within local faith communities, empowering individuals and smaller groups to respond directly to their immediate context. It suggests that the *fullness of faith* is discovered not solely through adherence to top-down directives but through the lived experiences of solidarity and mutual support within the community. During a crisis, this decentralized approach can foster more agile and compassionate responses, as communities draw on their own internal strengths and understanding of local needs to care for their members and reach out to others. The crisis, therefore, serves as a stark reminder of the potential limitations of

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<sup>27</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 1985.

overly centralized power structures in the face of unforeseen challenges and underscores the resilience and adaptability inherent in empowered local communities of faith.

Consider the Great Schism of 1054.<sup>29</sup> For centuries, the Bishop of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople, heads of their respective church structures, found their theological paths diverging, their liturgical practices distinct, and their political allegiances pulling them apart. When mutual excommunications were finally exchanged, the established hierarchy, meant to be a unifying force, fractured along pre-existing fault lines, unable to contain the growing chasm between East and West. The very structure designed for unity became a stark display of division under the pressure of cultural and theological drift.

Centuries later, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century erupted.<sup>30</sup> The centralized authority of the Catholic Church, burdened by perceived corruption and a disconnect from the spiritual needs of many, could not contain the dissenting voices of figures like Martin Luther. His challenge to papal authority, fueled by a desire for a more direct relationship with scripture and a less mediated faith, ignited a movement that shattered the religious landscape of Europe. The once seemingly monolithic hierarchy proved fragile when confronted with a widespread yearning for a more personally accessible and scripturally grounded faith, leading to the emergence of diverse Protestant denominations.

More recently, the digital shift, accelerated but not solely caused by events like the COVID-19 pandemic, presents a different kind of challenge to traditional hierarchies. The internet and social media have democratized access to information and fostered the formation of

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<sup>29</sup> John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 35-55; Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1997), 63-87.

<sup>30</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1990), 15-105.

online communities that often bypass traditional gatekeepers of religious knowledge and authority.<sup>31</sup> Individuals can now access diverse theological perspectives, engage in peer-to-peer religious discussions, and even participate in virtual forms of worship outside the purview of established institutions. This shift reveals a potential fragility in hierarchical control over religious discourse and communal formation in an age where digital connectivity offers alternative avenues for spiritual exploration and belonging. The nascent integration of Artificial Intelligence into various aspects of life,<sup>32</sup> including potential theological interpretations and even the creation of religious content, introduces a further layer of decentralization, raising questions about authority and the very nature of religious experience in a future where AI might play a more significant role.

This perspective aligns with the concept of the pandemic as a kairos moment—a moment of grace and crisis when God’s future intersects with our present, demanding a decision. Henri Nouwen eloquently captures the essence of such moments: “the old ways have crumbled in an instant before our eyes, and the new ways are not yet clear. It is a time of great danger, but also of great opportunity.”<sup>33</sup> This opportunity, as theologian N.T. Wright suggests, invites the church to re-examine its fundamental purpose and activities beyond the confines of its physical structures.<sup>34</sup> The pandemic, by restricting gatherings within church buildings, inadvertently pushed the church to consider: Where is the church when the building is closed? What does it

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<sup>31</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 1-35, 145-168.

<sup>32</sup> Beth Singler, *Religion and Artificial Intelligence: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2024).

<sup>33</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 87.

<sup>34</sup> N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic* (Orlando, FL: SPCK, 2020); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 215.

mean to *be* the church when traditional forms of gathering are impossible? Wright's insight points to a rediscovery of the church's calling not primarily as a place one attends, but as a dynamic and active body of believers whose mission extends into the world.<sup>35</sup> This necessitates a shift in focus from maintaining the institution to embodying Christ's presence and work within the everyday spaces of human life—in homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and online communities.

This call to move beyond physical walls powerfully echoes Jürgen Moltmann's profound vision of the church as a community of hope actively living *in the world*.<sup>36</sup> For Moltmann, hope is not a passive waiting but an active orientation towards God's promised future, a future that compels believers to engage with the present realities of suffering and injustice. When the church understands itself as a community of hope *in the world*, its primary location is not the sanctuary but the spaces where hope is needed most.<sup>37</sup> The pandemic, with its widespread suffering, isolation, and uncertainty, starkly illuminated this need. Moltmann's perspective suggests that the church's true calling is to be a visible and active source of hope amidst despair, a community that embodies the coming Kingdom of God through acts of love, justice, and compassion in the world.<sup>38</sup> Wright's emphasis on moving beyond the building provides a practical avenue for embodying Moltmann's theological vision: by being present and engaged in the world, the

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<sup>35</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1973, 154.

<sup>36</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 337.

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 327-328.

<sup>38</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 277-278; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 2015.

church becomes a tangible sign and instrument of hope. The forced dispersal during the pandemic thus became an unexpected invitation to live out this fundamental identity.

This call to move beyond physical walls powerfully echoes Moltmann's profound vision of the church as a community of hope actively living in the world. For Moltmann, hope is not a passive waiting but an active orientation towards God's promised future, a future that compels believers to engage with the present realities of suffering and injustice. When the church understands itself as a community of hope *in the world*, its primary location is not the sanctuary but the spaces where hope is needed most. The pandemic, with its widespread suffering, isolation, and uncertainty, starkly illuminated this need. Moltmann's perspective suggests that the church's true calling is to be a visible and active source of hope amidst despair, a community that embodies the coming Kingdom of God through acts of love, justice, and compassion in the world.<sup>39</sup> Wright's emphasis on moving beyond the building provides a practical avenue for embodying Moltmann's theological vision: by being present and engaged in the world, the Church becomes a tangible sign and instrument of hope. The forced dispersal during the pandemic thus became an unexpected invitation to live out this fundamental identity. The transformative potential of such moments resonates with Tillich's understanding of history as punctuated by periods where fundamental shifts occur, allowing for a reinterpretation and revitalization of existing realities.<sup>40</sup> Such a paradigm shift requires a radical openness to the Spirit and a willingness to take risks. It has catalyzed a shift from institution-centered ministry to

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<sup>39</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 1993.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2022); Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 178.

mission-driven discipleship, challenging church leaders to pivot their approach to faith and community.

## The Digital Church and Hybrid Ministry

Churches in the Northeast, particularly within the dense urban landscape of New York City, which had long thrived on the rhythm of in-person gatherings and the physical presence of their congregations, faced an abrupt and profound challenge with the onset of the pandemic. The swift implementation of lockdown measures and restrictions on indoor gatherings compelled these institutions, many deeply rooted in tradition and communal physicality, to rapidly embrace a hybrid model of engagement.<sup>41</sup> This transition was not a seamless adoption of new technologies for mere convenience; rather, it became a critical imperative for institutional survival and the maintenance of any semblance of connection with their dispersed members in an increasingly digitized society.<sup>42</sup> Internally, many congregations grappled with significant struggles. The sudden shift strained financial resources as in-person giving declined and new technological infrastructure demanded investment ("COVID-19's Impact on Giving: A Special Report" 2020). Leadership teams wrestled with the ethical and theological implications of virtualizing sacred practices, often leading to internal debates and anxieties about maintaining the authenticity of worship and community.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the digital divide within their own congregations became starkly apparent, as not all members possessed the necessary technology

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<sup>41</sup> Samuel G. Freedman, "New York's Houses of Worship Confront a Crisis of Faith and Finances," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2020, sec. New York.

<sup>42</sup> Scott Humma, and Warren Bird, *Pandemic Pivot: How Churches and Faith-Based Organizations Navigated Coronavirus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 25-42.

<sup>43</sup> John Swinton, "Theology in a Time of Pandemic," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 24, no. 2 (2020): 137-51.

or digital literacy to fully participate in online offerings, creating new forms of exclusion and pastoral challenges.<sup>44</sup>

This rapid and widespread adoption of technology raised fundamental questions that many churches in NYC and beyond had to confront head-on. The main issues and snafus included: the digital divide and ensuring equitable access for all members; technical difficulties with streaming, sound, and online platforms that often disrupted worship experiences; maintaining a sense of genuine community and belonging in virtual spaces, combating feelings of isolation and detachment; theological debates surrounding virtual sacraments, particularly communion and baptism, and their validity or appropriate practice online; pastoral care challenges in reaching and supporting vulnerable members remotely, identifying needs, and providing meaningful connection; volunteer fatigue as staff and lay leaders stretched themselves to learn new technologies and adapt ministries; and security and privacy concerns related to online platforms and data management.<sup>45</sup>

Theologians and church leaders engaged in robust debates concerning whether the move toward online worship diluted the essence of communal faith, potentially fostering a sense of detachment and passivity among congregants, or whether it served to expand the reach of the Gospel, creating new avenues for evangelism and discipleship in a digitally connected world.<sup>46</sup>

This tension between the preservation of tradition and the embrace of innovation became a defining characteristic of the church's response to the pandemic. Throughout history, the

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<sup>44</sup> Kathryn Reklis, "The Digital Divide in the Church," *The Christian Century*, July 8, 2020, 18–21.

<sup>45</sup> Campbell, Heidi A. 2020. "What Happened to Online Christian Community During COVID-19?" *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 9 (2): 1-10.

<sup>46</sup> Heidi Campbell Howard and John Dyer, eds., *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church: Theological Reflections on a New Normal* (London: SCM Press, 2022).

church has consistently navigated this dynamic, often with profound consequences. For example, the deeply entrenched traditions that upheld the institution of *enslavement in America* faced radical challenges from abolitionist movements rooted in a more innovative interpretation of Christian ethics emphasizing human dignity and equality. The struggle forced a confrontation between long-held social and theological traditions and a burgeoning understanding of justice.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the *Civil Rights Movement*, advocating for the equality and liberation of marginalized groups – including Black and Brown people, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community – directly challenged traditional interpretations of scripture and social order that had historically justified discrimination. This era saw a powerful tension between the preservation of discriminatory traditions and the innovative embrace of a more inclusive and just understanding of God's love and the inherent worth of all individuals.<sup>48</sup> Even the ministry of Jesus himself was marked by this tension. His teachings and actions, such as healing on the Sabbath<sup>49</sup> and associating with those considered social outcasts,<sup>50</sup> directly challenged the rigid interpretations of Jewish law and tradition held by the religious authorities of his time. Jesus's ministry represented an innovative approach to fulfilling the spirit of the law over its strict letter, often leading to conflict with those

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<sup>47</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970).

<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 127–146.

<sup>49</sup> Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus (Mark 6:1-6 NIV).

<sup>50</sup> Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. **2** But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:1-2 NIV).

who prioritized the preservation of established customs.<sup>51</sup>

Theologians and church leaders engaged in robust debates concerning whether the move toward online worship diluted the essence of communal faith, potentially fostering a sense of detachment and passivity among congregants, or whether it served to expand the reach of the Gospel, creating new avenues for evangelism and discipleship in a digitally connected world.<sup>52</sup> This tension between the preservation of tradition and the embrace of innovation became a defining characteristic of the church's response to the pandemic.

Some churches, however, discovered unforeseen opportunities for outreach, connecting with individuals who had been previously disconnected from traditional religious spaces.<sup>53</sup> The online format demonstrably increased accessibility, particularly for individuals with disabilities who may have faced architectural barriers in physical church buildings, those residing in geographically remote areas with limited access to religious communities, and those who had historically experienced exclusion from traditional church structures due to factors such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.<sup>54</sup> This expanded reach challenged conventional notions of church membership and participation, prompting a re-evaluation of inclusivity and belonging within faith communities.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted the church's latent potential to serve as a

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<sup>51</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Howard and Dyer, eds. *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church*, 2022, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Abigail R. Garner, *Politics and the Pulpit: Progressive Rhetoric During Contentious Times* (Minneapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

prophetic voice for justice in a world rife with oppression, a tangible community of agape love in a world saturated with hatred, and an active agent of reconciliation, mending the fractured bonds of society and fostering unity amidst division.<sup>56</sup> As Root aptly observes: “The question is not whether the church will change, but how it will discern its identity in the midst of change,”<sup>57</sup> thereby underscoring the critical importance of intentionality and theological reflection in navigating this period of transformation. This discernment necessitates a careful examination of the church’s historical witness, its core values, and its ongoing commitment to embodying the liberating and reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ in an ever-evolving cultural landscape.<sup>58</sup>

## Defining the Church: The Ecclesia in a Post-Pandemic World

As the world gradually emerges from the acute phase of the pandemic, the church confronts an existential and fundamentally urgent question: What does it truly mean to *be* the church in this transformed landscape? The answer resides not primarily in physical structures or adherence to traditional practices, but in a renewed commitment to its core identity. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. Etymologically, it signifies “the called-out ones” — a dynamic and dispersed body of believers, not rigidly bound by architectural walls but intentionally united in a shared mission.<sup>59</sup> Jesus himself, in his encounter with the Samaritan woman, prophetically redefined worship as transcending geographical location: “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a

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<sup>56</sup> James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 187; Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 78.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Root, *The Church After Innovation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (Colossians 3:11 NIV). Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right (Acts 10:34-35 NIV).

time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem (John 4:21 NIV).” The early church, as depicted in the Book of Acts, embodied this expansive concept, gathering in homes, catacombs, and open public spaces — wherever conditions allowed for the flourishing of authentic community and the dynamic pursuit of its divinely ordained mission (Acts 2:42-47).<sup>60</sup> If the COVID-19 pandemic has imparted any enduring lesson, it is that the church is not fundamentally a place but a people, not merely an institution but a Spirit-led movement, and not simply a collection of individuals but a collective embodiment of the Kingdom of God on earth.<sup>61</sup>

Ultimately, the COVID-19 crisis calls for leaders who are not only willing but also adept at pivoting, exhibiting the capacity to embrace change as an opportunity for renewal without relinquishing their grounding in the church’s enduring mission. Indeed, just as the early church demonstrated remarkable resilience in adapting to periods of intense persecution, navigating complex cultural shifts, and engaging in rigorous theological disputes, today’s church must now navigate a world irrevocably altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant challenges and unforeseen possibilities,<sup>62</sup> further complicated by the pervasive uncertainty, social unrest, and divisive rhetoric increasingly prevalent within the American political landscape, raising

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<sup>60</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47 NIV).

<sup>61</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2019).

concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian tendencies.<sup>63</sup> This imperative to adapt, however, is not without historical precedent. This reality, therefore, sets the stage for the subsequent discussion, which will explore how the church has historically navigated pivotal moments, tracing a lineage of adaptation from biblical times to the present day, and gleaning invaluable lessons for contemporary leadership in an ever-changing world. Thus, we will next turn to Scripture, examining key biblical narratives and figures who exemplified the art of pivoting, providing a foundation for understanding how faith communities can remain resilient and relevant in the face of unprecedented challenges.

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<sup>63</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt *How Democracies Die* (New York, NY: Crown, 2018).

# Chapter 2: Biblical Precedents for Pivoting – Lessons from Scripture

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14 NIV).

The church exists primarily for two closely correlated purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world. The church also exists to encourage one another, to build one another in the faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn from one another and teach one another, and to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent tasks to perform.<sup>64</sup> — N. T. Wright

## Pivoting as a Biblical Imperative

Throughout the sweeping narrative of biblical history, God’s people have been consistently summoned to embrace pivotal moments of profound crisis, unsettling uncertainty, and transformative change. This call to adaptability is not presented as a mere pragmatic response to circumstance, but rather as a fundamental dimension of covenant faithfulness. From Abraham’s radical departure into the unknown, leaving behind his ancestral homeland and familiar kinship ties in obedience to a divine summons (Genesis 12:1-4),<sup>65</sup> to the early church’s courageous and often contentious expansion beyond the circumscribed boundaries of Jewish tradition and cultural norms, embracing a universal vision of salvation for all peoples (Acts

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<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran (Genesis 12:1-4 NIV).

10:9-16),<sup>66</sup> Scripture resoundingly reveals that authentic faith is not a static adherence to fixed doctrines or immutable practices; rather, it is a dynamic, ever-evolving journey that necessitates continuous movement, courageous adaptation, and unwavering trust in God's unfolding plan for humanity.<sup>67</sup> This understanding of faith as a dynamic process challenges the allure of rigid ideologies, whether religious or political, that seek to impose a fixed order upon a complex and ever-changing world, mirroring the contemporary tensions within the American political landscape where polarized factions struggle for dominance.

In the crucible of change, biblical leaders were not afforded the luxury of complacency. They were compelled to make decisive shifts in strategy, mindset, and mode of engagement, not merely for the sake of institutional survival but, more significantly, for the faithful fulfillment of God's overarching purpose. These transformative moments of transition were not simply reactive responses to external pressures; rather, they were divinely orchestrated opportunities to step into a grander, more expansive calling, often requiring a profound re-evaluation of deeply held assumptions and cherished traditions. Just as the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the contemporary church to critically reimagine its mission beyond the familiar confines of the physical sanctuary, exploring new avenues for connection, service, and witness in an increasingly digital and socially distanced world, Scripture consistently demonstrates that God often calls His people to fundamentally redefine their understanding of faith, leadership, and

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<sup>66</sup> About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*" This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven (Acts 10:9-16 NIV).

<sup>67</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 23.

community, challenging them to transcend the limitations of their own perspectives and embrace a more inclusive and transformative vision of the Kingdom of God.<sup>68</sup>

## Abraham: Leaving the Familiar for the Unseen

One of the most foundational biblical exemplars of a divinely initiated pivot is found in the seminal narrative of Abraham, whose life trajectory was irrevocably altered by a singular, audacious command. In Genesis 12:1, God issues an unambiguous directive to Abraham, compelling him to sever ties with his ancestral homeland and embark on a perilous journey to an as-yet-undisclosed land:

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1 NIV).”

This summons represented far more than a mere relocation; it constituted a radical disruption of Abraham’s established existence, demanding that he relinquish the security of his familiar surroundings, the comfort of his kinship networks, and the predictability of his cultural traditions. Abraham lacked a meticulously detailed itinerary or a comprehensive strategic plan, receiving instead a promise that functioned as a guarantee of divine guidance and future blessing. This promise was predicated entirely upon his unwavering obedience and unreserved trust in God’s providential care. His courageous pivot, therefore, served to establish the very bedrock of the covenantal relationship between God and His chosen people, prefiguring the ongoing call to faith-based action and transformative discipleship that would characterize the Abrahamic lineage for generations to come.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014.)

<sup>69</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002).

Much like Abraham, the contemporary church, in the wake of the cataclysmic COVID-19 pandemic and amidst the rising tides of political polarization and social unrest, has been thrust into a liminal space, compelled to relinquish long-held assumptions and conventional methodologies regarding the practice of ministry and the very nature of ecclesial community. This is not a summons to abandon the core tenets of the Christian faith or to jettison the accumulated wisdom of centuries of tradition; rather, it is an invitation to boldly reimagine the church's role in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world, trusting that God's redemptive purposes will continue to be fulfilled, even when the familiar structures and routines of the past are no longer viable or relevant.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, this reimagining must extend beyond mere adaptation to technological innovation or shifts in worship styles; it must encompass a critical re-evaluation of power dynamics, systemic injustices, and historical patterns of exclusion that have often marred the church's witness, dismantling oppressive structures and promoting radical inclusivity.<sup>71</sup>

## Joseph: From Pit to Palace, A Leadership Pivot

The epic narrative of Joseph, immortalized in the annals of Genesis, stands as an enduring testament to the transformative power of strategic pivoting in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. Wantonly betrayed by his own brothers, driven by envy and malice, and subsequently sold into the dehumanizing bondage of chattel slavery,<sup>72</sup> Joseph could have

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<sup>70</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> Joseph's brothers plot to kill him when he arrives at Shechem, but Reuben persuades them to throw him into a cistern instead. Later, Judah suggests selling Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites, and they sell him for twenty shekels of silver (Genesis 37:12-28 NIV).

understandably succumbed to the crushing weight of despair, allowing bitterness and resentment to corrode his spirit. Instead, with remarkable resilience and unwavering faith, he chose to embrace a proactive posture of adaptability at every successive stage of his tumultuous journey: from his initial servitude in the household of Potiphar, where he quickly ascended to a position of trusted authority and responsibility,<sup>73</sup> to his unjust imprisonment, where he nonetheless distinguished himself through his exceptional character and administrative acumen,<sup>74</sup> and ultimately to his unprecedented elevation to the apex of power in Pharaoh's opulent court, becoming the second-most powerful figure in all of Egypt.<sup>75</sup>

Each successive shift in Joseph's extraordinary life was not merely a matter of reactive survival, a desperate attempt to mitigate the deleterious effects of unforeseen circumstances; rather, it was an intentional process of proactive preparation, a divinely orchestrated series of trials designed to hone his leadership skills, refine his character, and equip him for an even greater purpose yet to be revealed. What initially appeared to be devastating setbacks and insurmountable obstacles were, in fact, strategic setups meticulously designed to position him for

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<sup>73</sup> Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate (Genesis 39:1-6 NIV).

<sup>74</sup> Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did (Genesis 39:20-23 NIV).

<sup>75</sup> Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream, explaining that seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of severe famine. He advises Pharaoh to appoint a wise leader to store grain during the years of abundance. Pharaoh, impressed by Joseph's wisdom, appoints him to oversee all of Egypt, giving him authority second only to Pharaoh's own. (Genesis 41:14-44).

a future role of unparalleled influence and transformative leadership. By the time the prophesied famine descended upon the land, threatening to engulf entire nations in starvation and chaos, Joseph found himself uniquely positioned to avert disaster, implementing visionary policies that not only saved countless lives but also consolidated Egypt's power and secured its long-term prosperity, including saving his own family from certain starvation.

In a moment of profound reconciliation with his brothers, Joseph poignantly reflects upon the seemingly random events that had shaped his life, revealing a deeper, more purposeful design at work:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives (Genesis 50:20 NIV).

Joseph's timeless story serves as a potent reminder that every crisis, regardless of its magnitude or apparent senselessness, carries within it the latent potential for divine realignment, a hidden opportunity for transformative growth and redemptive action. For contemporary church leaders, grappling with the multifaceted challenges of a post-pandemic world and navigating the treacherous currents of political polarization and social division, the COVID-19 pandemic represents far more than a mere interruption of established routines or a temporary setback to institutional growth; it is a profound invitation to fundamentally rethink the very nature of leadership, service, and mission, dismantling oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality and promoting radical inclusivity in all aspects of church life because, living out the embodiment of agape love is profoundly political.<sup>76</sup> Just as Joseph's unwavering faith and strategic adaptability enabled him to transcend the limitations of his circumstances and embrace a future of

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<sup>76</sup> Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2018).

unprecedented influence, so too can today's church leaders, by embracing a spirit of courageous innovation and unwavering commitment to justice, transform the present crisis into a catalyst for transformative change and redemptive action, embodying the very character and mission of Christ in an ever-changing world.

## Moses: Leading Through Uncertainty

The divinely orchestrated commissioning of Moses at the burning bush,<sup>77</sup> meticulously chronicled in the Book of Exodus,<sup>78</sup> serves as a paradigmatic illustration of a pivotal moment in biblical history, underscoring the indispensable qualities of adaptive leadership in the face of daunting uncertainty. A man who had previously fled from the oppressive regime of Egypt, content to lead a relatively tranquil existence as a shepherd in the remote wilderness of Midian, was now thrust into the unbidden role of leading an entire nation, generations removed from their ancestral homeland, out of the cruel shackles of unrelenting bondage. This audacious task demanded not only exceptional courage and unwavering conviction but also remarkable agility, adaptability, and a profound capacity to navigate unforeseen challenges and recalibrate strategies in response to ever-shifting circumstances.

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 3:11 NIV)?”

Moses' protracted leadership odyssey was replete with pivotal moments, each requiring a

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<sup>77</sup> *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, “Editorial: Fire regimes in desert ecosystems: Drivers, impacts and changes,” *Front. Ecol. Evol.* 10 (2022), doi: 10.3389/fevo.2022.968031. In arid environments, it is not unusual for dry vegetation to catch fire, often sparked by lightning. However, what is remarkable about the bush Moses encountered was its ability to continue burning without being consumed.

<sup>78</sup> Moses, tending his father-in-law's sheep, encounters a burning bush where God calls him to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. God reveals Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and commands Moses to return to Egypt and free the Israelites. Moses questions his ability to carry out this task. (Exodus 3: 1-11 NIV)?

strategic pivot and a renewed commitment to the overarching divine vision:

- **Confronting Pharaoh** with a series of awe-inspiring signs and wonders, challenging the very foundations of his authority and power (Exodus 7-11).
- **Miraculously leading the Israelites** across the treacherous expanse of the Red Sea, defying the seemingly immutable laws of nature and delivering them from the pursuing Egyptian army (Exodus 14).
- **Wisely adjusting his overburdened leadership** structure at the sage advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, delegating responsibility and empowering others to share in the arduous task of governance (Exodus 18:13-26).
- **Patiently navigating the Israelites' incessant complaints** and addressing the myriad crises that arose during their protracted sojourn in the unforgiving wilderness, demonstrating remarkable resilience and unwavering commitment to their well-being (Numbers 11).

At every successive stage of his transformative journey, Moses was compelled to adapt his strategies, recalibrate his expectations, and make difficult decisions, all while remaining firmly rooted in the unwavering conviction of God's overarching vision for His people. The contemporary church, navigating the complex terrain of a post-pandemic world and grappling with the pervasive challenges of political polarization, social fragmentation, and the erosion of public trust, faces remarkably analogous challenges.<sup>79</sup> Leading in such a volatile and unpredictable environment necessitates a willingness to embrace necessary adjustments, experiment with innovative approaches, and dismantle oppressive structures that perpetuate

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<sup>79</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

inequality, all while remaining steadfastly faithful to the church's core mission of proclaiming the Gospel, fostering community, and embodying the love and justice of Christ.<sup>80</sup> Moses' example shows how faith calls for action in any political climate, even if one is standing up to what seems like a kind.

## Paul: The Apostle of Adaptability

The life and ministry of the Apostle Paul stand as a compelling embodiment of what it truly means to embrace adaptability as an essential component of effective Christian leadership. As a former Pharisee, deeply entrenched in the traditions and legalistic interpretations of Judaism, Paul's dramatic transformation on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19) represents a profound personal pivot, a radical reorientation of his entire worldview and life's purpose.<sup>81</sup> However, beyond this singular moment of conversion, Paul's entire ministry was characterized by a remarkable capacity to adapt his message, his methods, and his approach to diverse cultural contexts, all for the sake of advancing the Gospel and reaching those who might otherwise remain alienated from the Christian faith.

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Corinthians 9:22 NIV).

The ministry of Paul provides a compelling case study in the necessity of cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness. By tailoring his presentation to his specific environment through a range of settings, such as the religious synagogue, the intellectual marketplace, and the dire conditions

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<sup>80</sup> Shane Claiborne and Anthony Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Saul, on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, is blinded by a heavenly light and hears the voice of Jesus asking why he persecutes Him. After three days of blindness, Ananias is sent to restore Saul's sight and baptize him, marking his conversion (Acts 9:1-19).

of a Roman prison, Paul modeled an indispensable flexibility. This apostolic pattern serves as a mandate for modern practitioners to remain equally responsive to their own unique ministry contexts.

The contemporary church, navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world marked by technological disruption, political polarization, and increasing cultural diversity, must proactively adopt Paul's adaptive mindset, striving to meet people where they are, rather than insisting upon rigid adherence to pre-pandemic models of ministry or clinging to outdated cultural assumptions.<sup>82</sup> This requires a willingness to embrace innovative approaches, experiment with new technologies, and engage in authentic dialogue with those who hold differing perspectives, all while remaining firmly grounded in the unchanging truths of the Gospel and the unwavering commitment to embodying the love and justice of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the post-pandemic church must seek to dismantle oppressive structures both inside and outside the walls of the church and to create a space that promotes radical inclusivity for any who seek to follow Christ. If the church seeks to remain the "called-out ones," then it must be willing to change.

## Jesus: The Ultimate Pivot in Ministry

The earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth represents the ultimate paradigm shift in the history of humanity, embodying a profound and multifaceted pivot that challenged the very foundations of religious, social, and political norms. Unlike many religious leaders who sought to reinforce existing power structures and maintain the status quo, Jesus consistently disrupted conventional expectations, redefined long-held assumptions, and reimagined the very nature of

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<sup>82</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

worship, leadership, and community.

## The Sermon on the Mount: Reframing the Law

Jesus embarks upon a radical reinterpretation of the Mosaic Law within the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). In doing so, he confronts the legalistic interpretations favored by the religious establishment of his day. By prioritizing the underlying spirit of the Law, Jesus highlights a divine mandate for justice, mercy, and compassion that transcends a merely rigid adherence to its literal prescriptions.<sup>83</sup>

- You have heard that it was said... But I tell you... (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32 NIV).

This audacious act of reframing required Jesus' followers to fundamentally rethink their understanding of righteousness, justice, and love, moving beyond a superficial conformity to external rules and embracing a deeper commitment to internal transformation and ethical action. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the rise of political polarization and social unrest, has compelled the contemporary church to shift away from rigid organizational structures and outdated ministry models, embracing a more fluid, adaptable, and mission-centered approach that prioritizes the needs of the marginalized, challenges systemic injustices, and promotes radical inclusivity in all aspects of church life.

## The Great Commission: A Missional Pivot

Prior to His ascension into heaven, Jesus issued a transformative mandate to His disciples, commanding them to transcend the geographical and cultural boundaries of Jewish communities and carry the life-giving message of the Gospel to all nations:

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<sup>83</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

- Go and make disciples of all nations... (Matthew 28:19).

This represented a monumental shift in missional strategy, requiring the disciples to venture beyond their familiar comfort zones, embrace cultural diversity, and proclaim the Good News to people of all ethnicities, languages, and social backgrounds. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant travel restrictions and social distancing protocols, has compelled the modern church to embrace a similar expansion of its missional reach, utilizing technology, digital discipleship platforms, and decentralized ministry models to connect with a global audience and extend the transformative power of the Gospel to the farthest corners of the earth.<sup>84</sup>

## The Church's Biblical Mandate to Pivot

The resounding chorus of voices echoing throughout the sacred texts of the Bible—from the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament to the apostles and early church leaders of the New Testament — unambiguously affirms that God's people have always been called to embrace adaptability, embrace change, and place their unwavering trust in His divine guidance, even when the path ahead appears shrouded in uncertainty and fraught with peril. Whether navigating the uncharted territories of the ancient world, as exemplified by Abraham's courageous journey of faith, or confronting the entrenched injustices of oppressive regimes, as demonstrated by Moses' unwavering commitment to liberating the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, or boldly proclaiming the revolutionary message of the Gospel to a world steeped in religious and cultural diversity, as embodied by the apostle Paul's tireless ministry, strategic pivoting has consistently served as an indispensable component of authentic faith and effective leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its far-reaching consequences and unprecedented challenges, represents but the

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<sup>84</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

latest in a long line of transformative moments that have compelled the church to re-evaluate its priorities, reimagine its methods, and reaffirm its unwavering commitment to fulfilling its divinely ordained mission in an ever-changing world.

Contemporary church leaders currently navigate the complex and often turbulent currents of a post-pandemic world. They must grapple with the pervasive challenges of political polarization, social fragmentation, and a significant erosion of public trust. In this climate, the critical question is not whether the church will undergo transformation, as change remains an inherent and unavoidable reality of the human condition. Rather, the challenge lies in how the church will intentionally embrace this process while remaining firmly aligned with God's eternal purposes and the timeless values of the Gospel. Like Abraham, we must summon the courage to step out into the unknown, trusting that God will provide the necessary guidance and resources to navigate the uncharted territories that lie ahead. Like Joseph, we must cultivate the capacity to perceive crises as opportunities for growth, transformation, and redemptive action, recognizing that even the most devastating setbacks can be divinely orchestrated setups for greater Kingdom impact. Like Moses, we must lead with unwavering faith and resolute conviction, even when confronted with seemingly insurmountable obstacles and facing relentless opposition from those who seek to undermine our efforts.

Like Paul, we must cultivate a spirit of adaptability, embracing innovative approaches and challenging traditional assumptions to effectively communicate the unchanging truths of the Gospel to a diverse and ever-changing world. This cultivation of adaptability finds resonance throughout scripture and theological history. For instance, the Prophet Isaiah, witnessing the exile and despair of his people, conveyed a message of radical newness from God: “Forget the

former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland (Isaiah 43:18-19 NIV).” This divine initiative demanded a profound shift in perspective, urging the people to release their rigid expectations and embrace God’s unexpected and innovative ways of redemption.

Similarly, the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30)<sup>85</sup> powerfully illustrates the need for adaptable thinking. Initially hesitant to extend his ministry beyond the house of Israel, Jesus responds to the woman’s persistent faith and her insightful analogy – “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs (Mark 7:28 NIV)” – by acknowledging the validity of her request and healing her daughter. This pivotal moment demonstrates Jesus’ willingness to transcend traditional boundaries and assumptions about who is worthy of God’s grace, showcasing an adaptable heart moved by genuine faith.

Theological giants throughout history have also emphasized this spirit of adaptability. Martin Luther, in the context of the Reformation, challenged centuries of established church tradition to return to what he perceived as the core truths of scripture.<sup>86</sup> His willingness to innovate in theological interpretation and church practice, despite significant opposition, underscores the necessity of re-evaluating tradition in light of evolving understanding. Paul Tillich, writing in a different context, similarly highlighted the dynamic interplay between the eternal truth and its temporal expression, suggesting that the unchanging message of faith must

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<sup>85</sup> A woman from Phoenicia begs Jesus to heal her daughter possessed by a demon. Despite an initial spurning, she responds with faith, and Jesus tells her the demon has left her daughter (Mark 7:24-30).

<sup>86</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, Inc., 2011).

find new forms and language to remain relevant in changing cultural landscapes.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, liberation theologies, emerging from contexts of oppression, consistently call for an adaptable hermeneutic, challenging traditional interpretations of scripture that have been used to justify injustice and advocating for readings that empower the marginalized and promote liberation.<sup>88</sup> These diverse voices, across centuries and contexts, underscore the vital importance of a flexible and innovative spirit in faithfully engaging with the world. Above all, like Jesus, we must embody the very essence of transformative leadership, challenging oppressive structures, championing the cause of the marginalized, and promoting radical inclusivity in all aspects of church life, ensuring that the church remains a beacon of hope, healing, and justice in a world desperately in need of God's redemptive love.

In conclusion, the church's biblical mandate to pivot is not merely a pragmatic response to external pressures or a strategic maneuver to ensure institutional survival; rather, it is a profound expression of covenant faithfulness, a tangible demonstration of our unwavering commitment to embodying the very character and mission of Christ in an ever-changing world. This commitment to adapt and remain relevant is deeply rooted in the covenant relationship between God and humanity. Covenant faithfulness, in this context, suggests a divine-human parallel. God consistently met humanity within its evolving circumstances, as seen in the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and finally the new covenant in Christ. Consequently, the Church must mirror this faithfulness. As God's covenant people, the Church is called to

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<sup>87</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>88</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

actively engage and minister within the specific contexts it currently inhabits.<sup>89</sup> This requires a dynamic and responsive posture, willing to shed outdated forms and embrace new methods to faithfully communicate the enduring message of the Gospel.

The history of the Black Church in America offers a powerful example of this covenant faithfulness in action. Facing the brutal realities of slavery and systemic oppression, the Black Church was compelled to pivot and innovate in its expression of faith. It developed unique forms of worship, spirituals that encoded messages of hope and resistance, and became a central organizing force for social justice and liberation.<sup>90</sup> This adaptation was not a compromise of their faith but a profound embodiment of it, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to the liberation and dignity that are central to the Christian message, even when dominant societal structures and traditions actively denied these truths. The Black Church's ability to pivot in response to immense cultural and theological shifts underscores that covenant faithfulness demands a willingness to be contextually relevant and to embody Christ's mission of justice and liberation in tangible ways. With the church as the "called-out ones," it must remember its duty to God. Thus, with the gifts God has bestowed on us, and being the "called-out one" to speak to liberation, the future chapters will bring light to how the church is responsible to pivot, for future generations. This foundation sets the stage for the next discussion, which will explore how historical church movements have pivoted in response to cultural and theological shifts, and what lessons can be drawn for contemporary leadership.

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<sup>89</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

<sup>90</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).



## Chapter 3: The COVID-19 Pivot – A Global and Ecclesial Shift

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved (Matthew 9:16-17 NRSV).

The Word of God is always spoken to man in a particular time and place. It is never spoken abstractly or generally, but always concretely, as God's address to man in his here and now.<sup>91</sup> — Karl Barth

### The Church as a Living, Adapting Body

The Church, as a divinely inspired and Spirit-empowered organism, is not a static institution ossified by rigid traditions or inflexible structures; rather, it is a dynamic, ever-evolving entity, a living body that has continuously adapted and transformed across the centuries in response to the multifaceted challenges posed by shifting cultural landscapes, evolving political realities, and emerging theological perspectives. From its nascent beginnings in the upper room of Jerusalem, the church has been compelled to embrace strategic pivots in order to not only survive and grow but also to faithfully fulfill its divinely ordained mission of proclaiming the Gospel, embodying the love and justice of Christ, and extending the transformative power of the Kingdom of God to all people. These pivotal moments of adaptation have often arisen in response to crises of varying magnitudes and complexities—whether facing brutal persecution from hostile authorities, grappling with contentious doctrinal disputes that threatened to fracture the unity of the body, navigating the disruptive impact of technological

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<sup>91</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 136.

advancements that reshaped the contours of society, or confronting the profound ethical and social dilemmas posed by rapidly changing societal norms.

Just as the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have forced the contemporary church to critically re-evaluate its conventional structures, reimagine its established methods of outreach, and dismantle oppressive systems that perpetuate inequality, a comprehensive survey of church history reveals that every era of the Christian faith has encountered defining moments that necessitated bold transitions, courageous experimentation, and a willingness to relinquish outdated paradigms in favor of innovative approaches. Some of these pivotal shifts were immediate and reactionary, representing swift and decisive responses to unforeseen emergencies, while others were more gradual and strategic, unfolding over extended periods of time as the church prayerfully discerned God's will and sought to align its practices with His eternal purposes. In each and every case, however, the church's capacity to embrace adaptability, cultivate resilience, and remain steadfastly committed to its core mission has proven instrumental in sustaining its witness, expanding its influence, and effectively ministering to the ever-changing needs of the world.

This chapter embarks upon a captivating exploration of key moments in church history, illuminating instances where the body of Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit and empowered by unwavering faith, has successfully pivoted in response to shifting circumstances, demonstrating remarkable agility, creativity, and faithfulness. By examining these historical precedents, we will glean invaluable lessons for today's church leaders, who are tasked with navigating the complexities of an increasingly unpredictable world, grappling with the challenges of political polarization, social fragmentation, and the erosion of public trust, and seeking to lead their

congregations into a future filled with both unprecedented opportunities and unforeseen perils.

## The Early Church: From Persecution to Institutional Faith

### The Jerusalem Pivot: Expanding Beyond Jewish Boundaries

The early church's inaugural and arguably most consequential pivot was its audacious expansion beyond the circumscribed boundaries of Judaism, embracing a radically inclusive vision of salvation for all people, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or cultural background. Initially, the followers of Jesus were perceived as a mere sect within Judaism, diligently observing Jewish laws, adhering to Jewish customs, and participating in Jewish rituals. However, as persecution intensified, fueled by both religious and political opposition, and as an increasing number of Gentiles embraced the transformative message of the Gospel, the church was compelled to undertake a profound theological and missional pivot, challenging deeply ingrained assumptions and reimagining the very nature of Christian community.

- Acts 10 – Peter and Cornelius: The pivotal encounter between the Apostle Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius, meticulously documented in the Book of Acts, marked a watershed moment in the early church's understanding of its mission, signaling a profound theological shift that shattered the prevailing notion that salvation was exclusively reserved for the Jewish people. Peter's divinely inspired vision and subsequent interaction with Cornelius unequivocally demonstrated that the life-giving message of the Gospel was intended for all humanity, transcending ethnic, cultural, and

linguistic barriers.<sup>92</sup>

- Acts 15 – The Jerusalem Council: The contentious debate over the necessity of circumcision for Gentile believers, a practice deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and identity, culminated in the landmark Jerusalem Council, a pivotal gathering that would shape the future trajectory of the Christian faith. The council's ultimate decision—that faith in Jesus Christ, not adherence to the Mosaic Law, would serve as the defining characteristic of the new Christian community—represented a decisive victory for inclusivity and a bold affirmation of the universality of the Gospel message.<sup>93</sup>

This momentous shift laid the foundational cornerstone for the emergence of a truly global church, ensuring that Christianity would not remain confined to the narrow parameters of an ethnic or regional movement but would instead blossom into a vibrant, diverse, and multifaceted faith, embracing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

### From Underground Movement to Imperial Faith: Constantine's Pivot

For the first three centuries of its existence, Christianity existed as a largely clandestine and marginalized faith, often relegated to the shadows of society and subjected to brutal persecution by the vast and powerful Roman Empire. However, in the year 313 AD, the course of

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<sup>92</sup> In Caesarea, Cornelius, a devout Roman centurion, has a vision where an angel tells him to send for Peter in Joppa. Meanwhile, Peter has a vision in which God tells him not to call anything impure that God has made clean. When Cornelius's men arrive, Peter accompanies them to Caesarea, where Cornelius recounts his vision. Peter realizes that God shows no partiality and preaches to Cornelius and his household about Jesus Christ. As Peter speaks, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who hear, including Gentiles, surprising the Jewish believers. Peter then orders their baptism in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:1-48).

<sup>93</sup> Some individuals from Judea teach that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved, leading to a debate. Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem to discuss the issue with the apostles and elders. Peter argues that God has already accepted the Gentiles through the Holy Spirit, and salvation comes through grace, not the law. James agrees, quoting the prophets, and proposes that Gentiles should abstain only from idol food, sexual immorality, blood, and things strangled. The apostles and elders send a letter with Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas to Antioch, affirming the decision and encouraging the Gentiles to follow these guidelines (Acts 15:1-29).

Christian history was irrevocably altered when Emperor Constantine, motivated by a complex interplay of political calculation and personal conviction, issued the Edict of Milan, a landmark decree that effectively legalized Christianity and set the stage for its meteoric rise as the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

This transformative pivot had profound and far-reaching implications for the church:

- **The church gained unprecedented political power and influence**, affording it the opportunity to shape public policy, influence social norms, and exercise considerable sway over the lives of its adherents.
- **Worship spaces transitioned from humble house churches**, characterized by their simplicity and intimacy, to grand and opulent basilicas, reflecting the newfound wealth and status of the Christian community.
- **Christian doctrine and creeds were formalized at ecumenical councils** such as the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), establishing a unified theological framework and solidifying the church's authority in matters of faith and practice.

While this dramatic shift allowed for greater stability, enhanced visibility, and increased resources, it also introduced a host of new challenges and potential pitfalls, such as the perilous merging of church and state, which would subsequently give rise to centuries of theological and political struggles, ethical dilemmas, and power imbalances that continue to shape the landscape of Christianity to this day.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, this pivot began a journey of the church potentially mirroring what the nation of Israel did in asking for a king like all the other nations.

### The Monastic Movement: A Pivot in Spiritual Focus

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<sup>94</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

As Christianity experienced increasing institutionalization and integration into the power structures of the Roman Empire, a growing number of devout believers expressed profound concerns regarding the potential erosion of its radical, countercultural identity and the gradual assimilation of its distinctive values into the prevailing norms of society. This apprehension served as the primary impetus for the rise of monasticism, a transformative movement that consciously pivoted away from the allure of political entanglements, the pursuit of worldly influence, and the accumulation of material possessions, choosing instead to prioritize the cultivation of personal holiness, the fostering of intentional community, and the selfless service of others, particularly the poor, the marginalized, and the forgotten.

Key figures who played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of this influential movement include:

- **Anthony of Egypt (251-356 AD):** Widely regarded as the father of monasticism, Anthony of Egypt epitomized the spirit of radical detachment from the world, withdrawing into the desolate expanse of the Egyptian desert to embark upon an arduous quest for spiritual purification and intimate communion with God, serving as an inspiration for countless others seeking a more authentic and transformative experience of the Christian faith.
- **Benedict of Nursia (480-547 AD):** Benedict of Nursia, a visionary leader and astute organizer, established the Rule of St. Benedict, a comprehensive set of guidelines that meticulously structured the rhythms of monastic life around the core principles of disciplined prayer, diligent physical labor, and rigorous intellectual study, creating a sustainable framework for the cultivation of spiritual growth, the fostering of communal

harmony, and the provision of essential social services to the surrounding community.

Monastic communities, scattered throughout the landscape of Europe and beyond, played a crucial role in preserving the sacred texts of Scripture, meticulously copying and illuminating ancient manuscripts, safeguarding the intellectual heritage of Western civilization, and transmitting the wisdom of the past to future generations. Furthermore, these intentional communities cultivated a profound spirituality characterized by contemplative prayer, communal worship, and a deep commitment to the practice of virtue, serving as beacons of spiritual light in an era of widespread political instability, social upheaval, and moral decay. In addition to their spiritual and intellectual contributions, monastic communities also provided invaluable social services, offering hospitality to weary travelers, caring for the sick and the infirm, and providing sustenance to the poor and the hungry, embodying the compassionate heart of Christ in tangible and transformative ways.<sup>95</sup>

For the contemporary church, grappling with the complexities of a rapidly changing world and facing the seductive allure of consumerism, materialism, and political polarization, the monastic movement serves as a powerful reminder that strategic pivots are not always about outward expansion, increased visibility, or the accumulation of worldly power; sometimes, the most transformative pivots involve a deliberate return to the core values of the Christian faith, a renewed commitment to the cultivation of personal holiness, and a radical re-centering of our lives around the principles of prayer, community, service, and justice, resisting the temptation to conform to the fleeting trends of culture and instead embracing the timeless wisdom of the

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<sup>95</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992).

Gospel.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, like the journey of individual believers, and my faith journey, the church must continue to search for radical inclusivity and to create safety for all under its care and influence.

## The Reformation: A Theological and Structural Pivot

Arguably one of the most transformative and far-reaching pivot in the history of Christianity transpired in the 16th century, when a courageous cohort of visionary reformers, including luminaries such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, rose to challenge the entrenched authority and perceived corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, initiating a seismic shift that would irrevocably reshape the religious, political, and social landscape of Europe and beyond. To dismiss the Reformation as anything less than a profound transformation is to overlook its fundamental reorientation of Christian thought, practice, and institutional structure. As historian Diarmaid MacCulloch argues, the Reformation was not merely a series of adjustments but a “radical reshaping of Western Christianity,” touching upon the very core of belief and authority.<sup>97</sup> This transformative nature resonates with liberation theologians who emphasize the need for radical breaks from oppressive systems and a return to the liberating core of the Gospel.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Black Liberation Theology, as articulated by James Cone, highlights the necessity of challenging dominant theological paradigms that fail to address the experiences of the marginalized, a dynamic clearly at play in the Reformation's challenge to the established

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<sup>96</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God Through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2003).

<sup>97</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York, NY: Viking, 2003), 1.

<sup>98</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1973.

church.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Womanist theologian Delores Williams, underscores the importance of critically examining and transforming traditions that perpetuate injustice and silence marginalized voices, a parallel to the reformers' critique of the established religious order.<sup>100</sup> The Reformation, therefore, stands as a powerful historical example of a theological and structural pivot driven by a conviction that fundamental change was necessary to more faithfully embody the essence of Christianity.

The Reformation's transformative nature is evident in its key pivots, each representing a significant departure from medieval Catholic tradition and a foundational reshaping of Protestant theology and practice:

- **Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone):** A revolutionary paradigm shift that supplanted the long-held belief in church tradition as the ultimate arbiter of truth, asserting instead the primacy and supreme authority of the Bible as the inspired and infallible Word of God, accessible to all believers and capable of guiding them into a deeper understanding of His divine will.<sup>101</sup>
- **Sola Fide (Faith Alone):** A bold and unapologetic rejection of the prevailing doctrine of works-based righteousness, which emphasized the necessity of performing good deeds and adhering to religious rituals in order to attain salvation, advocating instead for the transformative power of grace and the concept of justification by faith alone, asserting that salvation is a free gift from God, received through faith in Jesus Christ and not

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<sup>99</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1970.

<sup>100</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

<sup>101</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021).

earned through human effort.<sup>102</sup>

- **The Printing Press:** The groundbreaking invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1440 ushered in an era of unprecedented access to information, enabling the mass production of Bibles and theological works, accelerating the dissemination of Reformation ideas, and empowering ordinary believers to engage with Scripture and theological discourse in their own languages, fostering a more personal and direct relationship with God.<sup>103</sup>
- **Worship and Liturgy:** A deliberate and conscious effort to make the Christian faith more accessible and understandable to ordinary believers by conducting worship services in the vernacular languages of the people, rather than the traditional Latin, enabling them to fully participate in the liturgy, comprehend the biblical readings, and engage with the sermons in a meaningful and transformative way, fostering a deeper sense of connection to God and to one another.<sup>104</sup>

The Reformation's multifaceted pivot triggered a profound and irreversible reshaping of Christianity, leading to the emergence of a diverse array of Protestant denominations, each with its own distinctive theological emphases and ecclesial structures, a renewed emphasis on personal faith and individual interpretation of Scripture, and a significant decentralization of religious authority, empowering believers to take ownership of their faith and engage in a more

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<sup>102</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 19-20.

<sup>103</sup> Mark Cartwright, "The Printing Press & the Protestant Reformation," *World History Encyclopedia*, last modified April 11, 2019, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2039/the-printing-press--the-protestant-reformation/>.

<sup>104</sup> Karin Maag, *Worshipping with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 45-46.

direct and personal relationship with God.

For today's leaders, navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world and seeking to lead their congregations with wisdom, courage, and integrity, the Reformation serves as a powerful reminder that sometimes strategic pivots require challenging deeply entrenched systems, questioning long-held assumptions, and dismantling oppressive structures in order to realign with biblical truth, uphold the principles of justice, and embody the inclusive love of Christ in a world desperately in need of hope, healing, and reconciliation. Furthermore, it demonstrates that sometimes leading as a "called out one" means walking and leading the revolution of radical change in the church.

## The Reformation: A Theological and Structural Pivot

Throughout the annals of church history, the Christian community has experienced recurring cycles of spiritual decline, characterized by apathy, complacency, and a gradual erosion of its distinctive values, followed by periods of profound renewal, marked by a resurgence of fervent faith, a renewed commitment to biblical principles, and a passionate desire to extend the transformative power of the Gospel to every corner of society. The First and Second Great Awakenings, which swept across the American landscape during the 18th and 19th centuries, stand as compelling examples of how the church, guided by the Holy Spirit and empowered by unwavering faith, has successfully pivoted in response to profound societal changes, recalibrating its strategies, revitalizing its message, and rediscovering its prophetic voice in an ever-changing world.

## The First Great Awakening (1730s-1740s):

Led by a cadre of influential and charismatic preachers, including luminaries such as

Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John Wesley, this transformative revival movement placed a renewed emphasis on the importance of personal conversion, heartfelt faith, and the necessity of cultivating an intimate and transformative relationship with God, challenging the prevailing rationalism and formalism of the established churches and igniting a spiritual firestorm that swept across denominational lines.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, the First Great Awakening shattered the barriers of denominationalism, fostering a spirit of unity and cooperation among Christians from diverse backgrounds and inspiring a wave of evangelistic outreach, as believers from all walks of life sought to share the Good News with their neighbors, their communities, and the world beyond.

The First Great Awakening also saw significant contributions from minority voices, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, who played pivotal roles in shaping the revival's impact. For example, Samson Occom, a Mohegan Native American minister, converted to Christianity during the revival and became an influential preacher and educator. Occom worked tirelessly to bridge cultural divides, advocating for the spiritual and social uplift of indigenous communities while raising funds for educational institutions like Dartmouth College, initially intended to serve Native Americans.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, the egalitarian message of the revival resonated deeply with enslaved African Americans, many of whom embraced Christianity for the first time. The movement's emphasis on spiritual equality inspired African Americans to participate actively in religious life, with some becoming exhorters or preachers despite societal

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<sup>105</sup> Frank Lambert, *"Pedlar in Divinity": George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>106</sup> William DeLoss Love, *Samson Occom and the Christian Indians of New England* (Boston, MA: Pilgrim Press, 1899), <https://archive.org/details/samsonoccomchris00love>.

constraints.<sup>107</sup> This participation laid the groundwork for the later emergence of Black churches as centers of community and social activism.

### The Second Great Awakening (1800s):

Marked by the emergence of large-scale camp meetings, characterized by impassioned preaching, fervent prayer, and powerful displays of emotional fervor, the Second Great Awakening placed a renewed emphasis on personal holiness, social reform, and the imperative to translate faith into action, inspiring a generation of believers to address the pressing social ills of their day and to work towards the creation of a more just and equitable society.<sup>108</sup> This transformative revival movement served as a catalyst for a wide range of social reform movements, including the abolitionist movement, which sought to eradicate the scourge of slavery from American society, and the women's rights movement, which advocated for greater equality and opportunity for women in all spheres of life, demonstrating the power of faith to inspire social change and to challenge oppressive systems.

These transformative awakenings serve as a potent reminder that strategic pivots are not solely about structural or theological shifts; they are also about spiritual renewal, a reawakening of the heart, and a rediscovery of the transformative power of the Gospel. The modern church, navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world and grappling with the challenges of secularism, materialism, and political polarization, must remain open to the possibility of revival, cultivating a spirit of humility, repentance, and openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and be willing to engage the culture in fresh and innovative ways, embodying the love, justice, and

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<sup>107</sup> Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>108</sup> Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

compassion of Christ in an ever-changing world.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, it must embrace inclusivity and disrupt injustice in the same way that the abolitionist movement did.

The Second Great Awakening was marked by the significant participation of marginalized groups, including African Americans and women, who played transformative roles in the revival and its associated reform movements. Jarena Lee stands out as a prominent African American woman who broke barriers during this period. She became the first authorized female preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Despite societal restrictions on both race and gender, Lee traveled extensively to preach, converting many and inspiring others to embrace Christianity. Her autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, offers a vivid account of her ministry and highlights her perseverance in advocating for spiritual equality.<sup>110</sup>

Women more broadly were central to the revival, as they made up the majority of converts and were often active participants in camp meetings. Some women even preached publicly, challenging traditional gender norms.<sup>111</sup> These contributions extended beyond religious spaces, as women involved in the revival also played key roles in social reform movements such as temperance and abolition.<sup>112</sup> African Americans, both free and enslaved, found empowerment through the revival's emphasis on personal salvation and spiritual equality. The Second Great

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<sup>109</sup> Robert E. Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2015: A Pictorial History* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019).

<sup>110</sup> Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>111</sup> Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>112</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 2004.

Awakening spurred the growth of independent Black churches, such as the AME Church, which became vital centers for religious worship and social activism. These institutions provided a platform for addressing systemic injustices like slavery and racial discrimination.

## The Digital Church: The Most Recent Pivot

The most recent and arguably most disruptive global shift in the history of the Christian church has been precipitated by the unprecedented challenges and transformative opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. This moment represents *today's* pivotal adaptation, a rapid and radical restructuring of church life necessitated by an immediate global crisis. Almost overnight, as governments-imposed lockdowns, social distancing protocols, and restrictions on public gatherings, churches around the world were compelled to undertake a rapid and radical transition to online platforms in order to sustain their core functions of worship, discipleship, pastoral care, and missional outreach. This swift and widespread move to digital spaces marks a fundamental change in how the church operates and connects, a pivot unlike any seen before in its speed and global scale.

### Key Aspects of the Digital Pivot:

- **Virtual Worship Services:** The adoption of livestreaming technology became the new norm, enabling churches to broadcast their worship services to a global audience, transcending geographical boundaries and connecting with individuals who may not have otherwise had access to a physical church community.
- **Online Discipleship:** Small groups, Bible studies, and pastoral care sessions migrated to digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and various social media channels, facilitating ongoing connection, spiritual formation, and mutual support among believers,

even in the midst of physical separation and social isolation.

- **Decentralized Ministry:** The pandemic accelerated a shift away from a Sunday-centric model of faith, where the majority of church activities were concentrated on a single day of the week, towards a more decentralized and distributed model of ministry, characterized by ongoing digital engagement, online resources, and virtual communities that fostered continuous spiritual growth and connection throughout the week.

While some initially feared that the widespread adoption of online worship would weaken the bonds of communal faith, diminish the sense of embodied presence, and lead to a decline in overall engagement, many churches have discovered that digital platforms have, in fact, expanded their reach, connected them with new audiences, and enabled them to minister to individuals who were previously unable to participate in traditional church settings due to physical limitations, geographic constraints, or other barriers.<sup>113</sup> Much like the invention of the printing press during the Reformation, which facilitated the widespread dissemination of biblical texts and theological ideas, technology has emerged as a powerful tool for Gospel expansion, enabling the church to extend its reach, amplify its message, and connect with people from all walks of life in an increasingly digital world.<sup>114</sup>

## Learning from the Past to Lead the Future

A comprehensive examination of church history reveals a recurring pattern: every major

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<sup>113</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

<sup>114</sup> Thomas Albert Howard, *The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Döllinger, and the Quandaries of the Modern Age* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

pivot, every transformative shift in strategy, structure, or theology, has invariably been met with resistance, skepticism, and even outright opposition from those who cling to the familiar comforts of tradition and resist the unsettling prospect of change. Yet, despite these challenges, each and every pivot has proven to be essential for the church's continued survival, sustained growth, and unwavering commitment to fulfilling its divinely ordained mission in an ever-changing world. The ability to embrace adaptability, to cultivate resilience, and to strategically pivot in response to shifting circumstances is not a sign of weakness or a compromise of core values; rather, it is a hallmark of wisdom, a testament to discerning leadership, and an act of obedience to God's dynamic movement in history.

As church leaders navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the post-pandemic world, grappling with the pervasive challenges of political polarization, social fragmentation, economic inequality, and the erosion of public trust, the lessons gleaned from the annals of church history provide invaluable guidance and enduring inspiration:

- **The church must always remain open to the Spirit's leading**, cultivating a posture of humility, discernment, and attentiveness to the still, small voice of God, recognizing that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate agent of renewal, transformation, and missional effectiveness.<sup>115</sup>
- **Strategic pivots require exceptional courage**, a willingness to challenge the status quo, embrace innovative approaches, and dismantle oppressive structures that perpetuate injustice, as well as an unwavering commitment to biblical truth, ensuring that all

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<sup>115</sup> In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people (*as a libation - VOICE*). Your sons and daughters will prophesy (*boldly - VOICE*), your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams (Acts 2:17 NIV).

decisions and actions are firmly grounded in the timeless principles of the Gospel and aligned with the character and mission of Christ.

- **Crisis moments often serve as catalysts for renewal and growth**, providing unique opportunities to re-evaluate priorities, reimagine strategies, and rediscover the transformative power of the Gospel in fresh and compelling ways, enabling the church to emerge from periods of adversity stronger, more resilient, and more effectively equipped to minister to the needs of a broken and hurting world.

In the next chapter, we will explore how these invaluable historical lessons can be applied to contemporary church leadership, equipping today's leaders with the knowledge, skills, and spiritual discernment necessary to pivot with wisdom, faith, and resilience in an ever-changing world, leading their congregations into a future filled with both unprecedented opportunities and unforeseen perils. With the anointing and gifts that God has given faith leaders today, it is our time to add to this conversation and to lead the church forward.

## Chapter 4: Leadership that Pivots — A Framework for Church Leaders

In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps  
(Proverbs 16:9 NIV).

Leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less.<sup>116</sup> — John C. Maxwell

Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.<sup>117</sup> — Peter Drucker

### The Need for Adaptive Leadership

Leadership in the Church, particularly in our rapidly evolving and increasingly complex world, transcends mere maintenance of the status quo, preservation of cherished traditions, or management of existing resources. Instead, it mirrors the very character of God as revealed in Scripture, demanding a dynamic and responsive posture. Consider the Exodus narrative: when the Israelites faced the seemingly insurmountable barrier of the Red Sea, God did not adhere to a preordained script but innovatively forged a new path through the waters.<sup>118</sup> This divine action exemplifies adaptive leadership – identifying a novel solution to an unprecedented challenge, prioritizing the well-being and forward movement of His people over rigid adherence to past norms. Similarly, Jesus consistently demonstrated adaptive leadership in his earthly ministry. When confronted with the rigid interpretations of the Sabbath law, he did not simply dismiss

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<sup>116</sup> John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

<sup>117</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *The Essential Drucker: The Best of Sixty Years of Peter Drucker's Essential Writings on Management* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> As Pharaoh's army pursued the Israelites, they panicked and questioned Moses, fearing death in the desert. Moses reassured them that God would deliver them. God instructed Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, promising to display His glory through Pharaoh's defeat. The angel of God and the pillar of cloud moved between the Israelites and the Egyptians. That night, Moses stretched out his hand, and God parted the Red Sea with a strong east wind, allowing the Israelites to cross on dry ground with walls of water on both sides (Exodus 14:10–22).

tradition but reinterpreted it in light of human need, declaring, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27 NIV).” This willingness to challenge ingrained assumptions and prioritize people over inflexible rules showcases a key aspect of adaptive leadership: discerning the underlying purpose and values rather than being bound by mere procedure. Scholar Heifetz, a leading authority on adaptive leadership, defines it as the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.<sup>119</sup> It involves diagnosing complex situations, framing the adaptive challenge, and empowering others to learn and adjust. This is precisely what Jesus did, challenging his disciples and the crowds to rethink their understanding of the Kingdom of God and their roles within it. Therefore, leadership in the church is about discerning where God is actively leading His people, both individually and collectively, and summoning the courage, vision, and unwavering faith to follow Him into uncharted territories, even when the path ahead appears shrouded in uncertainty and fraught with peril. As the annals of church history so vividly demonstrate, the most effective and transformative church leaders are not those who cling rigidly to outdated models or resist the winds of change; they are those who possess the agility, adaptability, and spiritual discernment to strategically pivot in response to emerging challenges, while remaining firmly anchored in the timeless truths of Scripture, the unchanging principles of the Gospel, and the enduring values of the Christian faith.

In an era characterized by rapid cultural shifts, disruptive technological advancements, and increasingly complex theological debates, church leaders must cultivate a robust and comprehensive framework that enables them to thoughtfully discern the signs of the times, skillfully adapt their strategies and approaches, and lead with unwavering integrity, compassion,

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<sup>119</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Hugh B. Alexander, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 13.

and a steadfast commitment to justice. This chapter embarks upon a detailed exploration of the essential qualities, characteristics, and competencies that define leaders who successfully navigate periods of transition, embrace innovation, and inspire transformative change within their congregations and communities. Drawing upon both biblical wisdom and practical insights, we will offer a comprehensive framework for guiding the church through uncertain times, equipping today's leaders with the tools, resources, and spiritual formation necessary to lead with vision, courage, and resilience in an ever-changing world.

## The Call to Pivot: Biblical Foundations of Adaptive Leadership

The concept of leadership that embraces strategic pivoting, adapting with agility to shifting circumstances while remaining steadfastly committed to core values and unwavering principles, is deeply rooted in the rich tapestry of Scripture. Throughout the biblical narrative, some of the most influential, transformative, and enduring leaders were those who demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt to new challenges, navigate unforeseen complexities, and recalibrate their strategies in response to evolving contexts, all while remaining resolutely faithful to God's overarching mission and His eternal purposes.

- **Moses:** Tasked with the monumental responsibility of leading the Israelites out of the oppressive bondage of Egypt, Moses initially adopted a more authoritarian, top-down approach to leadership, but was later compelled to pivot, transitioning from a military-style commander to a more compassionate, pastoral shepherd, guiding his people through the arduous trials and tribulations of the wilderness, nurturing their spiritual growth, and

fostering a deeper sense of community.<sup>120</sup>

- **David:** Beginning his career as a valiant warrior, skillfully wielding his strength and courage on the battlefield, David underwent a profound transformation upon ascending to the throne, learning to lead with wisdom, justice, and compassion, exercising restraint and seeking divine guidance in his decision-making, and demonstrating a deep commitment to the well-being of his people.<sup>121</sup>
- **Paul:** Formerly a zealous persecutor of Christians, relentlessly hunting down and imprisoning those who dared to follow the teachings of Jesus, Paul experienced a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, pivoting from Jewish legalism to a revolutionary gospel of grace, becoming one of the most prolific and influential missionaries in the history of Christianity, tirelessly proclaiming the Good News to the

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<sup>120</sup> In Exodus 18, Moses's father-in-law Jethro visits him in the wilderness, bringing Moses's wife and sons. After hearing how God delivered Israel from Egypt, Jethro praises God and offers sacrifices. Observing Moses single-handedly judging the people, Jethro warns that the burden is too great. He advises Moses to delegate authority by appointing trustworthy men as judges over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Moses accepts this counsel, establishing a leadership structure that lightens his load and enables the people to receive justice more efficiently (Exodus 18: 1-27).

<sup>121</sup> In 1 Samuel 16, God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a new king from among Jesse's sons. Though Samuel first assumes Eliab is God's choice, God rejects him and reminds Samuel that the Lord looks at the heart, not outward appearance. After seven sons pass by, Samuel asks if there are any others. Jesse brings in David, the youngest, who is tending sheep. God confirms David is the one, and Samuel anoints him; the Spirit of the Lord comes powerfully upon him. Meanwhile, Saul, tormented by an evil spirit, seeks relief through music. David, known as a skilled musician and man of good character, is brought to Saul's court, where he plays the lyre, bringing Saul peace. David becomes Saul's armor-bearer and finds favor in his eyes (1 Samuel 16:1-23).

Gentiles and planting churches throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>122</sup>

- **Hagar:** Hagar's story<sup>123</sup> offers a powerful lens through which to understand adaptive leadership from marginalized perspectives. As an enslaved Egyptian woman, Hagar faced multiple, involuntary pivots driven by the patriarchal structures of her time. Forced into a surrogate pregnancy and then cast into the wilderness with her son, Hagar's adaptability was a matter of survival. Womanist theologians like Delores S. Williams highlight Hagar's resilience and agency in the face of systemic oppression, seeing her encounters with God in the wilderness not as passive submission but as acts of resistance and self-preservation.<sup>124</sup> Hagar names God "El-Roi" – "the God who sees me (Genesis 16:13)" – an act of asserting her own visibility and relationship with the divine in a context where her humanity was often denied. This naming can be seen as a form of adaptive spiritual leadership, finding God in the margins and claiming a divine connection on her own

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<sup>122</sup> In Acts 9, Saul, a persecutor of Christians, is on his way to Damascus to arrest disciples when he is blinded by a divine light and hears the voice of Jesus asking, "Why do you persecute me?" Saul, blinded and unable to eat or drink for three days, is visited by Ananias, a disciple, who restores his sight and baptizes him. Saul immediately begins proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God, astonishing those who knew of his previous persecutions. However, some Jews plot to kill him, and his disciples help him escape by lowering him in a basket through a city wall. In Jerusalem, the apostles are initially afraid of Saul, but Barnabas vouches for him, recounting his conversion and bold ministry in Damascus. Saul continues to speak boldly in Jerusalem, but when Hellenistic Jews plot to kill him, he is sent to Tarsus for safety. Meanwhile, Peter heals Aeneas, a paralyzed man in Lydda, and many in the region turn to the Lord. In nearby Joppa, the disciple Tabitha (Dorcas) dies. Peter is summoned, prays, and miraculously raises her from the dead. This leads many in Joppa to believe in the Lord, and Peter stays there with Simon the tanner. (Acts 9: 1-43).

<sup>123</sup> Sarai, unable to have children, gives her servant Hagar to Abram to bear a child. Hagar becomes pregnant, and Sarai grows jealous, mistreating her. Hagar runs away, but an angel of the Lord finds her in the wilderness and tells her to return. The angel also promises that her son, Ishmael, will be the father of a great nation. Hagar obeys, and Ishmael is born to Abram when he is 86. Sarah, now miraculously pregnant, gives birth to Isaac. When Isaac is weaned, Sarah sees Ishmael mocking him and insists that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. God assures Abram that Ishmael will also be blessed, and he sends them away. Hagar, in despair, is visited by an angel who reassures her, showing her a well. Ishmael grows up in the wilderness and becomes an archer. God remains with him (Genesis 16, 21).

<sup>124</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1993.

terms. Additional liberationist readings of Hagar's story<sup>125</sup> further emphasize her liminal status and her forced navigation of oppressive systems, finding resonance with the experiences of those who exist outside traditional power structures and must adapt to survive and find meaning in hostile environments. Hagar's story, therefore, is not just about enduring hardship, but about actively seeking and finding ways to live and connect with the divine within drastically shifting and unjust circumstances.

- Rahab: Rahab of Jericho,<sup>126</sup> a woman often identified with marginalized social standing, demonstrated a pivotal act of adaptive leadership rooted in a shift of allegiance.

Recognizing the power of the Israelite God, she chose to betray her own city and protect the Israelite spies. This decision, a radical pivot from her cultural and political context, was driven by her recognition of a greater power and a desire for safety for herself and her family. Her adaptability and strategic action led to her inclusion in the lineage of Jesus (Matthew 1:5), highlighting how those on the margins can exercise transformative leadership through courageous adaptation.

Each of these exemplary leaders faced a pivotal moment of decision, a critical juncture where they were compelled to relinquish their own preconceived notions, set aside their personal ambitions, and trust in God's divine guidance, surrendering their plans to His higher purposes

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<sup>125</sup> "Queering Hagar's Story," *Binary-Breaking Worship*, June 24, 2023, <https://binarybreakingworship.com/2023/06/24/queering-hagars-story/>.

<sup>126</sup> Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, hides two Israelite spies from the king's soldiers. She acknowledges Israel's victory and expresses faith in their God. She negotiates with the spies, asking for protection for her family when they invade Jericho. Rahab shows adaptive leadership by assessing the situation, taking a risky step to align herself with the Israelites, and securing a future for her family. In return, the spies promise to spare her and her family if she ties a scarlet cord in her window as a sign. The spies escape, and Rahab's actions are instrumental in their success (Joshua 2: 1-24).

and embracing the unknown with unwavering faith and resolute obedience. In much the same way, church leaders today must cultivate a deep sense of spiritual attunement, remaining sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and embracing flexibility in their approach to ministry, adapting their strategies to meet the ever-changing needs of their congregations and communities.

## Jesus as the Ultimate Model of Adaptive Leadership

No leader in human history embodied the principles of adaptive leadership more fully and masterfully than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose earthly ministry was characterized by a remarkable capacity to respond to diverse challenges with unparalleled wisdom, unwavering compassion, and profound insight, skillfully adapting His approach based on the specific context and the unique needs of those He encountered:

- **With religious leaders**, who were often blinded by their own pride, self-righteousness, and legalistic interpretations of Scripture, Jesus was unafraid to be confrontational, challenging their hypocrisy, exposing their hidden motives, and calling them to a more authentic and transformative expression of faith.<sup>127</sup>
- **With sinners**, who were often marginalized, ostracized, and condemned by society, Jesus extended unwavering compassion, offering them forgiveness, healing, and a pathway to restoration, demonstrating the boundless love and grace of God for all people, regardless

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<sup>127</sup> In Matthew 23:13-36, Jesus confronts the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, highlighting his role as an adaptive leader who challenges the existing religious structures. He critiques their focus on outward displays of piety while ignoring justice, mercy, and faithfulness—values that are central to the Kingdom of Heaven. By exposing their failure to lead authentically and effectively, Jesus models adaptive leadership, calling for inner transformation rather than merely following external rituals. He redefines leadership by emphasizing the importance of humility, empathy, and service to others over legalistic rules. In holding the Pharisees accountable for their actions, Jesus demonstrates an ability to address deep systemic issues and calls for a change that moves beyond superficial appearances. This confrontation exemplifies how adaptive leadership involves recognizing underlying challenges, disrupting outdated norms, and guiding others toward more meaningful, transformative practices.

of their past mistakes or present circumstances.<sup>128</sup>

- **With disciples**, who were called to follow Him, learn from Him, and carry on His mission after His ascension, Jesus embodied the dual roles of both a teacher and a servant, imparting profound spiritual truths and practical wisdom while also demonstrating humility, selflessness, and a willingness to serve others, even to the point of washing their feet.<sup>129</sup>

Jesus' ministry was firmly anchored in His unwavering commitment to fulfilling His divine purpose, but it was also characterized by remarkable flexibility in method, adapting His strategies, His language, and His approach to effectively reach diverse audiences and address the unique challenges they faced, embodying a key principle for church leaders navigating the complexities of change today: remaining steadfastly committed to the unchanging truths of the Gospel while embracing innovative approaches to ministry and seeking to meet people where they are, rather than insisting that they conform to pre-existing models or outdated expectations.

## The Essential Qualities of Leaders Who Pivot

### 1. Visionary Discernment: Seeing Beyond the Present

Pivoting effectively requires a leader who possesses the ability to see beyond the immediate challenges, the pressing concerns, and the limitations of the present moment,

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<sup>128</sup> In John 8:1-11, Jesus demonstrates adaptive leadership by challenging the Pharisees' legalistic view of the woman caught in adultery. Instead of enforcing the law, he responds with compassion, saying, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." His actions shift the focus from punishment to self-reflection and grace, offering the woman forgiveness and a chance to change. This shows Jesus as a transformative leader who adapts to situations, prioritizing mercy and personal growth over rigid rules.

<sup>129</sup> In John 13:12-17, Jesus models servant leadership by washing His disciples' feet, a task typically reserved for the lowest servant. He then teaches them that true leadership is about serving others. By showing humility and selflessness, He challenges them to lead through service, emphasizing that happiness comes from practicing this mindset. Jesus sets the example for adaptive leadership, focusing on humility and the well-being of others over power or status.

discerning with clarity and foresight where God is actively leading His people and envisioning a compelling future that is both rooted in biblical truth and responsive to the evolving needs of the world. This visionary discernment involves:

- **Spiritual Discernment:** Cultivating a deep and intimate relationship with God through consistent prayer, diligent study of Scripture, and a willingness to seek His wisdom and guidance in all matters, large and small.<sup>130</sup>
- **Cultural Awareness:** Developing a keen understanding of the shifting dynamics, emerging trends, and underlying values of the surrounding culture, enabling leaders to anticipate the potential impact of societal changes on the church and to effectively communicate the Gospel in a relevant and meaningful way. This cultural awareness must also extend to the nuanced and often powerful role of gender and gender association within society. The ways in which societies construct and understand gender significantly shape individual experiences, social structures, and even access to power and influence. Ignoring these dynamics can lead to the church inadvertently perpetuating inequalities or failing to connect with significant portions of the population. For instance, the biblical narrative itself reveals the cultural constraints placed upon women, yet also highlights instances where women navigated and even subverted these norms to exercise leadership and influence. The story of Esther (Book of Esther) illustrates this powerfully. As a woman in a patriarchal society, her access to power was mediated through her marriage to the king. However, when faced with the potential genocide of her people, Esther strategically utilized her position, understanding the gendered expectations and

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<sup>130</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you (James 1:5 NIV).

limitations placed upon her, to advocate for justice. Her courageous decision to approach the king, a culturally risky act, demonstrates an acute awareness of the gendered dynamics at play and a willingness to adapt within those constraints to achieve a transformative outcome.

Scholarly voices across feminist, womanist, and queer theologies underscore the critical importance of understanding gender in cultural awareness. Feminist theologians have highlighted the “androcentric” bias within biblical interpretation and church history, revealing how dominant male perspectives have often obscured the experiences and contributions of women.<sup>131</sup> This necessitates a conscious effort to reclaim marginalized voices and understand how gender has shaped religious practices and power structures. Womanist theologians, such as bell hooks, further emphasize the intersectionality of gender with race and class, arguing that the experiences of Black women, for example, are uniquely shaped by the interplay of these social categories and require a nuanced understanding that goes beyond a singular focus on gender.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, Cheng, challenges binary understandings of gender and sexuality altogether, calling the church to develop a cultural awareness that embraces the diversity of human identity and experience beyond traditional norms.<sup>133</sup> Recognizing the fluidity and social construction of gender is crucial for the church to engage authentically and inclusively with a world where gender identities and expressions are increasingly diverse. By failing to account for these complex gender dynamics, the church risks irrelevance or, worse, becoming complicit in perpetuating harm and exclusion.

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<sup>131</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1983).

<sup>132</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>133</sup> Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2011).

- **Strategic Thinking:** Cultivating the capacity to anticipate future challenges and opportunities before they arise, enabling leaders to proactively develop innovative strategies, allocate resources effectively, and position the church for long-term growth and influence.

A leader who lacks visionary discernment will invariably resist change, clinging to outdated models and failing to recognize the need for adaptation, while a leader with godly discernment will recognize when a strategic pivot is necessary, embracing innovation, challenging the status quo, and leading the church into a future filled with hope, purpose, and transformative impact.

## 2. Courage: Leading Through Uncertainty

Strategic pivots are often met with resistance, skepticism, and even outright opposition from those who are comfortable with the status quo and fear the uncertainty that change inevitably brings. Great leaders, however, embrace discomfort for the sake of growth, demonstrating the courage to challenge conventional wisdom, defy expectations, and lead their people into uncharted territories, even when the path ahead appears fraught with peril. Biblical courage is not the absence of fear or the denial of risk; rather, it is a steadfast willingness to act despite fear, trusting in God's sovereignty, relying on His strength, and remaining committed to His purposes, regardless of the potential consequences.

- **Joshua** was commanded to be strong and courageous as he led the Israelites into the Promised Land, facing daunting challenges and formidable enemies.<sup>134</sup>
- **Esther** risked her own life to save her people from annihilation, boldly approaching the king and pleading for justice, demonstrating unwavering courage in the face of mortal

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<sup>134</sup> Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God (*I am your God, the Eternal One - VOICE*) will be with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:9 NIV).

danger.<sup>135</sup>

- **The early disciples** boldly proclaimed the Gospel despite facing persecution, imprisonment, and even death, refusing to be silenced and remaining committed to their calling to share the Good News with the world.<sup>136</sup>

Church leaders today must cultivate courageous faith, knowing that leading change often means stepping into the unknown, challenging oppressive systems, and advocating for justice, even when it is unpopular or uncomfortable, trusting that God will empower them to overcome obstacles, navigate complexities, and lead their people into a future filled with hope and purpose.

### 3. Emotional Intelligence: Leading with Wisdom and Compassion

Pivoting successfully is not solely about strategy, structure, or systems; it is also fundamentally about people, about understanding their needs, addressing their concerns, and inspiring them to embrace change with enthusiasm and commitment. Leaders must cultivate emotional intelligence, demonstrating the capacity to understand the emotional and spiritual needs of their congregation, responding with empathy, compassion, and wisdom, and fostering a culture of trust, respect, and mutual support. This requires:

- **Self-awareness:** Cultivating a deep understanding of one's own strengths, weaknesses, biases, and triggers, enabling leaders to lead with authenticity, humility, and a willingness to learn from their mistakes.
- **Empathy:** Developing the capacity to see challenges through the eyes of others,

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<sup>135</sup> Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish (Esther 4:16 NIV).

<sup>136</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness (Acts 4:29 NIV).

understanding their perspectives, and responding with compassion and sensitivity, creating a safe and supportive environment where individuals feel valued, respected, and understood.

- **Conflict Resolution Skills:** Mastering the art of addressing resistance to change with grace, wisdom, and skill, facilitating constructive dialogue, mediating disputes, and fostering a spirit of unity and collaboration, even in the midst of disagreement and tension.

Jesus Christ modeled perfect emotional intelligence, knowing when to challenge, when to comfort, and when to correct, responding to each individual with the precise blend of truth and grace that they needed in that moment. Church leaders must strive to emulate His example, cultivating emotional intelligence, responding with compassion, and leading with wisdom in all their interactions.

#### 4. Resilience: Thriving Amidst Challenge

Change is inherently difficult, often fraught with setbacks, disappointments, and unexpected challenges. Not every pivot will be smooth, and not every initiative will succeed. Leaders must cultivate resilience — the capacity to stay the course even in the face of adversity, learning from mistakes, adapting to new realities, and maintaining a steadfast commitment to their vision, even when the journey gets hard.

- Paul endured shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, and countless other hardships, yet he remained faithful to his calling, persevering through adversity and continuing to proclaim

the Gospel with unwavering passion and conviction.<sup>137</sup>

- Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem despite facing relentless opposition from enemies both within and outside the city, demonstrating unwavering determination, strategic planning, and a deep trust in God's provision (Nehemiah 4).

Resilient leaders do not quit when the journey gets hard; instead, they trust in God's sovereignty, draw strength from their faith, and press forward with unwavering determination, inspiring their people to overcome obstacles, persevere through adversity, and achieve remarkable things for the glory of God.

## Practical Strategies for Leading Through Pivots

### 1. Communication: Casting Vision and Managing Resistance

Clear, consistent, and honest communication is essential when leading a church through periods of significant change. Leaders must be proactive in sharing information, transparent in their decision-making processes, and empathetic in their responses to the concerns and anxieties of their congregation. This involves:

- **Casting Vision:** Articulating a compelling and inspiring vision for the future, explaining why the strategic pivot is necessary, how it aligns with God's overarching mission, and how it will ultimately benefit the church and the community it serves.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28 NIV).

<sup>138</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

- **Inviting Collaboration:** Engaging key stakeholders early in the process, seeking their input, valuing their perspectives, and fostering a sense of shared ownership in the change initiative, empowering them to become active participants in shaping the future direction of the church.<sup>139</sup>
- **Addressing Fears:** Validating the concerns and anxieties of those who may be resistant to change, acknowledging their fears, addressing their questions, and providing reassurance that their voices will be heard, and their needs will be considered throughout the process.<sup>140</sup>

For example, when churches were forced to transition to online worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders who communicated effectively, explaining the rationale behind the shift, providing clear instructions on how to access online services, and offering opportunities for virtual connection and community, helped their congregations embrace the change rather than resist it, fostering a sense of unity and purpose in the midst of uncertainty.

## 2. Equipping the Church for Change

A leader cannot successfully navigate a strategic pivot alone; the entire church body must be prepared for the shift, equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to adapt to new realities, embrace innovative approaches, and contribute their unique gifts and talents to the fulfillment of God’s mission. This involves:

- **Teaching and Training:** Providing relevant and engaging sermons, Bible studies, and

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<sup>139</sup> Edgar H. Schein and Peter A. Schein, *Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018).

<sup>140</sup> William Bridges and Susan Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2017).

workshops on the principles of adaptability, the importance of embracing change, and the power of faith to overcome obstacles.<sup>141</sup>

- **Discipleship and Mentorship:** Investing in emerging leaders, providing them with opportunities for growth, development, and mentorship, equipping them to carry the vision forward, and empowering them to lead with confidence and competence.<sup>142</sup>
- **Empowering Lay Leadership:** Encouraging church members to take ownership of new ministry initiatives, providing them with the resources, training, and support they need to succeed, and celebrating their contributions to the overall mission of the church.<sup>143</sup>

A leader's role is not just to manage change but to equip others to navigate it well, fostering a culture of learning, innovation, and collaboration that empowers the entire church body to thrive in an ever-changing world.

### 3. Remaining Anchored in Core Values

While methods may change, strategies may evolve, and structures may be re-organized, the core mission and enduring values of the church must remain firm, serving as an anchor in the midst of turbulent waters, providing stability, clarity, and a sense of unwavering purpose. This involves:

- **Jesus-centered ministry:** Keeping Jesus Christ at the heart of all decisions, ensuring that every action, every initiative, and every strategy reflects His teachings, embodies His

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<sup>141</sup>James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017).

<sup>142</sup>J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012).

<sup>143</sup>David Kinnaman Barna and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme* (New York, NY: Baker Publishing Group, 2016).

love, and advances His Kingdom purposes.

- **Biblical faithfulness:** Ensuring that all strategic pivots align with Scripture, grounding decisions in the timeless truths of the Bible, and seeking to honor God’s Word in all aspects of church life.<sup>144</sup>
- **Community and discipleship:** Prioritizing relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, and investing in the spiritual growth of believers, recognizing that the church is not just an organization but a family, a community of faith that is committed to walking alongside one another on the journey of discipleship.

A church that knows its why can confidently adjust its how without losing its identity, remaining grounded in its core values, and continuing to fulfill its mission with passion, purpose, and unwavering commitment.

## The Church Leader as a Faithful Pivot-Point

The role of a church leader in this rapidly evolving and increasingly complex world is not simply to maintain the status quo, preserve cherished traditions, or manage existing resources; rather, it is to serve as a faithful pivot-point, a strategic connector between where the church currently finds itself and where God is actively leading it to be, embracing the challenges and opportunities of the present while remaining steadfastly committed to the promises and possibilities of the future. Leadership that embraces strategic pivoting is not about chasing fleeting trends, pandering to popular opinion, or compromising core values for the sake of expediency; it is about prayerfully discerning when and how to shift strategies, structures, and

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<sup>144</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs, CO: Crown Publishing Group, 2011).

approaches in alignment with God's overarching mission, seeking to embody His love, justice, and compassion in an ever-changing world.

### Key Takeaways:

- **Biblical leaders have always had to pivot**, adapting to new circumstances, overcoming unforeseen challenges, and leading their people with courage, wisdom, and unwavering faith.
- **Jesus Christ modeled adaptive leadership** with unparalleled skill and grace, remaining firmly anchored in His divine purpose while demonstrating remarkable flexibility in His methods, responding to everyone with the precise blend of truth and grace that they needed in that moment.
- **Effective leaders cultivate visionary discernment**, enabling them to see beyond the present and anticipate future challenges; courage, empowering them to challenge the status quo and lead with conviction; emotional intelligence, equipping them to connect with others on a deeply personal level; and resilience, enabling them to persevere through adversity and remain steadfast in their commitment to God's calling.
- **Clear communication**, proactive equipping of others, and unwavering commitment to the core mission and enduring values of the church are essential for leading through change, fostering a culture of trust, collaboration, and shared purpose.

As the church moves forward in an ever-changing world, facing unprecedented challenges and navigating uncharted territories, leaders who can pivot with wisdom, faith, and integrity will be the ones who effectively carry the life-giving message of the Gospel into the next generation, transforming lives, healing communities, and advancing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in

heaven. This sets the stage for Chapter 5, which will explore the challenges and opportunities facing the church in the future and provide practical guidance for navigating the next great pivot.

# Chapter 5: The Future Church — Navigating the Next Great Pivot

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’[a] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true (Revelation 21: 3-5 NIV).”

Indeed, God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves (Quran 13:11).

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.<sup>145</sup> — Walter Brueggemann

## The Church in Transition

The church, as a dynamic and Spirit-led movement, has always been in motion, continually adapting to new cultural, social, and theological landscapes, embracing change, and responding with creativity and courage to the challenges and opportunities that arise in each generation. As history has shown, the ecclesia — the called-out ones, the community of faith that is set apart for a specific purpose — must remain faithful to its core mission of proclaiming the Gospel, embodying the love and justice of Christ, and extending the transformative power of the Kingdom of God to all people, while simultaneously embracing necessary changes in its strategies, structures, and approaches in order to effectively minister to the ever-changing needs of the world.

We now stand at the precipice of another great pivot, a transformative moment in history

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<sup>145</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978).

that demands bold vision, courageous leadership, and a willingness to reimagine the role and approach of the church in the 21st century. The post-pandemic world, characterized by rapid technological advances, shifting social dynamics, evolving spiritual needs, and a growing awareness of systemic injustices, all demand that the church re-evaluate its priorities, re-calibrate its methods, and re-commit itself to fulfilling its divinely ordained mission in a world that is desperately in need of hope, healing, and reconciliation. This chapter embarks upon an exploration of what the future church might look like, identifying key trends, examining emerging challenges, and offering practical guidance for how leaders can prepare for the next great shift, equipping the church to thrive in an uncertain future and to faithfully carry the Gospel into the next generation.

## The Forces Shaping the Future Church

The future church, as a dynamic and Spirit-led movement, will inevitably be shaped by several key forces that demand a thoughtful, faith-driven, and proactive response. These forces are not threats to be feared or challenges to be avoided; rather, they are opportunities for the church to pivot wisely, adapt strategically, and remain faithfully committed to its divinely ordained mission in an ever-changing world.

### 1. The Digital Revolution and the Virtual Ecclesia

Technology is rapidly transforming how people experience faith, blurring the lines between the physical and the digital, and creating new possibilities for connection, community, and spiritual formation. The rise of online worship, digital discipleship, and virtual communities has expanded the church's reach, enabling it to connect with individuals who may not have otherwise had access to a physical church community, but it also raises profound theological and

ethical questions that demand careful consideration:

- Can an online faith community be as spiritually rich, relationally intimate, and emotionally supportive as an in-person gathering?
- How does the church maintain sacramental integrity, preserving the sacredness and significance of rituals such as communion and baptism, in a digital space?
- What does pastoral care look like in an era of AI-driven counseling and virtual mentorship, and how can the church ensure that technology enhances, rather than replaces, the human touch of compassion, empathy, and spiritual guidance?

The church must pivot by harnessing the power of technology for the advancement of the Gospel, leveraging digital platforms to connect with new audiences, create engaging content, and foster meaningful relationships, while simultaneously ensuring that digital ministry remains relational, embodied, and mission-driven, prioritizing authentic human connection, tangible expressions of love and service, and a steadfast commitment to sharing the Good News with the world.

## 2. The Decline of Institutional Christianity

Church attendance and affiliation with traditional denominations are declining, particularly among younger generations, who are increasingly disillusioned with institutional structures, hierarchical leadership models, and perceived irrelevance to the pressing social issues of our day. Many people seek spirituality over religion, favoring authentic, community-driven faith expressions over rigid programs, rote rituals, and outdated traditions.

This shift calls for:

- Decentralized leadership models that empower laypeople, recognizing the gifts, talents, and passions of all members of the church, and providing them with opportunities to lead, serve, and contribute to the overall mission of the community.<sup>146</sup>
- Missional communities that prioritize relationships over rigid programs, fostering a sense of belonging, connection, and mutual support, and creating opportunities for believers to live out their faith in tangible and transformative ways within their neighborhoods, workplaces, and social networks.
- A return to the early church's house-church and discipleship-based approach, emphasizing intimate gatherings, shared meals, authentic conversations, and a commitment to walking alongside one another on the journey of faith.

The pivot here is not about abandoning the institutional church altogether but reforming it to be more adaptable, relational, and mission-focused, dismantling oppressive structures, challenging unjust systems, and embracing a more inclusive vision of Christian community that welcomes all people, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances.

### 3. The Call for Radical Inclusivity

Faith communities are increasingly called to be radically inclusive, extending extravagant welcome to all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or any other social marker that has historically been used to exclude, marginalize, or oppress. Liberation theologies challenge the church to live out Christ's radical hospitality, demonstrating the boundless love and grace of God for all people, particularly those who have been pushed to the margins of society.

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<sup>146</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 2006.

This shift demands that church leaders:

- Re-examine theological frameworks to ensure they align with Christ's teachings of justice and love, challenging interpretations of Scripture that have been used to justify discrimination, prejudice, and oppression, and embracing a more expansive and inclusive understanding of God's Kingdom.<sup>147</sup>
- Create spaces where marginalized voices are centered and empowered, providing opportunities for those who have been historically silenced to share their stories, express their perspectives, and exercise their gifts, fostering a culture of mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration.
- Model reconciliation in a world divided by race, politics, and ideology, bridging divides, building relationships, and working towards the creation of a more just, equitable, and compassionate society where all people are treated with dignity and respect.

Pivoting toward inclusivity is not about conforming to culture or compromising biblical truth; it is about living out the Gospel mandate to love as Jesus Christ loved, extending grace, mercy, and compassion to all people, and challenging the systems and structures that perpetuate injustice and inequality.

#### 4. The Rise of Bi-Vocational and Entrepreneurial Ministry

Traditional full-time pastoral ministry is evolving, as many church leaders are embracing bi-vocational models, social entrepreneurship, and alternative ministry structures to sustain their calling, supplement their income, and engage with the world in new and innovative ways. This shift reflects a growing recognition that ministry is not confined to the walls of the church but

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<sup>147</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1997.

extends to every sphere of life, empowering believers to live out their faith in their workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities.

This shift requires the church to:

- Rethink ministry funding models beyond tithes and offerings, exploring innovative approaches to resource mobilization, such as social enterprise ventures, crowdfunding campaigns, and partnerships with local businesses and organizations.
- Train pastors in entrepreneurship and marketplace ministry, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to launch and sustain their own businesses, create jobs in their communities, and integrate their faith into their professional lives.
- Support leaders who serve both in and outside the church walls, recognizing the value of their contributions, providing them with the flexibility they need to balance their responsibilities, and celebrating their commitment to living out their faith in all aspects of their lives.

The future church will not be led by career pastors alone but by kingdom-minded leaders operating in multiple spheres, leveraging their gifts, talents, and passions to make a positive impact on the world, demonstrating the transformative power of the Gospel in tangible and meaningful ways.

## Preparing for the Next Great Pivot

In light of these profound shifts and emerging realities, church leaders must proactively prepare for the future, embracing a mindset of adaptive faithfulness, characterized by a willingness to learn, adapt, and innovate while remaining steadfastly committed to the core

values and unchanging truths of the Gospel.

## Leading with Vision and Courage

Future-ready leaders must:

- Anticipate change rather than react to it, cultivating a proactive approach to leadership that involves scanning the horizon, identifying emerging trends, and anticipating potential challenges and opportunities before they arise.<sup>148</sup>
- Cast a clear vision that keeps the church mission-centered, articulating a compelling and inspiring vision for the future, reminding believers of the church's core purpose, and aligning all strategies and initiatives with the overarching mission of proclaiming the Gospel, embodying the love and justice of Christ, and extending the transformative power of the Kingdom of God to all people.
- Lead courageously, even when pivots are unpopular, demonstrating the willingness to challenge the status quo, embrace innovation, and make difficult decisions, even when they are met with resistance or criticism, trusting in God's guidance and remaining committed to His purposes, regardless of the potential consequences.

Just as Moses led Israel through the wilderness, navigating uncharted territories and overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and Paul adapted his mission strategy to effectively reach diverse audiences and communicate the Gospel in culturally relevant ways, modern leaders must be willing to shift strategies, challenge assumptions, and embrace new approaches while remaining faithful to the unchanging truths of the Gospel.

## Equipping the Church for a Hybrid Future

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<sup>148</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* (New York, NY: Crown, 2006).

The church of the future will be both physical and digital, requiring leaders to:

- Invest in digital discipleship tools that nurture authentic faith, creating online resources, virtual communities, and interactive platforms that facilitate spiritual growth, foster meaningful connections, and empower believers to live out their faith in the digital world.<sup>149</sup>
- Train congregations in theological literacy to navigate online misinformation, equipping believers with the critical thinking skills, biblical knowledge, and theological discernment necessary to evaluate online content, identify false teachings, and resist the spread of misinformation and disinformation.
- Create hybrid models of worship, community, and outreach, blending the best of both the physical and digital worlds to create engaging and accessible experiences that cater to the diverse needs and preferences of their congregations, fostering a sense of belonging, connection, and shared purpose, both online and offline.

A church that thrives in the digital age will be one that embraces innovation without losing its soul, leveraging technology to enhance its ministry, expand its reach, and connect with new audiences while remaining firmly grounded in its core values, its commitment to biblical truth, and its unwavering focus on Jesus Christ.

### Reclaiming the Church's Prophetic Voice

The future church must do more than adapt to cultural trends and technological advancements; it must reclaim its prophetic voice, speaking boldly against injustice, advocating for the oppressed, and embodying Christ's transformative love in a world that is desperately in

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<sup>149</sup> Campbell and Garner *Networked Theology*, 2016.

need of hope, healing, and reconciliation. This means:

- Challenging systems of oppression with a biblically grounded ethic of justice, dismantling oppressive structures, advocating for systemic change, and working towards the creation of a more just and equitable society where all people are treated with dignity and respect.<sup>150</sup>
- Engaging in social and political discourse with wisdom and integrity, participating in thoughtful dialogue, advocating for just policies, and seeking to influence the public square with the values of the Kingdom of God.
- Emphasizing spiritual formation so that believers are equipped to be agents of change, investing in discipleship, mentoring, and leadership development, empowering believers to live out their faith in every sphere of life, and equipping them to be salt and light in a world that is desperately in need of transformation.

A pivoting church does not merely survive cultural shifts; it shapes them for the glory of God, influencing the world with the values of the Kingdom, challenging injustice, advocating for the oppressed, and embodying Christ's transformative love in tangible and meaningful ways.

## A Church That Will Not Be Shaken

The church, as a resilient and adaptable movement, has always pivoted, navigating periods of profound change, overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges, and emerging stronger, more vibrant, and more committed to its mission. From the early disciples navigating persecution, oppression, and cultural hostility, to the transformative movements of the Reformation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the digital revolution, each generation has faced

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<sup>150</sup> Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times, Volume 2* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993).

its own unique turning point, and the body of Christ has endured, demonstrating its unwavering commitment to the Gospel and its enduring capacity to transform lives and communities.

The next great pivot is already here, unfolding before our eyes, presenting both unprecedented challenges and unparalleled opportunities for the church to reimagine its role, renew its commitment, and reclaim its prophetic voice in a world that is desperately in need of hope, healing, and reconciliation. The question is not whether the church will change, adapt, and evolve, but how it will change, how it will adapt its strategies, and how it will evolve its structures to more effectively fulfill its divinely ordained mission in the 21st century.

#### Key Takeaways:

- The future church must embrace digital ministry, leveraging technology to connect with new audiences, create engaging content, and foster meaningful relationships in the digital world.<sup>151</sup>
- Leaders must prepare for change with vision, courage, and strategic adaptability, anticipating future challenges, embracing innovation, and leading their congregations with clarity, conviction, and unwavering faith.
- The church must reclaim its prophetic voice, speaking boldly against injustice, advocating for the oppressed, and embodying Christ's transformative love in tangible and meaningful ways, challenging the systems and structures that perpetuate inequality and working towards the creation of a more just, equitable, and compassionate society.<sup>152</sup>

Through it all, the mission of Christ remains unchanged: to make disciples, equipping believers

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<sup>151</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2011).

<sup>152</sup> Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 2008.

to follow Jesus, live out their faith, and transform the world; to love our neighbors, extending compassion, mercy, and grace to all people, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances; and to build the Kingdom of God, working towards the fulfillment of God's purposes on earth as it is in heaven.

The church that pivots with wisdom and faithfulness will not merely survive the challenges of the future; it will thrive as a beacon of hope in an ever-changing world, demonstrating the transformative power of the Gospel, inspiring positive change, and pointing people to the love, grace, and redemption found in Jesus Christ.

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