

# Change Leadership for Revitalization

**T**his resource is for the architects of the culture change in your church. In particular, the senior leader and the top outreach leader are the two who most need what this chapter has to teach. But the elders and staff need it as well.

Knowing what needs to change in our leaders and our culture and actually leading that change are two different things. A vision for where we need to improve and what we want to see our future look like is critical. Yet too often, church leaders stop at just knowing where we are falling short and what needs to happen. Maybe they take a few steps for a few months, and then the momentum slips away, and business as usual reasserts itself. Grand plans of innovation, outreach, engagement, and hospitality sit idly on our desk, collecting dust as we fall back into the challenges of just keeping things going. What's missing? Sandra illustrates the hill we often have to climb, and sometimes it can feel steep.

Sandra became the outreach leader for an Evangelical Covenant Church in Omaha. She had a heart for outreach, good organizational skills, and strong relational abilities, and she modeled what she wanted

to see. She also had a senior pastor who was committed to outreach and enthusiastic about proposed changes. Yet as Sandra began, she immediately ran into some challenges. She wanted to develop missional leaders, but as she looked at the leaders of various ministries of the church, she noticed a common theme that discouraged her. The leaders of various ministries tended to be good-hearted people and effective in their respective areas, but none were oriented outward. They loved the teaching they received on Sunday, they enjoyed helping out at the church, but at their core they wanted the church to stay the same as it was.

Moreover, as Sandra assessed leaders in the church, she realized that they weren't strong leaders. The skills necessary for evangelism and organizational leadership that Sandra needed in her leaders were average at best. Essentially they were just making sure the slots were filled and the refreshments showed up on time. Asking more of these people who were hitting their limit was a nonstarter. They did not have any more time to give to any additional meetings, particularly not meetings involving outreach and growing much larger through seeing people commit to Christ. That kind of growth would change the culture of the church that many of them wanted to protect.

Reaching out to the pastor for help, she quickly realized that he was hitting his limit as well. He was carrying an immense load for the church and so didn't have any capacity to invest more time and energy into an evangelism initiative. While the pastor empathized with Sandra, he was struggling with his own confidence in leading the church as a whole. This led Sandra to the disheartening conclusion that she was unable to lead to change, that she was going to fail.

As a result Sandra stopped trying to influence leaders and just started doing her own thing, an outreach program with a few people from the church who were interested. Sandra and the three other

outreach-oriented people enjoyed it. But the rest of the church was not involved. Outreach quickly became a siloed ministry, and missional leaders were not emerging for the church.

In this chapter we are going to look at the final piece of missional leadership: leading to change. Missional leaders not only model and equip outreach but *lead to change* within their organizations or ministries. They are not content until strategies and practices for outreach are translated from paper into real life—not haltingly or sporadically, as they understand this will eventually flame out. Rather, they lead to the future, where these practices are consistently and enthusiastically embraced by other leaders and members of the congregation.

In learning to lead to change, I want to start by identifying public enemy number one to effectively leading any change we want to see.

### **Beware the Whirlwind**

One of the more insightful books I've read on change leadership is *The Four Disciplines of Execution* by Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling.<sup>1</sup> One of the key elements in the book is how the authors use the image of a whirlwind to distinguish the *urgent* from the *important*. The whirlwind is everything that you need to do to keep your church going. It is the urgent in the life of a leader: the things that press on you, threaten to occupy your thoughts and time, and demand your *immediate* attention. Like a whirlwind, these urgent tasks are constant, unrelenting, and distracting. Opposite the whirlwind are those goals and objectives that you know as a leader are important. In our case, it is developing a conversion community through modeling, equipping, and deploying missional leaders and developing a missional congregation. You may know that this is important to both the long-term health of your church and to being obedient to Scripture's calling for believers to bring the gospel to the world. Yet after every conference, every missions weekend, every book that gives you a

thousand new ideas and strategies, *the whirlwind is still there to greet you the next day.*

In essence the whirlwind is the activities that are required to keep your church afloat combined with all the challenges, relational and material, that pop up from week to week. Whether big or small, simple or complex, old or young, churches throughout the world regularly fall victim to the whirlwind. Surrendering precious attention and energy, they don't realize that the whirlwind will consume everything you are willing to give it and ask for more. The whirlwind is why many churches remain inwardly focused even though they long to reach people and change their communities. While many, if not most, of the activities associated with the whirlwind are *necessary*, leaders need to understand that if they are going to lead to change, they need to develop strategies for when to listen to and when to ignore the whirlwind, as well as focused ways of keeping people on track with the changes that you long for in your church.

So many pastors have confessed to me that they want to engage their community and grow through conversion, yet they are unable to create the change they know they need. Thus one of the most common refrains I hear from church leaders isn't *what* but *how*: "How do we get there from here?" They often face the same issues. Leaders who are not very strong as leaders and not very interested in becoming missional leaders (after all, that is not what they signed up for) often also don't have the time to give to any extra meetings. A welter of priorities and ongoing activities make it very difficult to really focus on outreach.

To help, I will dive into a case study that illustrates how one national organization that had drifted away some from its evangelistic mission and vibrancy recaptured outreach passion and impact, not only giving rise to conversion communities on campuses across the country but even becoming a national conversion movement.

## **InterVarsity Case Study**

Considering the longevity of the organization and its prominence within evangelicalism, it is important gain a full grasp of how InterVarsity fell from being a thriving conversion community. Sometimes church leaders discount the value of a case study from a parachurch organization. After all, parachurch organizations don't have the same challenges of tradition, organizational complexity, and long-term resistant members that church organizations have to deal with. Although there are some elements of truth in this, InterVarsity faced all of these challenges, and the steps to leading to change will be very applicable to churches.

I also want to address the limitation of case studies. Case studies give insight into what happened in a particular situation. Case studies often give us clues of what we might look for in more widely representative research. But case studies can never be generalized. Findings are suggestive but not conclusive for other situations. This paragraph represents my disclaimer. Results of case studies help researchers know what they might look for in broader, more representative studies. But they do not allow for conclusions that would cover other situations.

But here's my disclaimer to my disclaimer. We have helped 120 churches in seven different cities learn from the case study and then followed up their results with surveys to see what helped and applied and what did not. What we found in the case study, because of our further work with it, is more broadly applicable than the research methodology alone might warrant.

***Challenges InterVarsity faced.*** Here are the challenges that InterVarsity faced as the movement began to engage with changing the culture and the DNA and becoming more focused on evangelism and turning the ship:

1. mission drift and dilution over time
2. dependence on charismatic leaders and silver-bullet approach
3. overwhelmed and burned-out leaders
4. significant interpersonal conflict
5. theological disagreement on the gospel
6. a poor evangelism self-image

First, InterVarsity was fifty years old, and like a lot of other fifty-year-old organizations, the mission had shifted, diversified, and become fairly broad and diffuse. InterVarsity was founded in 1940 in the United States, with a vision to “engage students and faculty in evangelism, discipleship, and mission.” Very clear and simple. Very focused on the historic evangelical priorities of depending on Scripture, teaching people to pray and share their faith, helping people come to Christ, and sending people to their fellow college students and to the nations of the world. But mission drift and dilution set in.

As InterVarsity grew, had more status and influence in society, and broadened to a more kingdom-of-God center for its theology, the organization diversified its priorities in order to broaden its impact, but the result was that evangelism became one among many priorities.<sup>2</sup> At one point evangelism had become one among seven priorities that expressed only one of three larger goals. The mission and vision of InterVarsity were very full-orbed and compelling, but when it came to focus, InterVarsity staff didn’t have it. What InterVarsity discovered is what many have discovered: when outreach gets out from the centerpiece of the table and slips from being one of the top two or three priorities, it falls off the table and plummets in its potency. When vision becomes so diffuse and so broad, evangelism is often the first thing to die or dwindle. As one of our cohort pastors likes to say, “If vision leaks, evangelism evaporates.”<sup>3</sup> How could InterVarsity

leadership get evangelism back into the center of its life and vision as a movement? That was one of our challenges.

Second, InterVarsity had very up-and-down conversion reports that depended on a charismatic leader or a silver-bullet approach that would work for a couple of years and then run dry. InterVarsity had people such as Paul Little in the 1970s who helped staff do apologetics talks in dormitories and fraternities. He was a charismatic figure who wrote *How to Give Away Your Faith*, and he gave InterVarsity staff a method that worked for a while.<sup>4</sup> Becky Pippert, who later wrote *Out of the Salt Shaker*, also had a great impact and helped InterVarsity commit to relational evangelism and to the investigative Bible studies approach of drawing seekers and skeptics into small groups to look at the life of Jesus as recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>5</sup> That worked for a while, but when people made it a silver bullet, the key to seeing people commit to Christ and to a community, it tended to run dry. InterVarsity had periods of real infusions of energy and of the emergence of charismatic individuals and evangelists, but these periods came and went, and so the conversion numbers and the outreach vitality and impact fluctuated.

Third, many of the movement's other priorities consumed the bandwidth of the leaders, and so evangelism got less and less focus, energy, and leadership. When leaders are expected to do fifteen or twenty things well, and to supervise implementing fifteen or twenty different emphases and priorities, they become scattered, overwhelmed, and ultimately burned out. The whirlwind overwhelms them and consumes all available energy and attention. That was happening to InterVarsity. The middle- and upper-middle-management positions in InterVarsity were gradually becoming unattractive and unmotivating, and the best people stopped taking those roles because of the overwhelming nature of carrying so many priorities and communicating them to others as managerial middle-rung people. Leaders

want to lead, and leaders want to focus in order to get results. The breadth of vision and the resulting environment made that focus very difficult to achieve.

Fourth, InterVarsity had significant organizational and interpersonal conflict, which consumed much of the energy staff wanted to spend on outreach. Those conflicts included personnel issues that alienated whole parts of the country as well as different approaches to philosophy of ministry, resulting in polarization. There were also multiethnic and justice issues that led to an inward focus on the pain of being a minority and to a sense of guilt and accusation that went along with being white. InterVarsity had many failures and took many steps backward as it tried to become genuinely multiethnic, to develop diverse leaders, and to truly share power.

So InterVarsity was stuck in several forms of organizational conflict, and I can't tell you how many times I have seen this happen in churches as well. A pastor will seek to turn the congregation outward, and suddenly a major conflict emerges that sucks all the energy out of the room, out of the initiative, and often out of people's hearts and souls. When this happens, people leave, sometimes including some important givers to the church. As pastors get discouraged, the energy and enthusiasm for growth and outreach gradually dwindles. That had happened to InterVarsity.

Fifth, InterVarsity staff had disagreements around the central message they were proclaiming. Some were saying, "We've lost the gospel because we aren't as focused on the cross and Jesus' death for our sin, and on how his death paid the penalty we deserved so we can be accepted by God." Others were saying, "No, no, you've reduced the gospel. Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom or rule of God and how it can transform the world. It is about this life and this world, not just forgiveness, heaven, and the life after." It turns out that both were right, but rather than creating synergy and commonality in the

message, staff from different parts of the country were busy arguing about it, and ongoing debate was polarizing the organization.

Finally, InterVarsity as an organization, as a ministry, and as a movement had a poor evangelism self-image. Staff and students felt that they were the campus group that was bad at outreach. InterVarsity was great at a lot of things, including discipling people through small groups and training them in apologetics. InterVarsity also intentionally emphasized missions through its Urbana Missions Conference, held every three years. But when it came to evangelism, InterVarsity staff and students would build friendships with irreligious students, answer their questions, and then watch as a Southern Baptist or a Campus Crusade (now Cru) leader led them to Christ. InterVarsity staff knew we struggled with outreach. We could tell you what was wrong with what the Southern Baptists and Cru were doing, and I am sure we had some good criticisms, for what that is worth. But we thought we were not good at reaching students and helping them find faith and connection to our groups. We weren't good at helping people to cross the line of faith and commit their lives to Christ and to our community.

Then things began to change. The change continued over two decades and continues even today.

***Stages in the change process.*** Despite how dire things looked at InterVarsity, its leaders were able to turn the ocean liner around. Over time, with persistent effort and with ample prayer, missional leaders actually led to change. This transformation began with being mindful of the challenges InterVarsity faced, developing a plan to put the principles and strategies of outreach into place, and remaining steadfastly dedicated to seeing the process through.

So how did it happen? There were four stages to this process of leading to change, and missional leaders need to be mindful of these in turning their own organizations around.<sup>6</sup> In walking through these

stages, recognize that the time each stage took for InterVarsity is not necessarily normative for all churches or organizations. Each is dependent on the challenges a church faces, the leaders it already has in place, and the flavor of the organization.<sup>7</sup> One other comment: along the way you will see in the case study that I often use the word *we*. I was part of the leadership team that God graciously worked through to help bring the change about.

- *Stage 1: Preparation.* This stage is marked by a developing conviction and urgency regarding the need to be a conversion community, combined with hope that this transformation is possible. In this stage it is crucial that leadership unify around a common vision and mission. For InterVarsity this stage comprised 1995–2000.
- *Stage 2: Activation.* This stage marks starting to put into place the strategies, systems, and people necessary for success. Through appointing specific leaders to own the process of revitalization and outreach growth, churches and organization signal both internally and externally that this is a driving priority. In the case of InterVarsity, it entered this phase through appointing evangelism leadership and tasking these individuals with outlining and implementing necessary changes between 2000 and 2004.
- *Stage 3: Experimentation.* This stage signals the transfer from solely leadership-focused change to generating a culture of conversion among staff and people. Missional leaders seeking change that lasts past individual, charismatic leaders need to pay considerable attention to this stage. This requires innovation and experimentation in terms of method and strategy for outreach as leaders look to see what systems take hold within their organization. InterVarsity entered this stage by innovating at the grassroots of its organization: its volunteers. It thought critically

about what systems it could develop, experimented with them at different locales, and tried to implement them at a national level from 2004 to 2007. In all of these efforts InterVarsity was focused on what experiments were able to generate consistent, sustained results in outreach.

- *Stage 4: Actualization.* This stage marks the culmination of the revitalization process, where organizations begin to see consistent, incremental improvements in new commitments. At this point, strategies that succeeded in small-scale efforts have begun to be systematized, fine-tuned, and used to equip other leaders and staff to replicate the process throughout the organization. InterVarsity entered this phase once its successes on small, regional levels were nationalized as the organization began to grow across the board from 2007 to 2017.

***Steps to revitalization.*** Digging deeper into each stage, we can see that each corresponds to a specific step of how InterVarsity was successful in creating a conversion community. For church or organizational leaders hoping likewise to lead to change, these steps form a crucial process:

1. Instill a spirit of ownership within the whole church for the mission (preparation stage).
2. Appoint a leader and a coalition to develop and implement the vision (activation stage).
3. Build around key strengths and innovate from there (experimentation stage).
4. Outline and then secure funding necessary for the long-term strategic vision (actualization stage).

*Step 1: Instill a spirit of ownership within the whole church for the mission.* At the outset of the process, InterVarsity faced a fractured

leadership team and vision. Evangelism was merely one of seven priorities under the umbrella of three broader goals or missions for InterVarsity as a whole. While many of these other priorities were good and useful, they sowed division and ambiguity within InterVarsity regarding its direction. Like many churches, InterVarsity had tried to do everything well instead of striving to do one thing with excellence, and as a result it was suffering from a leadership and vision problem.

Once InterVarsity leaders realized the problem, the turnaround began in earnest with the hire of Steve Hayner, a pastor from Seattle, to lead InterVarsity. Committed to outreach not only personally but systematically throughout the organization, Hayner helped InterVarsity develop a clear and compelling vision for returning to its original mission. To cement this commitment to outreach, one of Hayner's first acts was to develop a new, overarching mission statement that focused on gospel witness as the core priority of InterVarsity. Using this mission statement, Hayner was able to enliven a passion for outreach among the staff and leaders simply by giving a bold vision and clear identity for what InterVarsity *was*. It now reads that InterVarsity is "A vibrant campus ministry that establishes and advances witnessing communities of students and faculty." This key phrase, "witnessing communities," began to shape everything InterVarsity did. The new president emphasized the urgency of reprioritizing outreach, and then he articulated that urgency by making witness the core characteristic of groups InterVarsity staff were seeking to plant and develop on every campus in the United States.

While mission statements may seem too corporate for churches, they are powerful tools that missional leaders can successfully deploy in the local church to unite the people behind a common vision. At my home church—Community Christian Church—our leadership has likewise led through crafting a clear and compelling vision for

outreach as a priority for growth. Our mission statement is “Helping people find their way back to God.”<sup>8</sup> Everything we do is measured by that outcome. Notice, however, that it is not comprehensive. It does not describe everything we do but rather focuses on the driving philosophy and priority of our church to reach and save those who are far from God.

Just as we needed to be able to come together on a central mission statement, we also needed to be able to rally around a unified understanding of the gospel. To do this, one key step in this early process was getting the staff together who were disagreeing about the theology of the gospel. We worked on and then released a unifying theological statement on the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus, putting atonement and new life at the center of the gospel and thus reaffirming our historic evangelical commitments. But we also expanded our understanding of the circumference of the gospel to include everything that expresses the Lordship of Christ both within and beyond history. The gospel has a center but also a breadth, and this affirmation of both the integrity and the universal applicability of the gospel brought the movement together. It raised our urgency and focus on communicating the gospel and inviting people into the kingdom of his Lordship.

InterVarsity staff and leadership also needed a picture of what it might look like if they succeeded in revitalizing their outreach. A leader with a vision not only needs to communicate where they are going and how but also what it looks like when they get there. What does success for InterVarsity as a conversion community—or series of conversion communities—look like?

To help InterVarsity staff gain an understanding of this end game, leaders and staff began to visit other conversion communities services. At one conference on evangelism and outreach hosted by a local church, 350 key InterVarsity leaders from around the country were

brought in. As they watched and learned about the effects of evangelism in growing an organization, the change in the staff was stunning. All of a sudden, an organization that felt that it struggled in outreach started to believe that we could be amazing in witness. Many leaders went back to their campuses with a vision of what the future could hold.

To summarize, the president created urgency, established the priority of witness by reforming the vision statement, and then cast a picture by bringing 350 staff to a church that was a conversion community and that matched InterVarsity's vision and values enough for staff to embrace the picture.

*Step 2: Appoint a leader and a coalition to develop and implement the vision.* After preparing by developing urgency and desire, InterVarsity began to actualize this vision by appointing leaders and gathering a coalition to oversee the process. The president appointed Terry Erickson as the national director of evangelism, and then Terry appointed an associate director for evangelism (me). A crystallizing moment for Terry and me regarding the immensity of the task that lay before us happened during a major conference early in our tenure at InterVarsity. We were attending Amsterdam 2000, a global gathering of evangelists sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. While in these types of gatherings InterVarsity leaders and staff had usually been prominent, in this case, with hundreds of seminars offered and a multitude of plenary sessions, InterVarsity people had almost no presence at all. Terry and I realized InterVarsity had a long hill to climb. Distracted and divided for years, InterVarsity was no longer known as a leader in evangelism. While *we* now knew that, it turned out that the rest of the world did too.

In response Terry and I worked on building a guiding coalition among regional directors and ministry leaders. While Terry focused on organizational change issues at the cabinet, board, and regional director level, I worked on fostering innovation, connections, and

resource development at the grassroots level. One of our immediate priorities was ingraining evangelism as a priority in every region and specialized ministry (e.g., graduate student ministry and multiethnic ministry) at InterVarsity. We did this through developing a coalition of “evangelism champions” across the organization, people who would advocate for evangelism within their ministry or community.

In all, fifteen leaders from across the country came to comprise this guiding coalition, which would meet regularly to challenge, encourage, and follow up with one another on how they were pursuing the vision for outreach in their localities. The champions visited various churches and conferences that focused on evangelism to stimulate our thinking and build our networks. Beyond just sharing information, Terry and I worked to keep the champions accountable for making progress in their own outreach on their campus or in their area. In turn they were also given responsibility to influence their regional director and to take back resources and ideas to implement in their part of the country. Over time these champions meetings became opportunities to share stories of conversion, innovation, and success.

In addition, the very strength we had developed in multiethnic ministry became a powerful center for growth in evangelism. Though facing the pain and the darkness of racial injustice is an important part of any authentic process of reconciliation, it is also true that many diverse ethnic groups have huge gifts to give to the evangelistic mission of the church. We began to experience that outward synergy.

Churches can experience on a smaller scale the same growth that InterVarsity did. In *Organic Outreach for Churches*, Kevin Harney encourages individual churches to make all their ministry leaders their evangelism champions team.<sup>9</sup> This model works well, and it is one of the ways I invite pastors to structure outreach at every level of their church in the cohorts. So the men’s ministry leader, small group ministry leader, worship leader, executive pastor, elder board

chairperson, and so on, are all part of a team that gathers monthly to fuel witness in each leader's personal life and each leader's influence over their ministry.

You need to appoint a leader and a coalition as well. That is when things start to really move forward, and until you do, you are not ready to grow much in your capacity to develop and implement the vision. One of the very interesting things I've noticed is that leaders and churches always designate leaders to lead what is most important to them. If worship on Sunday is the most important thing, then there is a director or leader of worship who facilitates that ministry and who develops other leaders to help. That person develops, leads, and influences that team. If small groups are really important to the church, then there is some kind of small group leader or coordinator who coaches and recruits other leaders. If children's ministry is important to a church, there is always some leader during the service who also develops that ministry and recruits volunteers to be part of it. But often senior leaders feel like they can lead the evangelism value themselves, without developing other leaders to help. In a few cases this is true. Sometimes a lead pastor is so outreach oriented that it just oozes out of the pastor's pores, and people can't help but catch it and implement it in whatever ministry they are leading. I have found that to be a very rare situation, and even in that situation, the evangelism value slips over time.

Mission drift sets in for even the most outreach-oriented pastors. In all cases the senior leader will be helped by having a partner, a champion, someone to lead on the evangelism value in the church and make sure it gets implemented by every key leader in the church and through every ministry.

Another key lesson from the InterVarsity case study is that it is not helpful to separate evangelism as a separate ministry of the church, such as worship ministry or children's ministry. Every leader needs to

become missional and to take responsibility for outreach through their ministries. That is true for children's ministry leaders, men's ministry leaders, seniors' ministry leaders, and so on—really every leader. Evangelism is an integration value, not a separate department or committee of the church. It goes back to our equation for conversion communities. Missional leaders characterize conversion communities, not a missional committee approach that siloes off evangelism and makes the rest of the leaders think evangelism is somebody else's responsibility. InterVarsity did not silo evangelism off to a separate committee but instead chose leaders to influence everyone in every structure. That is a much more sound, research-supported way forward.

It has also been interesting to see who makes the best kind of evangelism champion for churches. It turns out that people who are very successful and effective evangelists might not be the best for this position. Whoever champions evangelism at the leadership level in a church needs several important qualities. Passion for reaching people is one of them, but leadership gifts are probably the most significant. This person needs to influence other leaders. They need to help evangelism be an integrated value for everybody, as I discussed in chapter six. This person needs to be able to attend leadership meetings, with which evangelists often get very impatient. They need to be able to meet and pastor others but also challenge leaders in the church to pursue modeling personal outreach in their own lives and to integrate the evangelism value into what they are leading.

So you are looking for a leader who has passion for witness and models it well for other people but who does not do so in ways that other people feel like they could never imitate. Let the out-there evangelist be out there, and ask them to help train people, but don't try to put them into a harness of internal leadership over the outreach value of the church. They don't tend to do it very well. They get impatient, and people often don't imitate them (unless they are also evangelists)

because they don't have the same giftedness. You need an everyday person who is a good leader and who motivates other people to feel like they can reach out too. Help the evangelists lead lots of people to Christ through public proclamation and training, and then use an influential leader who works well within the structures of the church to keep all your leaders accountable and moving forward in their own life and leadership of witness.

For the outreach influence team, made up of all your key leaders, your church's size makes a difference in how you structure the team. If you are smaller (under 250 people, like most churches in the country), appoint your key ministry leaders, often volunteers or elders, and meet with them monthly for ten months a year, and then have your outreach influence leader meet with each leader one on one twice in the year.

If you are part of a church with over 250 members, you will have more staff and be running more programs. Your key leaders team will be growing. For those churches, I recommend, as does Kevin Harney, a different structure for the meetings. Meet once a quarter as a whole team, meet once a quarter in affinity clusters (a children's, middle school, and high school cluster; an emerging adult, men's ministry, and women's ministry cluster; and so on). Then, once a quarter, have your outreach influence leader meet with your key leaders one on one. The resources I have developed work for both structures.

*Step 3: Build around key strengths and innovate from there.* With leadership in place and a coalition of staff throughout the organization committed to evangelism as a guiding priority, InterVarsity entered the next stage in revitalization by beginning to build around its collective strengths. Central to this step was first identifying what strengths we had in various ministries and leaders, and then how we could maximize these areas in relation to evangelism. In auditing our leaders and staff, we determined that we were exceptionally strong in relationship building on campuses and leading Bible studies aimed at

spiritual seekers. Rather than cancel these programs as not “evangelistic” enough, InterVarsity evangelism champions worked to reorient these strengths by integrating more explicitly evangelistic practices.

Bible studies proved one of our more fruitful areas of experimentation and innovation. We shifted the focus from more seeker-oriented studies to evangelistically focused groups we branded “Groups Investigating God.” For those on the outside, the move from seeker oriented to evangelistic may not have even been noticeable, but it was a crucial and intentional reorientation by our champions, with the aim of making evangelism the group’s purpose. This was evident in how we structured the study: each ran for six weeks and concluded with every group inviting participants to commit to Christ and the community. Armed with this new focus, yet making use of the muscle memory of the organization’s strengths in Bible studies and relationships, InterVarsity staff embraced the strategy with a vengeance. Inspired by President Steve Hayner’s vision for InterVarsity as an evangelism leader and united behind a common mission, evangelism champions set bold goals for evangelistic success and challenged one another to meet and exceed expectations. In particular, we wanted InterVarsity to have as many groups for seekers and skeptics as small groups for Christians. At the time this was a bold, if not crazy, goal for the organization, but its ambition and clarity gave leaders and staff a direction to build toward.

As Groups Investigating God built on existing strengths in the organization yet managed to maintain an evangelistic priority, this change was an easy one to replicate throughout the country and across various ministries in the organization. Over time and because we built on InterVarsity’s strengths to achieve replicable success, the groundwork was laid for evangelism champions to begin innovating with the formula. InterVarsity leaders and staff began writing and rewriting manuals for these groups, each time tweaking the strategy

to fit the needs of its community while maintaining evangelism as the central priority of the group. In time nearly every national strategic ministry had a means of deploying Groups Investigating God. (National strategic ministries were national ministries aimed at particular populations, such as fraternity and sorority students, African American students, and graduate students.) Beyond just aiding established ministries, the model was adapted as a means of engaging groups on campuses across the country we previously had had little success in reaching. As a result, InterVarsity started to experience success. People made progress spiritually, and some people committed their lives to Christ and to the Christian community on campus.

What is the strength of your church or organization? Missional leaders who are capable of leading to change need to have an accurate understanding not only of their church's weakness but also of its strengths. Where can you build? What is your church doing well? What does it do with passion, excellence, or dedication? These are the entry points of developing outreach strategies and methods that are sustainable and replicable.

Kevin Harney describes this relationship between strengths and evangelism opportunity as the two-degree rule.<sup>10</sup> Harney argues that churches should look at each of their ministries and then "vector" them outward to related opportunities. For example, if your church excels at providing care, meals, transportation, and so on for its people, then deploy that strength for others in your community who are seeking. In other words, the two-degree rule is simply looking at what you do well for the Christians in your church and shifting it outward to serve and engage the unchurched. It does not require massive shifts in resources, training, and leaders but rather a subtle shift in a ministry you are already excelling in. Through vectoring their ministries outward a little, churches can build evangelistic programs into the existing culture.

So whatever you are strong at, focus on your strength for building and fostering outreach. Implement your strengths, then innovate while keeping your eyes fixed on outreach as the priority. Then celebrate every win.

*Step 4: Outline and then secure funding necessary for the long-term strategic vision.* The final stage was the development of a longer-term well-funded strategic vision and plan. InterVarsity chose to adopt three successive five-year plans that had evangelism front and center (one of four such priorities). Over the time period of these successive plans, InterVarsity's conversion-growth rates increased at 1 percent per year, finally getting over the 10-percent ratio during the second five-year plan. Growth accelerated as well in that second five-year run.

Funding for innovation went from investing in fifteen pilot projects to investing in eighty-two pilot projects around the country. Staff proposed and then ran these pilot projects within their campuses, areas, or regions. Unsurprisingly, the opportunity for funding motivated champions to come to the meetings and to become creative about their proposals so that they could be rewarded. After each gathering, staff scattered to their regions and begin the work of influence and change. That coalition of champions became a force within InterVarsity that influenced the organization at every level.

Several of these projects were as ambitious as they were expensive. We launched a three-million-dollar justice and evangelism campaign in New York City, hosted across fifteen universities and involving the mayor and other civic leaders. We developed and published a comprehensive Bible study and campus-engagement resource for InterVarsity groups throughout the country (\$500,000). The Groups Investigating God referenced earlier, designed to aid in reorienting Bible studies toward evangelism, were supported by \$150,000. In order to bolster our apologetics ministry, we pledged \$50,000 to developing resources, providing campus speakers, and hosting events

that address today's tough questions and obstacles to the gospel. We raised another \$50,000 for staff training in the dynamics of dependence on the Holy Spirit through fasting, prayer, and power evangelism. While costly, the momentum and the impact generated from these efforts made the rest of the process worth it to many of the leaders involved.

In Luke 14 Jesus speaks to the crowds on the cost of discipleship. To be his disciple, Jesus teaches, is an exceedingly difficult calling that demands sacrifice and endurance. Foreshadowing his own death, Jesus proclaims that "whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:27). In outlining these demands, Jesus is ensuring that those who want to follow him *know* what they are signing up for, that they understand the cost and are willing to pay it in order to have the reward of following him. To drive this point home, Jesus offers this helpful piece of advice:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. (Lk 14:28-32 ESV)

More than just a powerful glimpse into the calling of a believer, Jesus' words strike home for church leaders embarking on a new venture. So much of success in leading to change is ensuring that the church, its leaders, and its staff are resourced to see revitalization through. You can have the best strategies, generate immense enthusiasm, and have

a mission statement that inspires, but without resources to execute to the finish line, any change will be limited.

This step was very significant, and the research I did with churches over this past couple of years also showed the importance of dedicating funding to local evangelism and outreach if churches want to become conversion communities.<sup>11</sup>

**Conclusion.** InterVarsity had significant change in a twelve-year period from 2005 to 2017. As leaders led to change, the organization incrementally moved from ineffective and disinterested in evangelism to a conversion community. Measurable outcomes of this success include:

- InterVarsity went from a total number of 32,000 students to a total of 36,600 in 2014, or 14 percent growth.
- By 2015, InterVarsity topped 40,000 students, or 25 percent growth.
- Total conversions more than doubled, from 1,635 to 3,344, and by 2017 total reported conversions were 4,600.
- The numbers of groups without a single conversion shrank from nearly half of the groups to one-quarter of the groups.
- The numbers of unchurched people attending at least half the time increased from 20 percent in 2005 to 27 percent in 2017.
- Most importantly for my study on conversion communities, in those last three years InterVarsity became a conversion movement, with over 5 percent overall growth per year and over 10 percent of total attendance coming from new Christians in the last year.

More than simply a conversion community, InterVarsity had given way to a series of connected and mutually supporting conversion communities on the way to becoming a conversion movement. As with many of the conversion communities in our study, individual

leaders proved a catalyst for change in other ministries, localities, and groups. In the last year, InterVarsity had over forty thousand students involved, with campus groups in nearly every state in the country, and saw forty-six hundred students make first-time commitments to Christ, the vast majority of which stuck. People were reached and lives were changed.

You have the potential to be a skilled and artful leader of change in your church. You have potential to see this kind of change. This begins with understanding and leading a process of change.

1. Instill a spirit of ownership within the whole church for the mission.
2. Appoint a leader and a coalition to develop and implement the vision.
3. Build around key strengths and innovate from there.
4. Outline and then secure funding necessary for the long-term strategic vision.

Under God's good hand, and as you pray and depend on the Holy Spirit, you can do this. You can lead culture change in your church. You can no longer struggle with evangelism. You can become a conversion community and influence others to become conversion communities too.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. How does the whirlwind of maintaining what is already happening keep you and your church or group from becoming more missionally focused?
2. What challenges that Rick mentioned InterVarsity faced do you resonate with for your church or group?

3. As you look at the four stages Rick summarizes at the end of the chapter, where do you see your church or group in the change process? What are your best next steps?
4. Who will lead the change process for your group or church? Who will you designate as your coalition for change, and how will you support them, encourage them, and give them opportunities to influence others?
5. What are your strengths in outreach, and how can you focus on strengthening them even more and providing resource for them?
6. How might you innovate and fund new ideas and initiatives for outreach for your group or church? Get creative here.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup>Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling, *The 4 Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals* (New York: Free Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>What do I mean by “kingdom-of-God center for its theology”? Since the 1980s work of George Eldon Ladd at Fuller Theological Seminary in books such as *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Popular Expositions on the Kingdom of God*, more and more evangelicals have embraced the understanding that what God in Christ was and is doing is restoring the rule of the kingdom of God to every segment and sector of society and to every corner of creation. This bigger vision of God’s mission leads to an embrace of whatever helps reflect or extend the presence and values of God into the world. This presence of God through Christ is the presence of the future, a foretaste of the victory of God over all that is wrong in the world. Evangelism, the announcing of the good news that God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus, is still center of God’s mission, but by no means is evangelism the extent or circumference of God’s mission. See George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Popular Expositions on the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

<sup>3</sup>Randy Discher, at Constance Evangelical Free Church in Andover, Minnesota, near Minneapolis, coined this apt phrase, based on Bill Hybels’s earlier apt phrase about vision: “Vision leaks, and must be recommunicated and reinvigorated every thirty days.”

<sup>4</sup>Paul Little, *How to Give Away Your Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966).

<sup>5</sup>Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>The idea for this case study was born when Terry Erickson and I presented the results of the InterVarsity process to the national leadership of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Terry first gathered the statistics that we analyzed and initially suggested some of the change stages.

<sup>7</sup>These four stages are reflected well in the change model that has been proposed and researched by John P. Kotter, Harvard MBA professor and author of *Leading Change* (Brighton, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup>My colleague and boss Ed Stetzer critiques the theology behind this statement, since without God we are lost and separated from God and need to find our way *to* God for the first time and not *back to* God. I have three responses. First, in the creation sense we are all children of God, made in the image of God, and long to get back to that creation state of being with God in relationship. Second, many Americans were in church earlier in their lives and had some sense of relationship to God and need to get back to that relationship. Third, it is a better approach to assume people want to be with God and are just getting back to what they want, not that they are miserable sinners lost and without hope who need to come to God for the first time ever. (We can be both at the same time. Here I am just emphasizing the best starting place, not the whole of truth about us.) I will leave you to discern and decide which is theologically more sound. Of course, if you are a strong Calvinist, you are now wondering about me.

<sup>9</sup>Kevin G. Harney, *Organic Outreach for Churches: Infusing Evangelistic Passion into Your Congregation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 104.

<sup>10</sup>Harney, *Organic Outreach for Churches*, 141.

<sup>11</sup>Billy Graham Center Institute and Lifeway Research, Small Church Evangelism Study. The key data from this study is also included in chapter five.