

JOSH HAYDEN



REMISSIONING  
CHURCH

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A FIELD GUIDE TO BRINGING  
A CONGREGATION BACK TO LIFE

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## PART ONE

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# THE JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES STARTS SOMEWHERE

*Translation is the church's birthmark as well as its missionary benchmark:  
the church would be unrecognizable or unsustainable without it.*

LAMIN SANNEH, *WHOSE RELIGION IS CHRISTIANITY?*

BENEATHA: *Love him? There is nothing left to love.*

MAMA: *There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that,  
you ain't learned nothing. (Looking at her) Have you cried for that boy today?  
I don't mean for yourself and for the family 'cause we lost the money. I mean for  
him: what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think  
is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things  
easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't  
the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the  
world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure  
him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account  
what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.*

LORRAINE HANSBERRY, *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

*Our eyes were opened, but too late.*

ELIE WIESEL, *NIGHT*



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# THE GIFT OF REMISSIONING

*Practice resurrection.*

WENDELL BERRY, *THE MAD FARMER POEMS*

*It's about following and imitating Jesus and helping others follow  
and imitate Jesus. It's meant for everyone and not just some.*

EUN STRAWSER, *CENTERING DISCIPLESHIP*



A FEW MONTHS INTO MY NEW ADVENTURE as a senior pastor in a very established (150-plus-year-old) congregation, two experiences helped me realize I might have misjudged the depth of change necessary in my new calling. One Sunday in the greeting line after worship, a woman grabbed me by the shoulders (without shaking my hand), pushed down, and said, “Young man, this is how you stay put. We placed that pulpit on the stage for you to stand behind, so quit moving around.”

A few weeks later I did my first baptism and coached the congregation on how to celebrate with the kids and adults who were committing to be disciples of Jesus and walk from death to life. I encouraged them to clap, cheer, say “amen,” and celebrate the moment with each person getting baptized that day. In the greeting line after the service, a gentleman shook my hand and said, “That was nice to celebrate baptism with so many people today and to cheer them on. It’s not how we do it here, but it was nice for today.”

I had no idea that wandering a few steps from the pulpit while addressing the small crowd spread through a large sanctuary would cause so much discomfort. And who knew that encouraging some cheer during baptisms could be such a bother?

As I've worked with churches in different cultural, denominational, and geographic contexts, one thing has been abundantly clear: people resist change. Some resistance begins on the surface. For example, one church grew concerned when someone threatened to cut their twenty-one-step process for making punch at receptions down to a simpler process. Other means of resistance are more complicated. Some immigrant churches try to hold on to their native culture even as younger generations assimilate into the majority culture of their new home nation, leading to differing opinions on which language to use for worship.

The most common theme I've seen in dying churches is an overemphasis on shiny tools and technology that mask the decline of the congregation. One church near my home bought a large, overwhelmingly bright, impossible-to-read electronic sign for a building that can't hold more than forty people. They spent thousands of dollars on a sign for a back-country road where no one drives if they don't already know the church exists. This isn't much different from the thousands of churches that began broadcasting worship services online during the pandemic but never shared access to anyone outside the existing congregation. These churches put their hope in quick fixes and updated technologies, yet they still struggle or fail. They don't need revitalization. They need remissioning.

In 2019 a noticeable shift occurred in Protestant Christianity in the United States: more churches closed than opened (three thousand new churches formed and forty-five hundred churches closed for a loss of fifteen hundred).<sup>1</sup> While most church-planting networks have doubled down on starting new communities, is it possible to mature an established congregation out of its dysfunction and into health from the inside out? Is there something to be done about the large number of church closures besides abandoning them to start something new?

The starting point in the remissioning journey is a commitment to a central idea: people can change. And the idea that people, churches, institutions, and organizations *can't* change is antithetical to the good news of Jesus.

Don't get me wrong. People don't change easily. Churches, businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations don't evolve without struggle. People don't often want to change. But it's simply not true that people don't change.

This book is a story about hope and an invitation for church leaders and congregations to discover a pathway from death to life. We will explore stories about churches that are transforming into faith communities that are good for their neighborhoods and share tools that help remissioning churches pursue flourishing.

In a polarized, postmodern, and rapidly changing world, it's an uphill battle for established churches to defy their neighbors' skepticism that they're interested in the community's flourishing. And it's tempting to hide behind that struggle and avoid inviting real-life people into repentance and new life. But the alternative is death. A kind of dying that ends in the tomb and has no bearing on a shared future with God.

If I could pull the curtain back for a moment on this entire remissioning project and show you the wizard at the end of the yellow brick road, my hope would be this: you and your church would commit to making disciples who imitate Jesus and break the generational pattern of waiting until dropout, decline, or death to pursue a clear mission again.

### **TURN UP THE TEMPERATURE**

Established churches are on a journey. And to face the changes that happen on that journey, they embrace a common mantra: "The pain of staying must become greater than the pain of going."

That's because established churches need heat.

Have you ever heard of pyrophytic plants? That's right, fire plants (cue your favorite Super Mario fire flower memory!). Some trees and plants not only tolerate fire, but they also depend on its heat to further their species.

Some trees have fire-activated serotinous cones. For example, the long, skinny, sturdy lodgepole pines used to make tepees and cabins in the West produce cones that are sealed up with resin. For the seeds to be released, the cones need fire. During a forest fire, flames melt the resin, allowing the seeds to fall out and be scattered by the wind, gravity, and weather to germinate elsewhere.

Fire destroys many plants, organisms, and animals in its path. However, certain kinds of eucalyptus trees have special buds beneath the surface of their trunks that won't emerge until the bark is scorched and cracked open, allowing new life to emerge. Other plants hide new stems underground and the shoots won't poke above the surface until a fire has burned its way through the area.

Remissioning leaders and churches can learn to endure a fire and experience rebirth like a pyrophytic plant. I understand that wildfires are unpredictable. Wildfires cause damage. There is a risk that the fire will be too destructive and nothing will be left for a seedling to grow. But the alternative is a slow, steady decline that feels like survival but is the early stages of extinction.

Many of us hope for a grow-your-church-without-change plan. Conflict? Struggle? Death and resurrection? No, we didn't sign up for that. But established churches are much like these fire-dependent plants. Without the heat we may survive, but we won't produce fruit or multiply life.

It may feel overwhelming to think about starting the remissioning process, but the truth is you already have. Ready or not, your church is on a journey, and if you grow in awareness of your place in the life cycle, you'll have a better idea how much heat is necessary to produce new life.

## REVITALIZATION VERSUS REMISSIONING

Over the course of this book we will discuss how to remission established churches (both longstanding congregations and church plants that have survived past five years). We'll look at core competencies that aid in the remissioning process, and we'll examine practitioner-tested tools that help churches discover breakthrough in their context. But what is remissioning?

Remissioning is the process of inside-out transformation of the church through discipleship for the sake of our neighbors and world. It is a steady, purposeful, and dedicated process that involves the transformation of the leaders and church together for the sake of their community. Remissioning is much different from revitalization.

Revitalization is refreshing an existing church to do its current work with greater clarity and a goal of numerical growth. To revitalize is to work harder, smarter, and more efficiently on existing programs and events to help the church increase in relevance to the community.

Remissioning churches wrestle with a question: “If our people gathered in our building and the building fell into a sinkhole, would our community notice we were gone?” Revitalizing churches ask, “What can we do to bring more people to our programs and events?”

Revitalizing a church is like updating an app on your favorite device. Revitalization helps individual programs run more smoothly, use less battery, crash less often, and work more efficiently. Remissioning is upgrading the entire operating system so all the apps, messaging, and processes fit into a new system and work in sync with multiple other devices across the world.

Remissioning churches ask complicated questions about how to translate the gospel through life experiences, relationships, Scripture, and the Spirit who still speaks. To remission is to figure out where our church has lost the plot. Remissioning leaders recognize that our churches bear a responsibility to become Jesus-followers who go to our neighbors before asking them to come to our religious services. Questions like: Who are my neighbors? Where has the Spirit gone ahead of us? How do we catch up? To remission is to learn to repent and walk in new life for the sake of others. Remissioned churches understand that if they are thriving while their neighbors are barely surviving, then they aren’t really thriving after all.

Revitalizing churches have fallen captive to the challenges named by Edwin Friedman in his essential book *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. They think that with a little more dedication, hard work, and a charismatic leader, their (insert the church’s most popular past program or event here) will relive its glory days and the church will thrive again. But as Friedman points out, “The great lesson of this turnaround is that when any relationship system is imaginatively gridlocked, it cannot get free simply through more thinking about the problem. Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder.”<sup>2</sup>

As one of my mentors, Glenn Akins, used to say, what if it worked? What if you did attract more people, grow your worship service, and revitalize your existing programs and events? How would repeating those same programs, events, and ways of being church yield different results down the road? What would suddenly cause those programs to yield different disciples?

Remissioning leaders are going on a longer journey. It’s a journey of discovery, but they’ll have to deal with existing issues while on the road. It’s like

redecking a ship while out at sea. You don't have the luxury of pulling into dock and fixing things up. You have to pull up some boards, take on some water, repair the hole, bail out the water, and then move to the next section.

One of the more familiar ways we talk about "remission" is in relation to cancer. Someone is in remission when treatments have reduced or eliminated cancer from their body. The cancer has either disappeared (complete remission) or decreased and stopped growing (partial remission). Remission requires death. The cancer cells must die for the body to live and healthy cells to grow. In a similar way, many established churches are sick, and the disease is spreading in their body, threatening their existence. To remission a church is to learn what unhealthy cells must die and seek healing for the local church body so it might live again.

Please don't misunderstand me; the church as a whole will not fail (Mt 16:18). But individual churches are regularly going into hospice care, closing their doors, and fumbling the handoff to the next generation. To focus our efforts on revitalization is to put a Band-Aid on a large wound that needs stitches and healing from the inside out. Revitalization is like receiving test results showing only partial remission and trying to convince everyone it's good enough.

To remission a church is to ask what kinds of relationships, programs, events, and shared ways of being good neighbors are necessary for God's kingdom to flourish and transform the surrounding community. This book is a field guide to remissioning established churches so they become healthy from the inside out and become good neighbors.

## **OUTSIDE IN VERSUS INSIDE OUT**

Established churches live on mission by creating missional outposts, planting new churches, and releasing people to create new expressions of church. They send people out on mission, which often decreases short-term conflict and releases innovative leaders to live faithfully. A revitalizing church may try to create a missional outpost in order to "live on mission," but it often struggles with the new endeavor. The established church doesn't show up to the tattoo parlor meetups, the dog park church, or the runners' club Bible study. As when established churches used to hire, fund, and send missionaries to a foreign country, revitalizing churches often send "missionaries"

across town where “non-Christians” gather in hopes that eventually new converts will return to the established churches.

This outside-in approach is a challenge, because those who do meet Jesus in one of those innovative spaces or missional outposts rarely have the tolerance to attend an established church that is suspicious of their faith, judgmental of their clothes, and unsure of their character because they have no meaningful relational connection. In this approach to mission the sending church doesn’t have to make sacrifices. The onus is on the new Jesus-followers to pick up on the traditions, culture, and rules of the established congregation to find community. The established church doesn’t have to grow, change, or do the work; rather, it funds missionaries who do the work “out there” so members can remain safe in their enclave away from “the world.”

There are many great examples of partnerships, churches supporting churches and ministries in global contexts, and empowering other parts of the body of Christ to work in their local context. However, intentional formation is necessary to break through a self-centered, survival-first approach that exports mission to others and keeps people comfortable in the sending church. These churches often struggle to make disciples who live on mission and grow in love, hospitality, and neighborliness because someone else does it for them. The sending church doesn’t feel the need to change even when a trusted missionary tries to bring a new person into the fold. This methodology has gotten us into our current predicament where the average church size is shrinking, dying churches are outpacing new church starts, and mistrust of pastors and churches is at an all-time high.<sup>3</sup>

However, it’s not all bad news. Churches around the world are taking the invitation to love their neighbors and make disciples seriously and experiencing breakthrough as they learn to grow mission from within their church for the sake of their neighbors. One remissioning church located in a highly transitional community near a military base began a new program with well-trained volunteers and thorough background checks to offer free childcare one night a week so parents who had moved away from their families could attend to their marriage, rest, have fun, or run errands. They recognized that they could create a sense of home away from home and learned to love their neighbors without asking anything in return. It turns out that when people are served in practical ways and you care for their

children, they are inspired to worship, join a discipleship group, and make friends with the church. The changes the church needed to make in their worship times, dress code, and budget occurred with minimal conflict because their hearts were changed to love their neighbors over prioritizing their own preferences.

Another remissioning congregation in the UK sold its existing building and partnered with the local government to create a school that would also serve as a worship space on the weekend. The church provided volunteers throughout the school, shared the building space weekly, and invested in the lives of families in the community. Instead of asking the community to adjust to the congregation's building needs, they made tangible sacrifices to serve their neighbors. As a result the church became a hub for community engagement and support. Did it make the life of the church easier to set up and break down each week for worship? Did it simplify the organizational structure to coordinate safeguarding practices and serve on the board of directors to share the space? Of course not. But as the church grew to love the students and their families, the extra work to coordinate with local government became a powerful example to the neighborhood of how a church can invest in the good of the community.

Remissioning churches aim to grow transformational disciples from the inside out who will imitate Jesus and seek the flourishing of their neighbors. It's a slower process than revitalization, but it helps reduce the false notion that we can export mission to someone else to do on our behalf. As the good doctor and amazing missiologist Eun Strawser says in the quote to start this chapter, the mission of God isn't meant for just some of us; it's an invitation and challenge for all of us.

## GROWING UP AND GROWING OUT

I grew up as a pastor's kid living up and down the East Coast. I moved a lot and went to three different middle schools in two states in three years. Because of all the moves, church was one of the places where I clung to relationships. I spent the first half of my childhood in established, traditional churches. Despite their traditionalism, I was fortunate to know people across generations, from different socioeconomic contexts and cultural experiences, who live on purpose with one another and take big leaps to live

on mission in ways that made them uncomfortable yet committed to creating disciples. The second half of my childhood was in a church plant that never owned its own building. The church plant was committed to living on mission in both a local and global context, and it wrestled constantly with how to be relevant and attract new people while acknowledging that events and fun programming couldn't replace meaningful relationships.

In college I worked on staff with a nonprofit that practiced incarnational outreach to middle school and high school students, meeting them in their context rather than urging them to enter a church building. After graduation I went on staff at a church plant where I spent the next eleven years. I worked with students, managed communications, preached, taught at a local seminary, and led in various denominational networks.

Much to my surprise, while I was researching how churches, businesses, and nonprofits experience change and leaders bring people through the change process, I was invited to take my theories out of the abstract and put them into practice as the senior pastor of a congregation that described itself as stuck and unsure how to experience new life together.

Over the last ten years these theories, principles, and tools have moved from theoretical into real practice in my local congregation and have been used in churches across the United States, the United Kingdom, and a few other countries. These churches have gone on remissioning journeys with me, along with a team of coaches committed to the process. I'm passionate about remissioning. Empowering stuck, struggling, and dying churches to discover new life on the other side of pain can create a transition from selfishness to generosity so that congregations become assets to their communities instead of liabilities.

My remissioning journey with churches is like the old "Hair Club for Men" commercials from my childhood. The president would say at the end of the ad: "I'm not just the president; I'm also a client." The tools, frameworks, and stories are born out of my serving with two churches over twenty years. After all this time pastoring, I am more hopeful for the church today than when I first started. I've seen bridges between previously disconnected communities built. Intergenerational hubs of mission created. People who were disillusioned put their heart into meaningful community service and begin worshipping again.

Over the course of this book, we'll explore some of the markers of maturity in the remissioning process (learning to embrace change *before* plateau instead of waiting for decline, dropout, and dysfunction), as well as how to lead a church through this process. My hope is that we'll continue to grow a movement of churches and leaders willing to do the death-and-new-life work that unleashes the power of the resurrection in our local communities so we can experience a mutual transformation through relationships, justice, and grace.

These are the core competences we'll look at:

- Being a disciple
- Creative destruction
- Traditioned innovation
- Discipleship pathways
- Remissioning leadership

As we unpack these core remissioning skills, we'll also deploy a number of tested tools to help us put these skills into practice in our communities (both with church and neighbors). These tools will help you do the following:

- Exegete your church and community
- Prune for new life
- Lead through change
- Identify gaps
- Grow intercultural intelligence
- Begin with the end
- Remember well
- Create shared experiments
- Structure for mission
- Embrace conflict
- Develop healthy metrics
- Identify your church on the life cycle

After working with churches across various denominational, ethnic, and international contexts, I've found these tools and skills to aid in the remissioning journey guided by the grace of the Spirit.

**FURTHER READING**

E. K. Strawser, *Centering Discipleship: A Pathway for Multiplying Spectators into Mature Disciples* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

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