
Thriving Congregations in the 21st Century: The Writings of William M. Easum

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In the past two years the Reformed Church in America has come to understand its mission this way:

The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.

The challenge at the local church level is to discern the shape of God's call for a specific body of believers in a particular time and place. Each local congregation must wrestle with its own mission and vision, to see how they might contribute to the *"one thing"* in which we all share—*"following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God."*

This article will explore the thought and writing of William M. Easum, whose ministry has been devoted to strengthening the effectiveness of the local congregation. His passion for Christ, love of the local church, and broad exposure through speaking and consulting make him extraordinarily helpful to congregations and their leaders who want to follow Jesus more faithfully.

Since 1990, Easum has published five books aimed at helping local bodies of believers to build "thriving congregations" into the twenty-first century.¹ While groups such as the Gospel and Our Culture Network have been developing a helpful and challenging "theological vision for the sending of the church in North America"² primarily from within academia, Easum has been doing it from the "front line." Longtime pastor of the Colonial Hills United Methodist Church in San Antonio, Texas, he is currently director of 21st Century Strategies. His work currently focuses on church consultations, workshops, and research.

The primary reference for this review of Easum's thought is his most recent book, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, coauthored with Thomas G. Bandy. It offers their mature and synthesized vision for the church. Together they develop the metaphor of a "spiritual redwood"—congregational manifestations of the body of Christ that rise up amid the ever-changing cultural forest. In their experience spiritual redwoods:

- base everything on their experience of the transforming power of Jesus;
- organize themselves around strong team leaders and fulfilling lay ministries;
- devote themselves to experiencing God through indigenous worship;
- are led by visionary leaders who create an environment of growth and change;
- focus on making disciples;
- devote themselves to reaching out to their community with valuable help.³

What follows explores that list more closely.

The Changing Cultural Landscape

Easum's starting place is the changing cultural landscape within which the church does its ministry. In earlier books, he adopted the language of a "post-modern" and "post-Christian" world in which Christianity was no longer the dominant voice it was during the era of Christendom. In more recent years he has adopted George Hunter's description of our time as "pre-Christian"—a time of world and religious cultural ferment, of deep and diverse spiritual yearning.⁴

In *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, Easum describes sixteen paradigm shifts which are creating a new crack in history as we enter the twenty-first century.⁵ These shifts affect everything from the way we process information to how we organize ourselves; from moral standards to views of the truth; from relationships with institutions to relationships among people. Easum then argues for the importance of the church moving toward these paradigm shifts and seeking new, creative ways to minister to those living at the fringe.

In *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers* he explores how quantum physics and the computer chip impact the world in which the church ministers. The quantum revolution has brought change, interconnectedness, dynamic processes, and organic relationships.⁶ The computer chip has changed how we process knowledge by creating the possibility of parallel processing. That, in turn, has freed us from viewing information hierarchically to organizing and exploring information from a variety of directions at once—through any number of interrelationships.⁷ From these two revolutions comes Easum's major thesis: The church must abandon the "sacred cows" of control and top-down leadership and develop *permission-giving networks* as the arena in which to do ministry.⁸

In *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, Easum and Bandy present their picture of the pre-Christian world,

a world similar to the first century after Jesus. It is a world of technological change and population migration; a world of systemic injustice and apocalyptic longing; it is a world of excessive materialism and spiritual yearning; it is a world of

deep anxiety and utter cynicism toward the religious institutions of the past.⁹

To help the reader understand this pre-Christian world Easum and Bandy offer contrasts between twentieth-century Christendom and the twenty-first century, pre-Christian world. Changes are illustrated in the areas of attitudes, metaphors, processes, structures, theology, and leadership. Their contention is that those who lead the church into the next century need a new and different map.¹⁰

A Passion for the God We Meet in Jesus

The center of that new map is a passion for the God of grace we meet in Jesus. Easum and Bandy are convinced that the public's new spiritual yearnings in this pre-Christian world offer tremendous opportunity—but only if the church understands those yearnings. People no longer want to talk about religion; they want a spiritual experience. Instead of listening to religious experts, they want to share life with other spiritual travelers. They want no talk about divine abstractions; they want to talk about Jesus.¹¹

On this latter point Easum and Bandy assert that the church's traditional images of Christ, although accurate theologically, have been too institutionalized to be helpful. Instead, people's spiritual yearnings, the deep heartaches that persist in and pervade their daily life, draw them to Jesus. They yearn to be changed, to be whole, and to be free. They long for mentors and for a personal, meaningful destiny.¹² Our authors argue that churches which believe in the transforming grace and power of the God we meet in Jesus and that help people connect with that God through Jesus, will both thrive and give life to others. Easum and Bandy say it this way:

It is becoming ever more clear that those churches emerging as "Spiritual Redwoods" in the forest of North American culture emphasize Jesus, and one's relationship with Jesus, as the fundamental issue of faith and purposeful living. *At the same time, however, these churches celebrate enormous diversity of perspective about Jesus, and enormous variety in the manner in which people find themselves "in relationship" with Jesus.*

These churches clearly articulate in their conversation with North American culture their answer to the key question for ministry in the twenty-first century: *What is it about our experience with Jesus that this community cannot live without?*¹³

To answer that requires congregations to face two other questions about their presentation of Jesus in a pre-Christian world. First, at what point do their metaphors about Jesus find continuity with the experience of Christians of the

past? Second, how can they celebrate Jesus while avoiding religious bigotry and intolerance?¹⁴

Our authors challenge congregations wishing to thrive to explore constantly how to live in relationship with Jesus and how to share that experience with others. His answer focuses on (1) worship that is culturally relevant and indigenous to the target population; (2) organic structures that nurture leadership, make disciples, and release people for mission; (3) lay-led cells where faith is deepened and lives are transformed, and lay-led ministry teams that follow God in mission; and (4) congregational leadership devoted to helping people give birth to the potential God has placed within them. These four elements are central to his understanding of the thriving congregation. How they are lived out may vary, but their presence is essential.

Culturally Relevant, Indigenous Worship

In an ecclesiastical climate where “worship wars” are fought regularly, no one has the best or final word on worship. That may explain why I disagreed with Easum and Bandy most at this point. They too quickly dismiss elements of worship that have survived for centuries, are so enamored with technology that they give too little credence to the human dimensions of worship, and make generational generalizations that do not stand up under close examination. In spite of that, the chapter on worship alone in *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* is worth the price of the book. It will cause anyone who plans and leads worship to ask new, probing questions.

Because the “cultural forest” is encroaching upon and competing with Christian worship on multiple fronts, the church’s modes of worship need to reflect this new environment. The enemies of the church are addiction and idolatry, not ignorance. Therefore, the solution lies not in education but in grace. The need is not for denominationally certified and trained professional clergy persons, but for spiritual guides who can coach others through the tangled forest.¹⁵

Easum and Bandy understand worship as the time for people to celebrate and thank God for the transformations God is working in their lives. Worship belongs to a spiritual life that includes personal spiritual disciplines, face-to-face intimacy in small groups, and missional activity. Yet worship is central because in it the Christian joins with the community of faith to praise God as God, and to give thanks for past and present blessings.

Two central principles guide worship in our authors’ spiritual redwoods. First, it is indigenous. The gospel must be communicated in the language, cultural forms, and technology of the worshipers.¹⁶ The inherent value here is that no form, method, or liturgy is sacred. Nothing is sacred but the gospel, and nothing is more valued than the possibilities it offers for transformation. Worship’s second guiding principle is multiple options. The variety of cultures, generations, and experience characteristic of the publics the church is called to

serve means that no one form of worship is adequate. Spiritual redwoods gather for worship, not the unified “family” of God, but the diverse “peoples” of God.

To help planners think through worship options, Easum offers a framework of three tracks (traditional, praise, and sensory); three categories (transactive, interactive, and actualized); and four purposes (healing, coaching, cherishing, and rejoicing).¹⁷ Their value lies in helping congregations to expand the ways they think and plan for worship.

Permission-Giving Structures

Worship is the spiritual fluid, the sap, of spiritual redwoods. This sap flows through a living organism, not a static organization. Thus, the second key to thriving congregations in the pre-Christian, twenty-first century is a structure that is organic rather than repeatable, predictable, and bureaucratic. This concept is the heart of *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*. Here Easum argues that the world of quantum physics and computer chips necessitates a more chaotic, permission-giving, free-flowing way to structure congregational life. This need to release people for growth and ministry is a major challenge facing the missional church. The distinctive marks of permission-giving churches are:

- the conviction that God’s people are not called to sit on committees in the church, but to minister daily in the world by living out their spiritual gifts.
- encouragement of on-the-spot decision-making by people working together in self-organized and self-directed mission teams focused on accountability, not control.
- ministry delivered any time, any place, by anyone.
- leaders who equip others for ministry, and then simply stand aside to coach or to offer resources as needed.
- a flat organizational structure that facilitates ministry rather than manages it, and that functions through a network of collaborative individuals and ministry teams.¹⁸

In *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches*, Thomas Bandy devotes separate chapters to two contrasting systems of church leadership. Their flavor resides in the five key verbs that describe the goals for church members in each system. In controlling systems, persons are enrolled, informed, nominated, supervised, and kept. In thriving systems, persons are changed, gifted, called, equipped, and sent.¹⁹

These vastly different goals produce very different church structures. Controlling structures are hierarchical with top-heavy, redundant committees. Thriving structures are more like an electro-magnetic energy field—attracting people, transforming them, and releasing them in a variety of directions.²⁰ Such systems result in a riot of diversity. Clearly, thriving systems call for a different way to “do church.” They force the church’s salaried and non-salaried

leadership to rethink their paradigms of church structure. They also raise the anxiety level by asking about what unites varied mission activities and keeps them on track. These systems are reflected in the Reformed Church in America and beyond, as many congregations restructure themselves into smaller leadership/visionary teams, a variety of care-giving structures, and other ministry units. The smaller leadership/visionary team is the environment within which a permission-giving approach to ministry can thrive. The team's essential role is to provide the boundaries within which the creative energy of both people and teams can be released. These include shared vision, core values, foundational beliefs, and focused mission. Leadership's task is to listen to God in these four areas, to discover the words to express them, and to shape the congregation's life and ministry around them.²¹ Once people have internalized the four, the leadership can confidently give them permission to listen for God's call and to follow where Jesus leads. Rather than control, the leadership holds people accountable, monitors the results of their ministry, and offers corrections and redirections.

Easum and Bandy offer two patterns of organizational behavior to highlight the contrast between a bureaucratic structure and an organic system. In the former, the behavior pattern is:

Form a committee:

*with a clear institutional mandate,
from selected recruits representing each special interest,
who are motivated by a strong sense of duty.
Locate them in parliamentary procedure.
Link them in perpetual, internal communication.
Accept the best they can offer,
and supervise them constantly.²²*

In an organic system the pattern of behavior is very different:

Recognize a person:

*with a clear awareness of spiritual gifts,
who is personally called by Jesus, and
who is motivated by a strong sense of destiny.
Anchor them in the core vision, values, beliefs, and mission of
the organism.
Send them into a cascade of simultaneous ministries.
Equip them for excellence,
And get out of their way.²³*

Cells and Ministry Teams

The organic system works because spiritual redwoods expect people to participate in three interconnected spiritual disciplines. All individuals pursue

prayer and Bible reading, are linked to the larger body in weekly worship, and are linked to lay-led small groups where honest conversation, prayer, and listening to God through the Bible help to discern how a relationship with God through Jesus can transform and direct daily life. This may also lead to membership in a self-directed ministry team.

In *Dancing With Dinosaurs*, Easum writes, "The transition from the program-based congregation to the small-group based congregation is the most fundamental paradigm shift in the history of North American Christianity."²⁴ This strong statement applies to the church everywhere. The growth of cell-based churches worldwide is altering its face. Churches wishing to thrive in the next century need to come to terms with this paradigm shift.

Cells or small group ministries perform most traditional pastoral roles. Laity worship and pray together, care for one another, build up one another in Christ, identify gifts, invite people into the journey of discipleship, and go out together in ministry. They form the backbone of their congregations while the salaried staff trains, coaches, and supports them in a front-line ministry. Cells make disciples who in turn make new disciples.²⁵

Cells also hold freedom and covenant, authority and accountability in creative tension. They are given the freedom to think, speak, and act; the power to imagine, decide, and act; and the ability to share, care, and critique. While all cells share a common commitment to the vision, values, beliefs, and mission of the organism, the Holy Spirit shapes each one into a unique band of people.²⁶

Participants in a spiritual redwood neither grow nor minister alone. Through cells they live in relationships that nurture and guide their growth. In teams made up of others called and gifted by God, they minister. Thus, teams are a form of cell life primarily focused on transformation and following Jesus in ministry to a hurting and broken world. They go out as teaching teams, mission teams, worship teams, prayer teams, leadership teams, visioning teams, and salaried staff teams. Characteristically, ministry teams,

- come together around a mission God has given to their leader,
- are chosen by the team leader,
- are formed from people who have answered God's call to develop necessary skills,
- harmonize competency and passion,
- require cooperation and constant communication,
- value the contribution of each member equally.²⁷

All cells and ministry teams are led by lay pastors. The latter may be cell leaders who guide people in spiritual growth and destiny discovery; ministry team leaders who lead a group in mission; or administrative team leaders ministering in the areas of property, finance, or personnel. Lay pastors commit themselves to daily prayer and Bible reading, regular prayer for their ministry, monthly training and accountability, and individual coaching. These

commitments maintain the accountability and monitoring necessary for effective ministry.

The Leader as Spiritual Midwife

Spiritual redwoods call for pastoral and salaried leaders who reject the myth that the less leadership they exhibit, the more empowered the laity will be. They know the opposite to be true. They are willing to risk popularity, social status, and pension plans in order to lead their congregations to new levels of growth-producing ministry. Their leadership skills include faith-sharing, mentoring, nurturing small groups, designing and leading indigenous worship, and living confidently and effectively in the midst of chaos.²⁸ Easum and Bandy identify nine challenges faced by those who want to lead the twenty-first century, pre-Christian church:

- Change is no longer evolutionary; it is revolutionary.
- Organizations have shifted from prizing the autonomous individual to prizing the good team member and free sharing of information.
- Single, homogenous cultures have given way to multiple cultures.
- Churches can no longer assume a common foundation of basic Christian knowledge.
- The benefit of the doubt has been replaced by suspicion of motivations in almost all actions.
- Denominational loyalty is dead; church-shopping is alive.
- The neighborhood parish has been replaced by parishioners driving miles to a regional congregation.
- Ministry is done by equipped disciples instead of a professional staff.
- Worship has moved from a commonly shared liturgy to a variety of indigenous forms.²⁹

Leaders who meet these challenges are best described as spiritual midwives. This metaphor focuses on the event rather than the character of leadership. Spiritual midwives are part of a birth process within themselves and their congregations. They are visionaries, synthesizers, and motivators.³⁰ Having experienced the immediacy, intimacy, awe, and wonder of God themselves, they can help others in their yearning. They integrate spiritual life and spiritual calling, the ongoing cycles of constant growth. Spiritual life is built around the cycle of radical humility, thoughtful reflection, and profound love. Spiritual calling grows through a cycle of intuition of the holy, cultural perceptiveness, and compassion for the lost. Spiritual midwives help people give birth to that double helix of spiritual life and spiritual calling so every part of the spiritual redwood carries within itself the same genetic leadership code.³¹ Each part exists to help give birth to new life at every opportunity.

Although spiritual redwood is not a perfect metaphor, it does challenge us to rethink our worship, ministry style, structure, and leadership. Personally, I find

it exciting to help a congregation (1) train and organize itself to invite people into the story of God's love, to embrace God's grace, and then to find new life by bringing that grace to others; (b) discover the joy of helping people toward a deepening relationship with God that will enable them to live as God wants them live; and (c) know the exhilaration of freeing people from institutional control and sending them out in creative ministry to pass on life to others.³² If that excites you too, this article is your invitation to begin a conversation with William Easum.³³

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Church Growth Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990). *How To Reach Baby Boomers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992). *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993). *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere, By Anyone* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995). With Thomas G. Bandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

² The subtitle of a book published by the Gospel and Our Culture Network. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998). This fine work on the missional church lists none of Easum's books in its bibliography—a surprising omission given his life-long passion for developing missional congregations.

³ *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, 17. There is a striking similarity between the characteristics Easum and Bandy ascribe to spiritual redwoods and descriptions of missional congregations developed by others. Lesslie Newbigin, in *The Gospel In a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989) lists six characteristics of a missional community, 227-232. Christian A. Schwarz, describing an international research project involving more than 1,000 congregations on five continents (*Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* [Carol Stream: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996]) offers a third list. The many similarities in the three books point to elements of church life that should be taken very seriously.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, 23-35.

⁶ *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*, 22-26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23 (this helpful chart merits careful study).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36-39.

- ¹² *Ibid.*, 48-49.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51-56.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-85.
- ¹⁸ *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*, 49-57.
- ¹⁹ (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 39-88.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105-145.
- ²¹ *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, 115-130.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 124.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 127.
- ²⁴ *Dancing With Dinosaurs*, 60.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-80.
- ²⁶ *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, 148-157.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 158-159 and *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*, 114-130.
- ²⁸ *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, 177-182.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 179-181.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 183-184.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 194-203.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 208.
- ³³ To learn more about 21st Century Strategies, visit Easum's website at <http://www.easum.com>. While there you may browse his recommended reading list, and sign on to free forums on Transformational Leadership or Church Planters.