

Sailboat Church

Helping Your Church Rethink
Its Mission and Practice

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Introduction

*I*t is a warm summer day at the lake. The water looks cool and inviting. You push your boat off the shore, pick up the oars, and begin to row over to the other side. After a while what seemed like a warm day begins to feel hot. Pulling at the oars, your arms begin to tire, and the other shore looks farther away than when you started. You stop for a moment to rest, and as you wipe the sweat off your face, you see a *Sailboat* on the lake, not too far off. It is skimming across the water, almost dancing with the wind. The *Sailboat* is coming in your direction. You admire its graceful movement. As you pick up the oars again, you wonder what it would be like to sail.



Many North American Christians have spent their whole lives in churches that operate mainly by rowing. Rowboat churches do what they can with the resources—money, wisdom, energy, people, facilities—they have. In a time when church was a respected fixture of our culture and a major center of community life, this approach often took the church a long way. Today, however, many rowboat churches are finding that rowing is not getting them where they want to go. This situation has painful symptoms.

In many congregations the number of members is stagnant or decreasing at a steady rate. Older members die or become disabled, and no one takes their place. Other congregations struggle to fund programs, mission, and building upkeep with lower budgets than they used to have. Painful cuts have to be made. Significant numbers of churches are made up of people who once lived nearby but who

have now moved away and travel some distance to worship. The surrounding community does not really seem interested in the best they have to offer. They mourn the loss of children and youth in the church, and no one can remember the last time there was an adult baptism. As the pool of members decreases, it is tough to find people to serve on church boards.

Distress is also seen in the lives and ministry of clergy serving these churches. Declining churches often take out their unhappiness on their leaders. The culture of respect that once surrounded the office of clergy has evaporated. Members of declining congregations often have the unrealistic expectation that the right pastor can solve all their problems. This can set up both clergy and congregations for disappointment. Older clergy sometimes feel that the rules of ministry have changed and what is expected of them today is not what they were trained to do. Younger clergy say that their dreams and visions often don't fit into an institutional pattern that looks back to the glory days of the 1950s.

Even Christians whose congregations still have plenty of resources and members sense that things have changed. It used to be the norm that when people started a family or moved to a new community, they looked for a church. Now they are more likely to look for the nearest mall or coffee shop on Sunday mornings. People do not "fall in" the doors of the church anymore. Choosing to go to church, especially for younger people, is a countercultural option. The United States has become a new mission field, and we really do not know how to be missionaries.



These changes are only the front edge of the tsunami of change that has swept over American church culture in the last forty or so years. Given all this, it should be no surprise that many of us feel anxious. The world has changed, and the changes seem to be out of our control. We don't know what to expect or in which direction to move. How does the church navigate such change?

This is a book about churches operating, under the power of God's Spirit, as Sailboats run under the power of the wind. It reflects my passionate belief that God has more in store for the church than we have known. These resources are gifts of the Holy Spirit that Jesus

promised to the first Christians and still gives to those today who are willing to put down the oars and put up the sails. The things I am writing about here are not new. I did not invent them; they come from Scripture. Neither does this book contain a “ten easy steps” plan for how to grow your church. Rather, I call the church to walk an ancient path that will open us up to the power of God for our time.

This book is built around the image of the church as a Sailboat. This boat has sails spread wide, allowing the wind of the Spirit to move the church where God wants it to go. It is God-powered. The Sailboat image is a metaphor. A metaphor uses an image to point beyond itself. For instance, “You are my sunshine” is a way of saying that a person is absolutely important in your life. That person is not sunshine in the sense of being particles of light that come from the sun. But he or she is *your* sunshine. Likewise, the church is not literally a sailboat. But it can choose to operate in a way that allows the Holy Spirit—the wind of God—to become its power source.

In his poem “Footnote to All Prayers,” C. S. Lewis refers to “our limping metaphors.”¹ All metaphors have their limits, and this one is no exception. I know that I will be bumping up against the limits of the Sailboat metaphor from time to time. I apologize for it in advance. Also I apologize to real sailors everywhere who find I have not dealt properly or in depth with the technicalities of sailing. In spite of its flaws, I do believe that this image, with its invitation to drop the oars and put up the sails, carries the possibility of a new future for many Christians and congregations today.

Spiritual truth generally comes to us in seed form, and whether or not the seed bears fruit depends to a large degree on how we nurture it. I have included in this book reflection/discussion questions to help you in the nurturing process. My prayer is that groups of church members will read and discuss *Sailboat Church* together, praying for God to help them raise the sails and navigate God’s church into God’s future. It is still true that God “by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ever ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20).

Chapter 1

Created to Sail

*E*arly Christian symbols include a boat as a symbol for the church. In Jesus' time, there were two ways to power a boat on open water. One was to use muscles, most commonly by rowing. The other way was to harness the power of the wind. When the early Christians used a boat as a symbol for the church, it was never a rowboat; it was always a sailboat. That is because on the day of Pentecost, with "a sound like the rush of a violent wind" (Acts 2:1), Jesus' promise of power became a reality and drew those who believed in him into a different way of living.

For these early Christians, church was a God-powered, God-led, God-resourced adventure. They found they were caught up in something much bigger than themselves. Day by day, hour by hour, they moved as the Holy Spirit led them. They depended on the Spirit to provide what was needed to do God's work. They knew that God was really in charge of what was happening. On Pentecost, they received the gift of spiritual resources to participate with Jesus in his transformation of the world. As they felt the wind of the Spirit begin to blow around them that day, they raised their sails and began the process of learning how to become sailors.

The essential difference between rowboat and Sailboat churches may not be apparent on the surface. Both kinds of churches may be active and growing in numbers. Both may struggle and even die. Whether a church is liberal, conservative, or middle-of-the-road is no indication of whether it is a Sailboat or a rowboat. They both exist in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The difference is in the attitude of the members and leaders.

Rowing the Church

The bedrock reality of life in the rowboat church is that “God has given us a basic agenda (for example, to make the world a better place, save souls, help the poor, spread Christian truth, and uphold justice) and then left it up to us to get on with it.” The dominant attitude in this congregation is either “*We can do this,*” or “*We can’t do this.*” The church focuses on circumstances, such as the money it has or can raise, the available volunteers, the charisma and skill of the leaders, and the demographics of its community. The rowboat congregation believes and acts as if its progress depends on its own strength, wisdom, and resources. It’s all about how hard, long, and well people are willing to row.

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer writes about “functional atheism, the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests on us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.”¹ Functional atheism is at the heart of rowboat mentality. It offers intellectual assent to the idea that God is sovereign over creation, while usually acting as if what we do determines the outcome. If, in our deepest hearts, we really believe we are pretty much left alone in the universe to fend for ourselves, our congregations will tend to act like just one more human institution. In the worst case, a church is reduced to a religious do-it-yourself project focused on making the world a better place or on helping people cope or on any number of other worthy but secondary goals.

The distorted idea that the church is basically a human religious organization tends to creep into minds and hearts unconsciously over time. In spite of speaking about God quite a bit, studying a book that claims to be God’s word, and doing activities we believe God wants us to do, the actual experience of the personal presence of God is not much sought or expected in the church or in the lives of its members. Eventually worship grows cold. Teaching becomes distanced from God’s call on our lives. The congregation has little impact on the world outside its buildings. Intimate spiritual fellowship turns into surface socializing. Lives are not transformed; neither are communities.

In rowboat congregations, spiritual realities are effectively discounted. In this way of thinking, only things that can be seen, heard, felt, and counted make a substantive difference. To act as though material circumstances have the last word on us or on the church or on the world effectively discounts God's sovereignty and puts us at the mercy of whatever our circumstances may be. This version of functional atheism leads us to a life of impotence amid the powers and principalities of this world.

Another indication that we have forgotten our sails and taken up rowing is the frantic search for ways to fix perceived problems of both congregations and denominations. This need-to-fix mentality often manifests as a craving for a programmatic or organizational magic bullet. We seek a "how-to" strategy that will cause problems to disappear, making us the successful church we desperately want to be. Millions of dollars have been spent on books, conferences, and programs offering a simple fix for sinking churches. As good as some of these programs may be, they generally do not engage people at the spiritual depth required for permanent change in a healthy direction.

Another form the urge to fix takes is finding the right person to put in leadership. Here, someone, usually a staff person, is seen as the answer to the congregation's problems. Pastors especially are often judged by whether or not they can "fix" the church. If a church is failing, members often assume that it is the pastor's fault and that if they had a new one, things would be better. While leadership is a key piece of the transformation puzzle, few people have the level of charisma and skill required to revive a plateaued or dying church through personal effort alone. And even if they could, experience indicates that when that person retires or moves on to the next place, the church often loses energy and members as it reverts to old patterns of behavior. Getting the "right preacher" is no guarantee that the church will move out of dysfunction and decline, certainly not for the long haul.

Another form that trying to fix the church takes is looking beyond the congregation to place blame: "If only so-and-so were different we could grow." Each person holding this view fills in the "so-and-so" according to his or her personal views. For instance, there are those who think that if their denomination's policies and pronouncements were different, the congregation would be more successful.

Much energy is spent to manipulate the policies of various church bodies to this end. When the conflict level becomes too great, such congregations may seek to change their affiliation as a way to fix the problem.

All these ways of fixing the church have in common the underlying assumption that we human beings have the ability to do what will make the ultimate difference. The conviction that our decisions, our wisdom, our planning, our hard work, our right theology will make all the difference is a lightly disguised form of works righteousness. God is the only one who saves. However, the idea that we can and should fix the church, a first cousin to the heresy of salvation by works, is widely found in rowboat congregations.

Rowboat churches also tend to act as if what happens in the church buildings *is* church. It is a common assumption among North American Christians that *church* means an organized institution that meets in certain buildings on certain days and times. If a church is successful and thriving, those buildings will be full of people on those days and at those times. Money given by the people who come to church will be invested in keeping up the buildings and providing programs that take place in them. A successful church also has professional staff members who are charged with providing services and programs for people who are members of the church. Staff members also must make sure that enough money is donated to keep the buildings open, the staff paid, the programs going, the services happening, and the organization growing in membership. According to this line of thinking, the test of a church's vitality is mainly what staff makes happen in the church buildings.

Rowboat churches often tend toward a mind-set of scarcity, which hampers many in their mission and ministry. They tend to look at what they have in the way of resources, and then base plans for ministry and mission activities on those resources. When the resources run out or run low, the churches give up or go into a survival mode. They pull back to the minimum and stretch the limited resources as far as they can to survive for as long as they can. When a rowboat church runs out of resources, that's the end.

All these characteristics of rowboat churches can be traced back to faulty conceptions about the nature of the church and the nature of God. If we believe that God has left us alone to do the work of the

church by ourselves, we will row. Rowing also flows logically from believing that the church is essentially a human religious institution, with all the limitations that being human carries with it.

Sailing the Church

In contrast, the bedrock reality of life in the Sailboat church is that God “through the power at work within us can do abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:21). Sailboat churches tend to focus not on their own situation, resources, or limitations but rather on discerning God’s unfolding will. They engage in intimate partnership with God, trusting God to provide and do what only God can do. These congregations live in the creative tension between two spiritual realities.

The first of these realities we hear from Jesus at the Last Supper with his disciples: “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). *Nothing* is a very harsh word. It must have been hard for the first disciples to hear Jesus talk about his going away from them, and then to hear him say, “Without me you can do nothing.” How was God’s agenda going to be accomplished if Jesus was going away and if without him they could do nothing?

Nothing is still a hard word for believers to hear today. Yet Jesus also says to twenty-first century Christians: “Without me you can do nothing.” Without me, he says, you can give religious speeches, but you can’t preach the gospel. You can hold church services, but you can’t worship. You can put biblical and theological information in people’s minds, but they won’t come to faith. Without me, it is impossible to do my ministry or accomplish my mission. This sounds offensive to our ears because at the top of just about any human list of virtues is a can-do spirit. Deep down, we feel “it’s all up to us.” Most Christians today would agree, at least in theory, that doing God’s work should somehow involve God, but in practice, God tends to be a distant or even absent partner.

As we have seen, in a rowboat church, as long as the church is able to keep rowing, people are often reluctant to do anything else. Rowing means that we are in control; we are getting the job done. When we reach the point where we can’t row any more or when rowing is

not getting us where we need to go, then we are faced with a choice. One option is to give up. Some congregations simply run out of people or money or energy and close the doors. Others take what they have and just spread it thinner and thinner until it runs out. Another very sad outcome is that congregations turn inward and begin to fight each other until conflict finally tears the church apart.

Other congregations in a similar situation, decide to try doing church in a new way and begin to sail. Sailboat congregations know that they cannot make the wind blow, but they do realize that they can tap into spiritual resources beyond themselves by reorienting their efforts and catching the wind of the Spirit. This brings us to the second reality that Sailboat congregations live by. We hear it in the angel Gabriel's response to Mary's question, "I am a virgin. How can I bear a child?" Gabriel's response is elegantly simple: "With God nothing is impossible" (see Luke 1:35–37).

Sailboat churches know that when God becomes the chief guide and power source in their lives and ministries, the unthinkable moves into the realm of the possible. Jesus' disciples thought his story was finished when they put his dead body in a tomb and rolled a stone across the door, but God had other possibilities in mind. Just as human will did not produce Jesus, neither did human power have the last word on his life. He came to bring a new reign of God on the earth, which nothing could ever equal or destroy. The church was created to announce and demonstrate this new creation and to be a staging ground for partnering with God in saving the world. Only congregations that are living into a transforming relationship with this God for whom nothing is impossible can hope to fulfill their potential as the body of Christ.

Rowers are confined to the power they can generate themselves; sailors learn to let the boundless power of the wind move them where they need to go. Sailors live in the creative tension between our weakness and God's power, between our poverty and the wealth of resources God provides to those who obediently seek to do God's will. Living between the realities of "without me you can do nothing" and "with God all things are possible" is both humbling and exciting. We are constantly reminded that we are powerless to do the work of Jesus' church without him. At the same time, we find that

the wind of Christ's Spirit still blows in the world, and as we put up the sails God does amazing things.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you react to the idea of our life together in the church as an adventure with God? How do you see your church experiencing this adventure?
2. What do you think Jesus meant when he said: "The one who believes in me will also do the things that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12)? How do you think the first disciples felt when they heard this promise?
3. How have you experienced the reality that God both calls and provides what is needed to fulfill the call?
4. What difference would it make in your life if you took very seriously these words of Jesus: "Without me you can do nothing"?