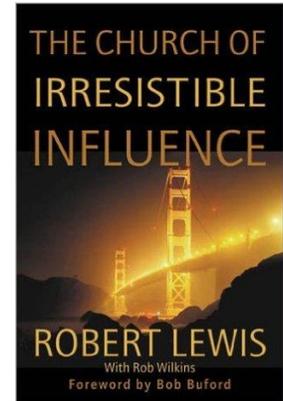


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The Church of irresistible influence

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Foreword – moving to an age where church life has shifted from proclamation to demonstration.

Before you read this book...read this! Imagine : your community being thankful for your church; city leaders asking for your church's participation in the community; neighbourhoods talking about how good it is to have your church's witness to God's love; lots of your members passionate about community service, using their gifts in ways they'd not thought possible; the community changing because of your church's impact; people in city praising God for your church instead of being hostile to him; the spiritual harvest that would follow all this?

A church of irresistible influence (i^2) is possible.

Best metaphor for church is a bridge; each chapter introduced with the story of the building of a great bridge – always with the odds against, the insistence and belief of the engineer, the difficulties.

I : THE GREAT DIVIDE – WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO RECONNECT CHURCH AND CULTURE?

1. *The great chasm.*

6 out of 10 Americans believe the church is irrelevant. That produces increasing cynicism and hostility in the community, and increasing sense of isolation in the church. How do we bridge the gap?

Strategies: be culturally relevant (provide experience without commitment, which is what they want); promise heaven now (American dream in pseudo-spiritual garb); preach the word (inadequate); stick with the tried and tested ('if the 50s ever come round again, my church will be ready'). Barna poll compared lifestyles of Christians and non, and in those aspects where Christians could have greatest impact on lives of nonChristians, he found no visible difference.

At first.. we didn't understand that bridge building was what we were supposed to be doing. Our church.. implemented many ministry concepts that only recently have come into vogue in today's contemporary church models : team preaching; small groups; lay equipping and empowerment; passionate worship; strong, focussed vision; seeker-sensitive evangelism; results-oriented planning – all with a deep commitment to biblical accuracy and truth. But people's excitement declined after 4-5 years' membership. They had been told they were to be equipped : but *for what?*

Decided they had choice: being a club, or moving out. God so loved the *world*. 'Without its own bridges to the world, church life – in time – fades into isolation, self-congratulation, and finally, irrelevance.'

2. *Living proof*

First error : to try to convince a postmodern world of truth when it rejects truth. Our postmodern world is tired of words. It wants real. Real is everything. Real is convincing. We are trying to build bridges on truth alone, whereas what the world wants is proof. A fitting description for a church would be this: a community of people who present living proof of a loving God to a watching world.

Scriptural foundation:

- Mt 5.16 let your light shine before men
- Luke 6.31-35 do to others what you would have them do to you; love your enemies and do good to them
- Acts 30.35 Jesus said, it is more blessed to give than to receive
- Romans 12.20-21 overcome evil with good
- Galatians 6.9-10 let us not become weary in doing good; we will reap a harvest
- Eph 2.10 good works prepared for you to do
- 2 Thess 3 do not grow weary of doing good
- 1 Tim 6.17-19 command them to do good, be rich in good deeds, be willing to share
- Titus 3.8 so that those who have believed in God may be careful to engage in good deeds
- Titus 2.11-14 a people eager to do what is good
- Hebrews 10.24 spur one another on toward love and good deeds
- 1 Peter 3.13 who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?

Early church grew at 40% per decade (Stark). Michael Green links holy living with effective evangelism – they stood out for chastity, hatred of cruelty, civil obedience, good citizenship; did not expose infants, swear; had nothing to do with idol worship; massive impact of their lives due to moral emphasis. Stark points to link between plague and spread of gospel – Christians dared care. Historian Durant points to almsgiving. Gospel spread because built over a bridge of living proof.

II : DESIGNING THE STRUCTURE – THE HOW-TOS OF INCARNATIONAL BRIDGE BUILDING

3. *Jesus and the idea of irresistible influence*

There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world; and that is, an idea whose time has come – Victor Hugo.

Driving idea behind Fellowship Bible Church, Little Rock, Arkansas, has been compressed into i^2 : irresistible influence. By building bridges of real spiritual integrity between the church and an increasingly skeptical society, we possess the power and authority to be a catalyst for change and an engine of influence. It was Jesus' idea, illustrated with loaves and fish, by great commission to make disciples, by promise to build his church, by metaphors of salt and light.

The church does not exist for the sake of the church. It exists for the sake of the world. Many churches exist to meet the needs of their members – events, facilities, activities. Others are driven by success – the bigger, the better. Often they grow but still remain a stranger to their community, issuing invitations which float by like leaves in a winter wind.

Fellowship Bible church began with the idea of equipping Christians to live lifestyles of spiritual integrity. Main focus was on changing lifestyles. Then added the concept of service: equipping for life and service. Haphazard to start with, and mostly done by hiring staff. Vision to help people discover their unique design, and then dream with them about where that design could be employed to both stir their passion and advance the kingdom of God. Vision of works not limited to church needs but given the scope of the whole community.

Then they asked, is our community really being changed? And added Mt 5.16, *let your light shine before men so that they may see you good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* That became the vision.

4. *The core of i^2 construction*

i^2 construction demands 3 significant ingredients: confession, vision, structure.

Confession as in Nehemiah; they confessed their wrong direction, priorities, pride, compromises; and it made change possible. We need to be grief stricken about how far our churches fall short of being salt and light.

Vision : a church committed to Christ and gospel; a church of winsome lifestyles and high moral standards; a church of radical love and selfless good deeds that amazes the world around it. They stopped improving their facilities, paid off their debts and hired staff who would be community focussed rather than church focussed.

Structure : isn't unspiritual, it's the difference between success and failure. Insight is not the same as achievement; it needs converting into results. Church needs to be structured:

- church projects – most Christians believe the world is a lost cause; need to expose them to the world by providing them opportunities to connect with it in a way that will build confidence and compassion. Eg they mentored youths on an estate and saw their lives change; they donated blood to the Red Cross; they worked with city officials on projects important to them. People began to see these things as spiritual.
- Personal ministry – Christian life is meant to crescendo round each person finding their place in the constantly unfolding fabric of kingdom work that engages the unique gifts and abilities with which each person has been endowed by God (1 Peter 4.10-11). Structures that ignore this produce stagnation. They have astonishing structure that moves people from a discovery group (newcomer orientation, small group training, church membership, taking 8-10 weeks) to a season of life group (small group spiritual growth group emphasizing relationships in life stages, taking 3 years), to a common cause group (small group spiritual growth group emphasizing service to Christ according to gifting and design, in successive one year commitments). Examples of common cause groups : support to an adoption agency; small group support to those seeking freedom from hurts and addictions; support to a foundation providing scholarships to low-income families wanting Christian education; matching community needs with new common cause groups; counselling to expectant mothers; teaching biblical principles of financial responsibility; working with the deaf; working with agencies in wake of natural disasters; divorce care; divorce prevention; building homes for underprivileged; mission support; inner city children; linking doctors with medical students; marriage support; nursing support for elderly; evangelism; mentoring of fatherless children by men; evangelistic basketball to the unchurched, et al. As people get involved, they become passionate.
- Strategic investments – planting new churches, giving money to faith-based causes; training pastoral leaders; running training conferences for other churches; connecting with city in more ways

5. *From lay spectators to i² participants*

Newcomers. Task to move them from anxious, fearful, lonely, needy, confused, protective, to: committed, courageous, lonely, connected, fruitful, focussed, productive. How?

Isolation in a church makes the world seem more threatening than it really is. Fear is the biggest obstacle to personal ministry. Fear of the world, fear of inadequacy. Use testimonies and success stories. Don't try and turn people into something they aren't – example of advertising executive who said he couldn't do church things; he was asked to help the church speak to the community with 30 second advertising sermons: enormous impact. Need to go with the grain and transform who people are into ministry; their passion is a potential area of ministry. Also: expose people to ministry. Programme it into your church calendar.

Confusion is next obstacle. They have a process designed to introduce people to common cause groups and help them choose one.

Lack of direction. They do a personality test (www.fellowshipassociates.com). Most Christians have a limited understanding of what we mean by ministry; frustration is the result.

Questions of impact. Doubt that it will do any good. Need to see it as a calling; and to measure success by how much you love, not how much things change.

III EXPERIENCING THE RESULTS: TRUE STORIES OF I² IN ACTION

6. *Holy Surprises*

Stories. Couple who took children out of Christian school and put them into public school; with another couple formed a common cause group and developed a sexual abstinence and mentoring program which they have ended up taking to 13 different schools. Couple who began common cause group to help occupants of the new homes the church built learn how to look after them. Couple who worked with inner city kids – events, money raising, summer camp. Business man who set up foundation to train church leaders. Woman who set up agency to arrange adoptions. Man who set up male mentoring for sons of single mothers. Couple who set up divorce recovery and prevention services. Man who teaches stewardship.

7. *Wounded healers*

Divorced and remarried couple; ended up working with single parents.

8. *Urban entrepreneur*

Millionaire Bud mentored black boy Michael. Ended up establishing foundation for urban ministry, which coordinates efforts of many other agencies, most of which staffed by people who care but have no strategic mind.

IV : EXPANDING THE I² EFFORT – NEW PARTNERSHIPS, NEW ADVENTURES

9. *Joining with other churches*

Jack Dennison, *City Reaching* – widening gap between the condition of the average US city and the influence of the church. Game plan in NT is for cities – Acts 1.8 you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. NT churches named for their city; cp epistles, Revelation.

But no church, however big, can reach a city.

Churches in Arkansas are beginning to learn to work together : through praying together and through the credibility gained in serving the community together. Helped by IRM – International Renewal Ministry – which helps facilitate prayer movements between pastors and Christian leaders. Prayer and good works bring churches together, like towers between which a bridge of spiritual influence gets built. The churches *in* Little Rock are beginning to feel like the churches *of* Little Rock. They started with 4 days away for pastors. Day one focussed on Christ. Day two on personal pain. They elected 8 men to form leadership team; who have coordinated network of pastoral prayer cells which unite once a month in a citywide prayer meeting. Pastors have 4 day retreat annually.

He suggested a Share fest (a binge of service projects to the community). Immediate sense by the others that here was the megachurch pastor making a power bid. He apologised, withdrew. A year later someone raised the idea again, and they did it. Enormous impact. They set up a Sharefest village, where people could come to bring food, give blood, donate clothes or toys, sign up as organ donor, and many other things. At same time they planned specific projects, one per church – refurbishing a park, a school, a home, a playground, repair homes, work with a social services agency. And finally, asked each

church to make an advance financial contribution. 100 churches signed up, 105 projects were performed in the community using 3000+ church volunteers – effectively because manned; they weren't just cash injections but actually carried through physically. Evening of prayer and unity; confession of churches of disunity, prejudice, pride, lack of concern, selfishness to community; commitment to pray and serve together in and for the community. The director of the Red Cross put up a card with Mt 5.16 to thank the churches – let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

The next time they did it, 4300 volunteers from 100 churches renovated 26 schools, invested \$400,000 of manpower and materials in schools, gave \$21000 for school uniforms, thousands of dollars also to agencies working with youth, gang members, urban poor, children; 8000 Christians gathered to pray for schools. Toys, clothes, school supplies collected.

10. Equipping leaders

A church's health is measured by its sending capacity, not its seating capacity; leadership crucial. Warren – the critical factor in ministry is not the idea but the leadership. Need to choose, train, mentor young leaders. They set up Fellowship Associates to do this, and to host annual conferences.

11. Developing a community strategy

Every community has a story, and that particular context must be thoroughly understood and considered by any church wanting to make an impact on its community in a meaningful way. Dennison – must gather info that allows us to see our communities as they really are, not just as they appear to be. Usually there is lots of research data; but rarely does it all get analysed together. They did this. Then they formed focus groups of community leaders; surveyed the 633 central Arkansas churches to ask for info about their communities and their programs. They found:

- Church attendance 25-40%, lower than national average
- Race and education are dominant issues, others being affordable housing, domestic violence, healthcare access, youth in poverty, substance abuse, elderly issues, transport, employment. Churches can use this list to imagine future common cause groups.
- There is wide gap between community needs and church programs
- Churches invest little money in local ministry
- The community welcomes church involvement

Survey recommendations : churches should reassess their ministry programs (ones which support family, neighbourhood, education seem the likeliest); churches should focus on existing programs first; should look for ways to work together; should look for ways to partner other organisations; should pursue racial reconciliation.

V: ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE – THE CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

12. From here to where?

People show interest in the truth of the gospel only after they've seen the relevance of the church and the credibility of Christians.

C20th was an age of separation – either a social gospel or a spiritual gospel, either a horizontal construct emphasizing human compassion or a vertical one emphasizing grace.

But the cross is a powerful combination of both! Horizontal AND vertical.

Why did evangelicals abandon social action and community needs (not so C18-19, witness Wilberforce, Wesleys, Finney)?

Stott: reaction against liberal threat which required them to concentrate on doctrine; division of gospel into social and spiritual categories; disillusionment with world after WW1; spread of premillennialism; identification of gospel by middle classes with their own wellbeing. Result: our agenda very different from what it was 100 years ago. We are disconnected from the real world; we must shift our focus from an institutional orientation to a community one if we are to survive and thrive. We need truth AND proof, proclamation AND incarnation.

Otherwise we are Pharisees; selfrighteous and judgmental.

I² will require:

- pastors to redefine success
- The church to redesign its structure
- Lay people to reconnect with a lifestyle of specific spiritual standards and service.

Nietzsche: 'in Christianity, neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point'. If we get on with it, our churches will transform selves from fading lights back into guiding lights.

See also Jack Dennison : *City reaching – on the road to transformation* , Pasadena, Wm Carey Library 1999.