

Note: This is the first chapter of *He Is Waiting on Us...to Become Kingdom-Centered* by Jeff O'Dell, with revisions and developmental editing by Ken Walker. Released Mar. 10, 2023 by Eyes2C Inc.

CHAPTER 1

Transforming the Church

The “Nones.” It’s a term coined in recent years to describe people who profess no religious affiliation. When it comes to the Church in North America, the increasing presence of the nones in surveys of religious preferences has attracted a lot of attention over the past decade. Among those addressing this situation is noted pastor and author James Emery White, who wrote a 2014 book titled *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*. Soon after, demographers George Barna and David Kinnaman of the Barna Research Group released *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*. The Barna book revealed results of a five-year study based on interviews with thousands of unchurched men and women.

Despite this and other well-grounded research, the numbers of disillusioned or never-believers have continued to expand. By the end of 2021, the Pew Research Center found about three-in-ten US adults were now religiously unaffiliated.¹ Not surprisingly, such developments have proved quite discouraging for pastors. Research released by Barna in the spring of 2022 showed 42 percent of them had considered quitting full-time ministry over the past year.²

Given this bleak state of affairs, what does a strategist in the corporate world have to say to a Church (a term I will capitalize when referring to the universal body of Christ) largely governed by professional ministers and bivocational pastors? As a longtime believer in Christ and elder in my local church, **a lot**. My purpose in writing this book is to make a case for change. My objective is to develop a strategy to transform today’s Church to its original design and intent. Namely, one centered on expanding God’s Kingdom (also capitalized), versus primarily serving its local members. A Kingdom-centered Church has the potential to become a powerful force in society — if it can band together with common goals to fulfill an incredibly important purpose.

¹ Pew Research Center, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

² Barna Research Group, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” April 27, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>.

I began this journey with the sober reminder of so many before me, who spent most of their lives pursuing this goal with little or no lasting impact. Yet, I believe that my experience has prepared me to take this different approach, drawing from the lessons of historical events and those of more recent origin. This precedence provides clues that form the foundation for this strategy and a corresponding plan to bring this vision to fruition, not in the distant future but possibly in our lifetime.

Parts of this book will sound different, so I ask each reader to be open-minded and not reject the message outright. It is different because we drastically need a different result. Our current model of the Church is fractured and disconnected, which is intrinsically weak despite the sincerity and value of each local church that collectively represents the body of Christ.

Transformation requires something difficult for all of us: change. It's hard to accept that what we've done for so many years needs to change. Church leaders know one thing for certain — when change occurs, people often leave to find another place for the express purpose of avoiding change. It is human nature to yearn for the familiar. Yet as leaders, we must transform ourselves and not simply preserve the status quo in hopes of keeping the flock together.

Despite the wonderful and essential aspects of the Church, we need a different way of operating — a better outcome. To paraphrase a famous quote often attributed to legendary scientist Albert Einstein, “If we keep on doing the same thing, we shouldn't expect a different outcome.” Given the obvious dysfunction and turmoil in society today, there is broad agreement that we need a different outcome. However, there is not agreement on the best path forward. Whichever we choose, learning to manage change will be the critical success factor of this strategy.

The prescribed shift in approach puts the Kingdom first and foremost, meaning the purposes of the collective Church should always precede the needs of a local church. While we may agree on this doctrine echoed in the Lord's Prayer and Christ's famed “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5–7), in most cases it is not our operative theology. The best path forward is to amplify our strengths and assuage our weaknesses in order to transform the Church as we know it.

Finally, as I write, I remind myself that this topic is way above my pay grade. Yet it seems that every experience in my spiritual walk, family life, and professional career has prepared me for this moment. It feels that all of heaven and earth are waiting for this strategy to unfold. This inspiration — this passion — has driven me to write with a sense of urgency that I have not felt before. I hope and pray that YOU will likewise contribute a piece to the epic puzzle outlined in 1 Corinthians 3:10: “According to the grace of God which has been given to me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, but another builds on it. Now let each one take heed how he builds on it.” Join me on the journey.

Perspective

For most of my adult life, my personal identity and purpose seemed clear. I found immense joy in my beautiful family. I married my high school sweetheart, who gave me four amazing children. I've been an elder in my church since 1992. My professional identity comes from more than thirty-five years in the corporate world, specializing in developing transformational

strategies for various companies. My latest title says I work in data and analytics architecture. In simpler terms, I have held executive management positions for financial services firms, helping organizations become great business partners by thinking “outside the box.”

In my professional life, nothing thrills me more than seeing a vision come to reality. Several times in my career, these strategies garnered over \$100 million in investments, which were foundational to the company’s competitive future. Such results have motivated me to build successful organizations. I am always thinking about the art of the possible, asking “what if?” questions. I am inspired by the statement: “It can’t be done.” I’m sure my family thinks I’m a little crazy but in business, these strategies are essential to a company’s growth and survival.

At the same time, I hear from God at times with such clarity that it can feel overwhelming. I know my Shepherd’s voice and have learned to obey it without question. For me, this divine revelation pervades both my spiritual walk and my performance in the workplace. I recall a seminal moment in my spiritual journey when I heard God say:

When you are *becoming* mature, you should utilize what you learn at church to benefit your family and career. When you have *reached* maturity, you should utilize what you learned in your career to benefit the Kingdom.

This surprised me because I always considered my marketplace career to be inherently secular. But God showed me the perfect example in Scripture that broadened my understanding. When Goliath confronted the Israelite armies (1 Samuel 17), David leveraged the skills he had gained in his vocation as a shepherd, killing the lion and the bear. His boldness in facing Goliath stemmed from overcoming earlier threats on his job, amplified by his faith. Slaying Goliath not only elevated David in his path to the position of king, but also bolstered the prominence of Israel as God’s chosen people. What a revelation!

I have always considered my spiritual insights an “unfair” advantage in the workplace. So many times, I could understand the underlying motives and insecurities of other corporate leaders. As my career advanced quickly, I became a vice president at several prestigious financial services companies. When I focused my years of experience in business strategy on the Church as a whole — not a single organization or congregation — I realized that it was ripe for transformation. I know that many others have come to the same realization.

Unrealized Potential

The Church has numerous strengths, which collectively benefit millions of individuals and families. It is run by so many dedicated leaders and supporters, who collectively see millions of lives changed for the better. However, I believe it has SO MUCH MORE unrealized potential. I am certain that I am not alone in this realization. Many have expounded on the original purpose of the Church as described in Scripture, but it appears that we continue to underperform as an organization relative to this overarching purpose.

Most of the proposed remedies I have studied focus on the basic tenants of the first century Church established by the apostles. While this approach is fundamental and can shed light on many aspects of the design, purpose, and intent of the Church, this perspective alone is not sufficient to fully realize the purpose of the Church in *this* age and the age to come. It would be easy if we could simply hit the “reset button” to revert to the beginning. The guiding principles of the operational model of the Church are hidden in plain sight in the Scriptures, yet they are cast in an era long passed.

In business, most transformational strategies are focused on technology. The internet, email, smart phones, and digital content have transformed lives around the world. While virtual meetings and videoconferencing became almost the norm in our schools and churches during the COVID pandemic, I *do not* consider technology to be the primary enabler of the Kingdom-centered Church. But this kind of disruption to our daily lives creates a window of opportunity. It is the catalyst for change.

One of my mentors once said, *Never waste a good crisis*. I initially thought this expressed his sarcastic outlook or quirky sense of humor, but soon realized his comment represented profound, true wisdom. When we live in relative stability, it is strenuous and challenging (even distasteful) to change. Even in times of adversity, our belief that things can become worse paralyzes our efforts to achieve constructive progress. The familiar becomes our impediment, even our enemy. The Scriptures characterize the end times as filled with trials and tribulation, wars, and rumors of wars. Sadly, our human nature seems to require this kind of instability to transform into the next chapter of our lives. This is a story told many times in Scripture.

Kingdom-Centered

To realize its full potential, the Church must be centered on the Kingdom of God — righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom is much more than a fragmented collection of independent churches and thousands of church-related organizations. We are suffering from the ramifications of division, which has resulted in isolation and weakness. I hope we can come together without waiting for a whole generation to pass, like the Israelites crossing the desert on the way to Canaan.

My purpose is not to bring correction but hope, with a renewed vision of a new day on our journey. I have neither the desire or authority to find fault with an institution that is so integral to my family tradition and has supported and encouraged me for decades. Rather, my goal is to *cast a vision* to see the realization of the true purpose and identity of the Church of Jesus Christ. To fulfill Jesus’s words in the Lord’s Prayer — to see His Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. This book will outline the strategy and a plan to make this vision a reality. It’s all about transformation.

Romans 12:1–2 states clearly that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, but that doesn’t mandate that the church itself should be transformed — individual congregations or collectively. Transformation is an essential process to either transition into the next stage of growth or restore what is off target. Despite all that is good about the church, I assert that it needs to be transformed to fulfill its purpose as Christ ordained it.

There have been times in history where we've seen a glimpse of a unity in society. For example, on September 11, 2001, virtually all of America rallied around a common cause. We set aside our differences and became one. In the previous generation, it was the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 that touched off World War II and brought us together as one nation despite those voices that had argued strenuously against war.

I recall major events in the life of the Church which created similar results of unity, such as citywide Billy Graham evangelistic meetings that brought together numerous denominations, races, and ethnicities for a single purpose: conversion. All the churches would come together and cooperate, rising to the occasion and seeing memorable results. But as we all know, as time passed, society reverted to its former status quo. That's why this transformation must be sustainable, not simply a short-term, emotional response to crisis or an event. In order to impact the world, the Kingdom-centered Church must become the *new normal*!

