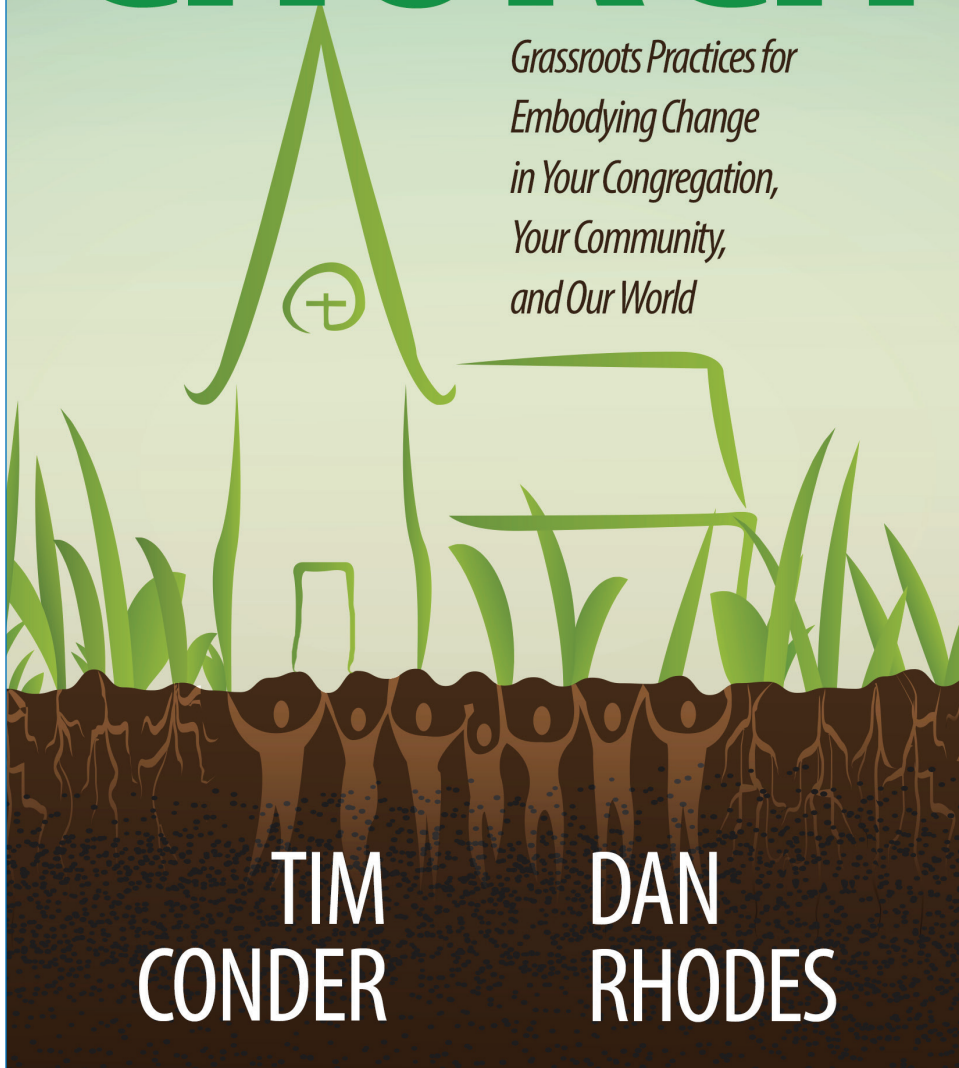


Organizing **CHURCH**

*Grassroots Practices for
Embodying Change
in Your Congregation,
Your Community,
and Our World*



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ACTION GUIDE

BY TIM CONDER AND DAN RHODES

Action Guide for...

Pastors, Church Leadership Teams, Faith Communities, Institutional Leaders, Activists...

and almost anyone who cares about the health of their congregation, their community, and the state of our world

An Action Guide

Organizing Church has much to study. Dan and I are pastors, scholars, and researchers who are both passionate about ideas. In these roles, we are perpetually drawn to understand and assess the contexts that frame, inform, and inspire action. In starting a church together with missional and activist ambitions, we found it essential to provide a theological, political, and social rationale for our hopes and vision. You will find some of that rationale littered throughout this text. But, at base, we are active and aspirational persons—almost to a fault. In chapter one, you will almost immediately encounter a lament that drives the book, namely that churches, despite our best understanding of the mission and purpose of Jesus’ life and ministry, are very often apathetic to and dismissive of actions that substantively realign our communities and world around Jesus’ just and beautiful vision for a world that reflects the compassionate heart of God. Hence, this is an action guide. It will ask our readers not only to reflect, but to **ACT** in their church, community, or institution. But it will ask you to do so with some intentionality. We confidently believe those actions will animate your context and will activate it.

Christian — A Diversity of Traditions

This guide will occasionally acknowledge the many audiences who we believe will find this book to be helpful. First and foremost, we have written to Christian leaders and pastors who shape the work and mission of the church. But we also strongly believe this text to be urgently useful to other faith communities and leaders in other relational institutions. In a society beset by sharp divisions and stark inequities, organizing culture has often served as a leader in finding common interest across the racial, class, and religious differences that threaten to define not only our democracy, but our faiths and our worship. For those outside the Christian tradition, this guide will help you use the book in your own tradition—something we’d challenge you to do. Of course, as leaders in the Christian church, we also think this guide will help Christian leaders recover portions of their practice and tradition. Our clear hope is a church fully engaged at the wounds intrinsic to our society.

In the Wake of the 2016 Presidential Election

Dan and I finished this manuscript well before the conclusion of the election in a time when a Trump presidency seemed unimaginable. As organizers, we were up to our elbows in work with affordable housing, educational equity, and equal access to healthcare. Particularly in North Carolina, a supposedly Christian political agenda that vilified the poor and played upon the lines of historic racism screamed for an increase of faith-based organizing and a book with the tools to equip faith communities and faith leaders. We knew that churches desperately needed this book. Obviously, our nation changed radically and frighteningly for the most vulnerable in society with this election. By the inauguration, the world of organizing (and protest) welcomed many who, to that point, could never have imagined themselves to be politically active. The need for a book that offers wisdom in organizing and hope for fellowships that seek to use its principles has never been higher. For that reason, and so many others, we hope that you will work through this guide, turning every question and challenge into the possibility for collective action.

And, some credit where credit is due...

When Dan was at Emmaus Way, he started a pub group that continues to this day. For over 12 years, many of us have gathered at various Durham, NC, taverns to discuss theology, philosophy, politics, and life. The ever-changing group has been an inspiration to us and a great sounding board to many of the ideas of this book. Even now (as I write this guide), the group is working through *Organizing Church*. Many of their questions and insights are included here.

Chapter One

RE-Assessing the Church as It Is and Could Be

In a sentence or two...

Our reason for writing this book was framed in our own personal history with the church and our study of the church as a place that can be the site of a beautiful and potent instance of the kingdom initiated by Christ but so often reverts to embodying something much less if not something oppositional to Jesus' message.

Reflect and dream for a bit...

- We shared a couple of scenes of profound and lasting social impact by organized churches and faith communities. What are your recollections or memories that inspire you to read on? Can you remember and share a moment or season when a specific fellowship or collection of congregations had a substantive impact on a local community by courageously embodying the kingdom?
- We also wrote from a posture of great disappointment regarding our common experiences with the church as we shared a couple of stories of lost opportunity. What's your own lament about the lost opportunities or lost vision of local congregations? Share a story – or two!
- Finally, what is your vision for the church or your faith community? How do you hope to impact your local community or even the greater society?

ACT!

Create a space to share your inspiration, laments, and vision and hear those of others in your congregation or fellowship. As our book illustrates throughout, this can be easily done within the confines of your worship gatherings or liturgy and this can be done in a special event. Do it! As we share later in chapter seven — narratives, struggles, and imaginations profoundly shape local spaces such as the church and its identity.

Chapter Two

RE-Defining the Church: Practice-Based Ecclesiology

In a sentence or two...

Our discussion of the “what...where...and why” of the church relocates the church from simply theological assertions (some very useful) or institutional proclamations that exist apart from practice to “a peculiar way of life,” a practice-based identity that establishes it as a countercultural, potent social body enacting together Jesus’ vision of a new creation.

Locate your own community...

- What are the theological rationales that drive the identity of your community?
- What are the specific sacred or traditional practices that “locate” your community in its normative understanding of those who participate, its primary acts of worship, and its relationship to your community?

Note: For faith communities or institutions outside of the Christian tradition, the examples of Christian theology and biblical interpretation we use can act as stand-ins to help you isolate your own theological/philosophical/ethical rationales evidenced in your primary practices.

ACT!

Theology implies practice, a way of living. Good theology (or ethical philosophy for that matter) does not abide a stark division between theory and practice. After all, who God is already indicates who we must be to worship God. Look at one of your worship or common practices that may have become historically detached from social practice in the understanding of your community. Re-narrate this tradition or sacrament from its historical roots to embodied practices that would locate your fellowship in a justice-soaked relationship with your greater community. Preach it – Publish it – Teach it! Find a way to recover this practice as formation of your fellowship in the work of Jesus’ kingdom or a similar ethical vision.

CHAPTER THREE

RE-Empowering the Church: Why Power Matters for Congregations

In a sentence or two...

This chapter defines power in a sense that reveals that churches and all communities are collections of power and enmeshed in systems of power within our society. We eschew naïveté and acknowledge the pervasiveness of power, while working to show the peculiar kind of power at work in the church. Then, we move toward organized expressions of power that build a new corporeal good.

React...

- We know! — this description runs against so many common (mis) understandings of power and its relationship to faith and the church. How does this presentation make you feel? Frightened? Relieved? Confused? Something else? This is definitely a point of our book that merits some conversation and prolonged reflection.

ACT!

Do separate power analyses of your church and a portion of your local community that relates to a social issue where you want your fellowship to work for justice. We'll help you a bit with this. When we do this we often work on a whiteboard or a large post-it. Name key persons and social entities who have real power, the power to make others act or react. Near where you have named them, also name their interests. What do these persons or groups seek to accomplish, protect, or critique? Why? Then carefully (possibly using lines between those you have named) describe their relations with other powerful persons or entities. The more carefully you do this process, the more you will see "how things really work" in your congregation or local community. Key: Do your power analysis with a team of leaders or interested actors! Collective vision will be better than one person's (regardless of how influential) perspective.

REACT, again...

As we explained in the chapter, power often lies in the reaction it causes. See your power analysis as an action on you and your team! What do these power maps reveal about winnable possibilities according to your vision? What can you do to further your vision? Make a plan of action now.

CHAPTER FOUR

RE-Connecting the Church: The Constructive Practice of the Relational Meeting

In a sentence or two...

The relational meeting is the heart-and-soul of an organizing church. A commitment to a culture of relational meetings, where congregation members meet regularly with each other (often across demarcations of distance) to listen to each other's interests, passions, and narratives can reinvigorate the relational fabric of the fellowship and drive it into meaningful mission.

Differentiate...

In the back of the book, we have provided an appendix to offer further details on the practice of the relational meeting. After working through that template, discuss with key leaders how this form of one-on-one meeting differentiates from other forms of one-on-one meetings common in church settings, such as pastoral care, training, or spiritual formation. Learn carefully the art, boundaries, and goals of relational meetings. (Remember, good relational meetings are about the person you're meeting with, not a prefabricated agenda!)

ACT!

- Make a specific goal for the number of relational meetings you want to hold in a week. Name specific persons in a variety of social spaces (friends, key leaders in your church, persons you aspire to know, persons with power in your extended community, etc.) with whom you aspire to have relational meetings. Put this list in a prominent space. Also share this list with a peer committed to this same practice as an act of accountability.
- Teach this practice of relational meetings more widely in your church, organization, or faith community. As you teach this practice, those in Christian settings should carefully connect this to "the recognition of gifts" or "the fullness of Christ" (see pages 18–19 in chapter two). If you are in an institution or a faith community outside of the Christian tradition, what does your own charter or tradition affirm about the significance, giftedness, and value of every member?
- Create a season in your congregation where relational meetings become a focal point of your life together. Reinforce this commitment by perhaps forging space in meetings (or even worship gatherings!) where relational meetings can be practiced and held.

Chapter Five

RE-Collecting the Church: House Meetings and Discernment

In a sentence or two...

The practice of open community listening or “house meetings” can be admittedly frightening. But, as described in many examples, house meetings can help fellowships discern vital acts of viable mission and, through the discernment process that follows, can mobilize a whole congregation behind that mission.

Reflect (and confess!)...

Are you frightened about house meetings? What are you afraid to hear? Your answers to those questions may indicate why open listening has been truncated in your fellowship. In the Christian tradition, our pneumatology, our theology of the presence and leading of God’s Spirit, can drive us to trust the value of listening and the power of discernment. Reflect on these theological resources (and others from within your own tradition if relevant) as an impetus to collective listening.

ACT!

Use appendix two from the book on the details of organizing a house meeting process to develop your own process of collective listening. Make a plan, set some firm dates and goals, choose your leaders, and step into a practice that will surely lead your congregation into new spaces of understanding and mission. (Don’t forget to agitate! Admittedly an art rather than simply an easily defined action, agitation is necessary to move those of us unaccustomed to voicing our real passions, frustrations, hopes, and concerns in public toward real expression. You have to move beyond both niceties and Pollyannaish ideas for others to do in order to really get the good stuff from your community).

Chapter Six

RE-Uniting the Church: On Conflict and Revitalization

In a sentence or two...

The avoidance of conflict or careless means of addressing conflict is widespread and often paralyzes all types of communities and fellowships. Actually, leaning into conflict with a determined and biblical practice such as “the rule of Christ” can transform inevitable conflicts into a source of reconciliation within your congregation and can unleash previously inconceivable trajectories of action and mission.

Reflect and confess (again!)...

How has your congregation, faith community, or institution been impaired by unresolved conflict over its distant and near past? How have you personally been complicit in this impairment by a determined avoidance of conflict? We identify several common strategies of conflict avoidance. What strategy or combination of strategies (feel free to author your own here) best characterizes your practice in this realm? And, if conflict reconciliation is your strength, can you name your commitments and actions that make this so?

Some additional reading...

We strongly recommend your following our end notes regarding the “rule of Christ” (commonly named as “binding and loosing” from the works of John Howard Yoder) and “the politics of forgiveness” from Jim McClendon. Reading on this rich New Testament practice will greatly enhance your application of what can be a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural practice. Reading chapter one of John Howard Yoder’s *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* is a great place to start.

ACT!

You probably won’t have to look far for a place to put “binding and loosing” into action.

- Learn carefully about this practice and commit to deploy this process in a conflicted relationship in your fellowship or congregation. Because this is truly a community practice, you will need to study this with others. And, above all, we believe this is a prayerful practice that can be astoundingly liberative for your congregation.

- Be thoughtful and creative about ways to use this language, as we have done, on a communal level. Help your fellowship begin processes of discernment to “bind” themselves (become resolved to maintain certain obligations) and “loose” themselves (become absolved of certain obligations).
- Beyond individual conflicts, consider what activities or programs your community might need to be loosed from—often we find some of our biggest conflicts are where we’re trying to keep afloat a ministry that is no longer a passion in the community. Then, consider where conflicts might be leading you to bind yourself to a new ministry or a much-needed change. Begin to discern with others what a pilot project in this area would look like and how it might take a risk to initiate it.

Chapter Seven

RE-Discovering the Church: An Organizing and Reorganizing Community

In a sentence or two...

An organizing church is more accurately a fellowship committed to constant organizing and re-organizing, a commitment to being a kinetic community. A commitment to organizing and re-organizing profoundly reshapes the identity of a congregation and its leaders.

In praise of kinetic communities...

In the text of this chapter, we argued against static communities, communities that resist change by adhering to strict templates and forms, and a static understanding of identities for pastors, leaders, and their communities. We cited William Easterly's distinction between "planners" and "searchers" as part our defense of that critique. Give that section a quick reread (pp. 101-102) and then do a bit of analysis about leadership and the expectations for social change in your church or faith community.

- Does the community lean toward the broad, often externally generated, "one size fits all" solutions generated by planners or the nimble plans or visions enhanced by local knowledge that is common of searchers?
- How would a greater emphasis on a searchers style action impact the mission of your fellowship or institution and the its ability to listen to persons inside and outside the fellowship regarding their needs and ideas?
- Can you think of past initiatives that might illustrate some of your reactions regarding this material?

ACT!

In the book, we affirmed a shift in pastoral (leadership) identity toward that of an ethnographer who studies "spaces, locations, and geographies" and becomes "attuned to their surroundings, the histories of their local communities, the structures of power that create and protect injustices around them, and the key local spaces that impact identities in their congregations" (p. 105).

- What are the spaces, locations, and communities that you need to study? How and when will you study them?
- What are the laments that you need to write, preach, or embody from the histories of your local community and the space you inhabit? How and when will you craft these laments?
- How will you use this book to become a co-conspirator in the work of social justice?