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FOREWORD

I'd like to invite all pastors and lay leaders to step aside with me for a personal word. The first time I traveled to Australia, I bought three different guidebooks. Each one was a zillion pages long and covered every conceivable travel contingency, in every possible microculture, in every imaginable weather condition. I now know how to recognize snakes that I will never see and how to order food that I will never eat. Unfortunately, the guidebooks neglected to emphasize repeatedly that people drive and walk on the left, and I almost got killed at least hundred times. True, it's a jungle out there and one day I will really appreciate the zillion pages in the guide book, but at the beginning all I really (desperately!) needed were twelve steps to survive and thrive in another world.

The same is true for churches hoping to find their way in a new world. The mission field that is defined by the average distance people walk to work and shop in your zip code is fragmenting and diversifying at an alarming rate. So also is the multiplication of church-growth guidebooks. Yes, they are useful. One day you will need to explore all the nuances of culture and experiment with all the options for mission—and thank God for the zillion pages of advice. However, right now all you need is twelve steps to survive the trip and thrive in what will certainly feel like a foreign land. Believe me, it is a humbling experience.

Since I have you leaders to one side for a moment, this leads me to share with you the one thing you absolutely must understand about modern culture and the established church. *People are incredibly selfish.* It's not just the “boomer” generation, although their reputation for self-centeredness is well deserved. It is every-

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body, of all ages, races, and incomes. North America is a “me first” culture. Sure, people can be very generous with time and money for acute needs, but they are poor givers for chronic care. Philanthropic giving is higher than ever, but always with a personal tax exemption and a good feeling inside. Churchy people are just as selfish, and people beyond the church think churchy people are actually worse than the general public. Churchy people hate leaving their comfort zones for anything, including Christ. They talk a good line—and preach it, teach it, sing it, and sometimes dance to it—but they rarely risk much to do it. Churchy people pay for their membership benefits first, and if there is any money left over, they will give it to charity. The single most important thing leaders of change need to understand is that people are incredibly selfish.

After years of denominational and cross-denominational consulting for church growth, I am astonished at how many leaders are astonished at this. Somewhere in the midst of the twelve steps you will learn in this book, the sleepless pastor or lay leader suddenly realizes that people are *selfish*. Duh! *That’s why they are resistant*. That’s what it means to say that they are “sinners.” And since Jesus had a habit of associating with sinners, it should not be surprising to find more selfish people *inside* the church building than *outside* the church building. Churches magnetically attract selfish people because something inside compels them to seek healing, but make no mistake. Most of those people inside (on your staff and board and membership rolls) are *still selfish people!* Even if God has healed them into temporary “unselfishness,” they are remarkably prone to backslide into selfishness at the first signs of conflict or crisis.

Selfishness is not a state of being. It is a self-destructive habit, like smoking. Even after quitting, all it takes for the ex-smoker to start smoking again is for life to become suddenly stressful. Guess what? As a church leader you are about to make church life suddenly stressful, and it is going to send seemingly healthy church members

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right back into selfishness again. I've seen church members make it all the way through step 10 (as explained in this book), and suddenly start "smoking" again. The startled church leader pauses in midstride, thunderstruck, realizing that even after 10 steps of transformation *people are still selfish!*

It is ironic that Dave Laubach begins this book describing the U-turn churches must make to "turn around and grow." I had a conversation with a church member who used exactly this metaphor. He was a veteran church member and retired school district superintendent. Every week he drove his Mercedes to church. He parked in the same parking space and sang his favorite Christian music in the choir, wearing the gown that had his name sewn on the collar. His family sat in the same pew, and woe betides any newcomer who inadvertently sat there. He drank his coffee in the same way, standing in the same place, in the same room, talking with the same friends, for the same amount of time, before driving home in his Mercedes. He tithed to the Lord, and kept 90 percent for himself. He was a lifetime trustee and board member and never missed a meeting. This is what he said to me as a consultant to his church:

I really don't know where we have come from. The origins and history of the church don't interest me. I really don't care where we are now. Community needs are complicated, and better addressed by nonprofit agencies anyway. I really don't want a vision. They are always painful, and I just need the church to be a rock, an oasis, and open to celebrate my funeral. And Tom, I really, really, really don't need directions on how to get somewhere I don't want to go. How soon can you leave town?

Do you see what I mean? The same thing will be said to any church leader hoping to transform and turn around their church. It may not be articulated so well. It may be revealed by a raised eye-

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brow or an angry outburst, or by diminished giving or absenteeism, but it's there.

It's hard to break people of the habit of selfishness, and since churchy people have enjoyed the privileges of majority since Westerners first immigrated to North America, it is harder for established church members to consider change. So, since I have you pastors and lay leaders aside for a moment, let me share with you the two things you need to know about breaking the habits of selfishness in the church.

First, you must break the hidden habit of selfishness that is within you. Yes, you are selfish too. We are all sinners, and you are no exception. I am amazed by how often I consult with a church that has made it through the first ten steps of transformation outlined in this book, but it is still not growing in spiritual depth and mission impact. It comes as a shock to the pastor and lay leaders to realize the problem is them. They were so busy freeing others from selfishness that they forgot to free themselves. How can you tell that you are still selfish?

- You are not a good coach, because you are unwilling to *be coached*. Your pride is in the way. You aren't able to admit mistakes, learn new things, and show others how to move beyond their comfort zones because *you* aren't ready to move beyond your own comfort zones.

- You are not able to be your very best. Your self-interest is in the way. Jesus says "follow me," and you're worrying about career moves, a regular day off, and retirement plans. It's easy to be "sold out for Christ" when you are young and childless, but when you are trying to pay for university educations for your grown-up kids and the edge of idealism has worn down, it is tempting to be only "sort of sold out for Christ."

So before you lead the church into steps 1–10, you may want to look ahead in this book and check out steps 11 and 12. It would

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be a shame to assemble an army, only to discover you are unprepared to lead it into battle.

Second, you must surrender everything to Christ. Ultimately, only God can liberate the sinner. Only Christ can heal you, your congregation, and North America from its profound habit of selfishness. You have to do more than pray. You have to make your life a prayer. Be ready for God's Spirit to intrude, upset, and change your church, your leadership, and your lifestyle. These days we hear a lot about "nation first," "family first," "marriage first," "the poor first," "peace first," and any number of causes and precious relationships coming "first." But until Christ comes "first" the church will not grow. This is a hard challenge. I urge you to talk it over with your spouse and children before launching into the twelve steps of this book.

One of my own books connects the emerging faithful church with the earliest mission described in the New Testament. *Roadrunner* contrasts the "Body of Christ in Residence" with the "Body of Christ in Motion." I keep coming back to that metaphor again and again. In the end, this book is not just about twelve steps. It is about "stepping out." It is about walking with Christ into mission, and doing what the church is supposed to be about. Step, step, step, step ... and keep going. It may take you five minutes or five years to move from one step described in this book to the next step. That's OK. Just don't stop. Keep going. God wants the church to be *in motion*.

—Thomas G. Bandy
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INTRODUCTION

“Stagnant, stuck, and sterile!”¹ For many years, I borrowed this phrase from David Dethmers to describe congregations at an impasse and churches in decline. A definition of being stuck comes from Kenneth Halstead, who says a congregation is stuck when it “does not hear and respond to needs, is unable to foster a maturing faith in its members, and is unable to grow and adapt its structure to change.” In a stuck congregation, members feel frustrated that the church is going nowhere or losing ground. “Its energy flow stagnates or drains away.”² The alliteration, stuck-sterile-stagnant, sounds an alarm that inward-focused, maintenance-minded, and survival-mode congregations are not evangelizing, planting new churches, and reaching out to their communities in friendship and service.

Statistics tell us that in the United States more than 80 percent of churches have plateaued or are declining, and 50–75 churches close their doors every week.³ My desire is to signal that many churches are in distress and that there ought to be urgency about recovering a faithful representation of the church. I deliberately use the vocabulary of transformation, which is the Latin form of the Greek word *metamorphosis*, to talk about change in the church. Transformation is that type of deep structural change that brings vitality, helps churches break free from unhealthy patterns, and produces fruit.

This book is for the leader who recognizes the challenging realities of the congregation today, has a vision for a healthier expression of Christ’s church, and is looking for some help with the process of congregational renovation.

I feel compelled to say a word of qualification about the title of

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this book. As with any 12-step program, the journey toward transformation is much longer than twelve paces. Each step represents a stage in a process that will take some time. And while it is best and often necessary to start at the beginning, transforming a congregation is not like assembling a new bicycle. The steps are all critical, but different congregations in different situations will have different starting places in the process.

The similarity between *Twelve Steps to Congregational Transformation* and the twelve steps⁴ of such recovery programs as Alcoholics Anonymous is not entirely contrived. The first step in recovery for alcoholics is to admit that they are powerless over alcohol and that their lives have become unmanageable. The first step for churches and leaders in recovery is to confess that we are powerless to change churches that have become unsustainable. It is only the greater power we name as Jesus who will restore us to a healthy life in the body. The journey toward personal and congregational transformation begins with the decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.⁵

With each step I have included a biblical text and commentary that speak to the topic. After each step I have added questions and process for reflection as well as suggested actions. It will be in the conversation about change and the activity around renewal that transformation will happen.

The cartoons that introduce each step are not meant to trivialize the sacred business of continually renewing Christ's church. They are intended to make the point of that chapter visually and creatively. It will take all five senses (have you seen the Scratch and Sniff Bible?), all of our multiple intelligences, and our right and left brain to partner with Christ, the church's founder in church renovation.