

*The problem with best practices  
is that by the time they are discovered  
and developed into training programs,  
culture has moved on and  
the 'best practices' are no longer 'best.'  
What is needed is a learning community  
made up of practitioners  
who are learning together  
in real time.*

-Len Sweet

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AN ONGOING CONVERSATION  
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# INTRODUCTION

## I DIDN'T SEE IT COMING.

I didn't see the wave coming. But all of a sudden, it was breaking, and I was in the impact zone.

I opened my eyes. The red digits of my ceiling projection clock glared at me. 3:40 a.m. Too early to get up. But I knew I would not be going back to sleep. My tired, terrified brain was racing, looking for a solution.

The day before, we'd been informed that the deal fell through on the sale of our house due to a "catastrophic" problem with a wooden support beam that could result in parts of our nearly new house collapsing. As I lay in the dark, the resulting ramifications reverberated through my consciousness. Our carefully earned equity—gone. Our financial security—gone. Our plans for a new organization focused on starting urban churches now in complete disarray.

Up to this point, the journey had looked so promising. Cherri and I met at college. Over our first 12 years of ministry together, we became the parents of two fantastic kids while I served as the youth pastor in three progressively larger churches.

We transitioned out of youth ministry because we sensed that God was calling us to start a new church in Utah. On the surface, this church-planting move seemed a little crazy to our friends and family. But we waded in with confidence, convinced that God was moving us into a new season of ministry. Over the next decade, God allowed us to be a part of the start and growth of an amazing new church in the fascinating state of Utah. Church on the Terrace (now known as “God’s Place”) grew into a congregation of over 600 and helped to start five other new Utah churches.

Toward the end of our time in Utah, we were invited to move into a full-time church multiplication catalytic role in the Rocky Mountain region. We moved to Colorado Springs and, over the next six years, had the privilege of partnering with the launch of 25 new churches in every imaginable context.

This work at the regional level got the attention of our denomination’s national leaders. In 2005, I accepted an invitation to serve as the National Church Planting director for the Assemblies of God.

This new assignment led to the development of what is now known as the Church Multiplication Network. I had the privilege of being the chief strategist for this initiative. But it was truly a team effort. Nine teams of five to 10 leaders each were mobilized to create the initial implementation plan.

In the ensuing years, the Assemblies of God experienced unprecedented expansion in the face of severe cultural headwinds. My “place in the lineup” allowed me to see a big wave coming in—a wave that is both an opportunity and a threat to the missional effectiveness of the Church in America. More about that wave later.

Something else got my attention as well: most new church starts were occurring in suburban communities. At first, I had no problem with that, because suburbs were where most Americans were choosing to live. In fact, the mega-trend in the 1970s and 1980s was migration from city centers to

the rapidly growing suburbs. When people left the cities for the suburbs, churches followed them—a smart missional move.

But over the past 25 years, the migration trends have become more complicated. In some metropolitan areas, city neighborhoods have actually grown more rapidly than their suburban counterparts. Almost without exception, city neighborhood populations are growing. But what surprised me was not seeing a corresponding trend in the starting of new churches in urban neighborhoods. More people, less Church. This struck me as unacceptable.

I began to pray about what I should do to address this missional challenge. Slowly, over about a year, Cherri and I began to sense that God was calling us toward a radical shift in focus. We were not thrilled with the consequences of saying “yes” to this shift. It would require us leaving behind my perfectly good career of leading CMN and paddling out into unknown waters, creating a new organization focused on starting churches in city neighborhoods. I was 56 years old at the time—not a good time to reinvent oneself. Adding even more stress to the equation was the fact that despite doing a ton of research, I was unable to find anything close to a “silver bullet” to solve the problem of why the Church was not adequately present in urban communities. I would have to be willing to surf uncharted waters with a board I built myself.

In 2014, we arrived at a point of conviction that this was indeed a step of obedience we needed to take. Contrary to all logic, we submitted our resignation to the Assemblies of God leadership. It was GO time. Our full attention was now focused on solving the urban dilemma.

This NEW adventure has been loaded with surprises. Despite being lifelong ministry veterans, we were surprised by the level of spiritual warfare we have encountered. At one point, our personal financial security appeared to be in serious jeopardy—thus the sleepless night I described in

the opening lines of this chapter. We've encountered inexplicable setbacks and challenges. We've attempted a lot of things that just didn't work at all.

But not all the surprises have been unpleasant. Cherri and I decided we would personally need to live in an urban neighborhood setting. We deliberately moved into a high-rise multi-family building in a downtown Denver neighborhood. Our previous residential experiences had all been lived in suburban contexts. We found the difference between our suburban roots and our urban present to be remarkable. We joyfully discovered that we love living in an urban neighborhood.

Some of the surprises have been paradigm-breaking. Concepts that were previously vague notions have now become revolutionary realities for us. We now live in the middle of a phenomenon called "gentrification." We have regular encounters with the people experiencing homelessness who have temporarily chosen our neighborhood as a place to stay for a few days. Sirens blare at all hours. Our neighborhood actually has microphones that listen for gunshots so the police can respond more quickly when there is a problem. Construction cranes dot the city skyline around us. We have one car and sometimes go days without using it. Our new neighborhood friends have diversified faith (or lack of) journeys. Our Zip code leans politically dark blue. When we combine our personal experiences with those of the numerous other urban church starters we've worked with over the past six years, we've directly and indirectly accumulated a treasure trove of urban church-launching knowledge that we—the Urban Islands team—are eager to pass along to whomever is ready to learn.

To date, Urban Islands has assisted 49 church start-up teams in difficult settings. We've partnered with numerous churches, networks, and denominations to help them optimize their efforts to start churches in difficult and urban places.

## THE WAVE I DIDN'T SEE COMING.

**Here is the unexpected discovery that came out of our efforts to increase the presence of the Church in the city.** When I started writing this book, my intention was to help urban church starters go into the urban context more effectively. But the more I wrote—I realized that the insights our leaders were discovering in the urban context are applicable in every church setting everywhere. Why? Because we are all living in the tension between the receding 20th-century wave of culture and the rapidly emerging 21st-century urban cultural wave that will soon be crashing on the shores of every community.

Here's the thing about waves. You have to decide how you will respond to each wave. You basically have three options. Miss them. Be pulverized by them. Or ride them. If you miss them by diving under the wave, you end up in the calm on the other side of the wave going nowhere fast. Being pulverized speaks for itself. Nobody wants to be pulverized. But that's what happens when you choose to stand your ground. Riding the wave requires serious effort that is richly rewarded when the power of the wave grips the board and propels the board and the rider toward the shore.

Here's the thing about riding a wave. You will not finish the ride if you passively stand on the board without constantly shifting your center of gravity. Staying on the wave requires you to intentionally shift to adjust to the constantly changing shape of the wave. You can't stay on the wave without shifting.

My hope is that this book will help you catch the 21st-century urban cultural wave and ride it all the way to the beach! Digesting the contents of this book will help you see the wave that's now arriving, know how to catch it, and understand the shifts you will need to make to ride it all the way to the shore.

## TWELVE SHIFTS

The wave is the 21st-century culture emanating from the crucible of the urban context. The shifts are the necessary adjustments we will need to make to ride the wave of the 21st century. The collective learning of the 40+ Urban Islands Project church starts has coalesced into an awareness of Twelve Shifts that leaders must make to effectively ride the 21st-century wave. Here is a brief overview of what the Urban Islands Project cohort is learning about the shifts that will help us all ride the wave:

### **#1 SHIFT ONE: REDISCOVER THE CHURCH.**

*From Building the Institution to Catalyzing a Movement.*

The sustainable 21st-century church rests on a solid, minimal ecclesiology.

### **#2 SHIFT TWO: REIMAGINE DISCIPLESHIP.**

*From Discipleship as a Program to a Lifestyle of Disciple-Making.*

The 21st-century church must be built on a platform of broadband discipleship. Start making disciples who make disciples, and the Church will emerge.

### **#3 SHIFT THREE: REINVENT FUNDING.**

*From Self-Sustaining to Sustainable.*

The sustainable 21st-century church requires a full-spectrum funding strategy.

### **#4 SHIFT FOUR: RETHINK TEAM-BUILDING.**

*From Titles and Positions to Communities of Disciples on mission with Jesus.*

The sustainable 21st-century church always begins with people first.

**#5 SHIFT FIVE: REDEEM ARCHITECTURE.**

*From Empty Buildings to Fully Utilized Assets.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will use architecture creatively.

**#6 SHIFT SIX: RECLAIM THE ECOSYSTEM.**

*From Isolating to Complementing.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will participate holistically in the ecosystem of the city.

**#7 SHIFT SEVEN: RECALIBRATE THE TIMELINE.**

*From Launching to Emerging.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will respect every formative stage of the emerging church. Discover, Discern, Deploy, Develop, Duplicate.

**#8 SHIFT EIGHT: REFRESH THE METRICS.**

*From Bodies in the Pews to Disciples in the Marketplace.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will skillfully measure missional progress utilizing metrics that measure authentic Kingdom advancement.

**#9 SHIFT NINE: REFOCUS CHURCH HABITS.**

*From Calendar Driven to Mission Driven.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will embed healthy missional habits into the ongoing rhythms of the church.

**#10 SHIFT TEN: RE-CONSIDER CORE VALUES.**

*From Institution Focused to Mission Oriented.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will be guided by core values appropriately informed by 21st-century cultural trends.



## **#11 SHIFT ELEVEN: RECOMMIT TO MULTIPLICATION.**

*From Addition to Movement.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will intentionally cultivate a culture of multiplication that permeates every organizational dimension.

## **#12 SHIFT TWELVE: REACTIVATE SPIRIT DEPENDENCE.**

*From Duty to Necessity.*

The sustainable 21st-century church will be unashamedly and intentionally dependent on pursuing the ongoing empowerment of the Spirit of God.

All of us will benefit by making these shifts. Now. The recent COVID-19 event has been a wake-up call to the Church. Business as usual will need to cease. We are all living in a new context that demands fresh, Spirit-anointed approaches. These shifts will help us all thrive into the future.

Starting an urban church? I passionately believe that increasing the presence of the Church in the urban context must be a high priority. I believe in increasing the presence of the Church in urban places so much that I blew up my perfectly good job to give all my energy to it. If you are sensing a call to start a new faith community in an urban setting, you will find most of the appendices at the conclusion of the book particularly relevant.

Starting a suburban church? As the suburban culture becomes increasingly infused with the urban worldview, these shifts will help you go where Jesus is taking His Church.

Starting a church in small-town or rural America? We've found rural church starters have more in common with their urban counterparts than they do with their suburban ones.

Reformatting an existing church? Every church built on a 20th-century platform will become increasingly less effective without intentional

adaptation. Although this book is written primarily with the leaders of new start-up churches in mind, leaders of existing churches will find making these Twelve Shifts to be crucial for guiding their efforts to keep their church fruitful in the 20th-century culture. I've included an appendix at the conclusion of the book with some specific suggestions for leading an existing church through the Twelve Shifts.

I do not intend to suggest that these shifts provide the ultimate answers to everything or the end of the discussion. The conversation about these shifts is best viewed as a framework for understanding the emerging forms of the 21st-century church. These are some of the shifts we've made on our way toward missional effectiveness in the urban context. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated our shared awareness that every place will soon be urban or deeply influenced by urban culture. Understanding these shifts will be helpful for every leader everywhere. Ready?

The wave is here. Enjoy the ride.