

TO
DREAM
AGAIN,
Again!

*Growing Healthy Congregations
for Changing Futures*

Robert D. Dale

Author of To Dream Again and Weaving Strong Leaders

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Bob Dale's practical wisdom is now seasoned with decades of watching and guiding the institutional church as it finds its modern expression. Because of that, *To Dream Again* is now not only a practical guide to doing the hard work of vital congregational expression, but it also has the added richness of hard-won wisdom. And while the landscape of the church is changing radically all the time, what we know to be true about who we are called to be in our best corporate expression of God's hopes for the world is still real and true and possible. Bob Dale's voice has guided generations of congregational leaders; here he does it yet again.

—Amy K. Butler, senior minister, Riverside Church, New York City

Bob Dale has been dreaming for a long time. And he has been dreaming well. I have seen him dream alone, with one or two people in a hallway, in a theological classroom, in a church fellowship hall, and in conversations over a dinner meal. I guess you could say Bob Dale is a dreamer—but not in the conventional sense of mystical apparitions or hazy visions. The best way to describe Dale's style of dreaming is to use the Chinese expression for the word “dream.” The Chinese translation is actually two syllables, 做梦, “make a dream.” Dreaming is hard; it requires a helping verb—to make. You don't just dream—you have to make a dream. Just like Dale says, church revitalization is hard work; it requires some helping words. Ecclesiastical dreaming is not some hazy mystical vision of simple platitudes and slogans, but rather honest introspection and just plain hard work. To “make a dream” again, and maybe even again, also requires some helping people along the way willing to share their well-earned wisdom. And that is Bob Dale. Thanks for making a dream with us and for us, Bob Dale.

—Linda McKinnish Bridges, president, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond

Bob Dale offers a prophetic and creative voice to and for the church today. Theologically grounded and formed through decades of wisdom, *To Dream Again, Again!* is a wellspring of thought and practice for congregational lay leaders and clergy alike. Each section is carefully crafted, providing reflective material along with concrete facts and information gleaned from all aspects of life. Written in a conversational manner, readers are drawn in to believing they are participating in a one-to-one consultation. To assist this process, there are 13 “action exercises” drawing from the materials and applying the lived experience of the local congregation. I will be sharing this book as I pastor pastors and equip local congregations to dream!

—Trisha M. Manarin, coordinator for mission, evangelism, and justice, Baptist World Alliance;
executive coordinator, Mid-Atlantic Cooperative Baptist Fellowship;
director of supervised ministry, John Leland Center

I've been dreaming with Bob Dale since the '80s! He's challenged me in every aspect of my ministry. And, now he's challenging me again. Congregational vitality has to embrace change and clarity. Bob gives great insights into moving past nearsighted vision, unclarified identity, and unrealized expectations. His insights will lead you to clarify the organic purpose of your church, to dream bold dreams as you live into the next generation of your church's ministry. If you are a congregational leader, pastoral or laity, this book is for you. If you are a leader who loves your congregation and are committed to keeping

your church healthy and redemptive, this book is for you. Embracing change and clarifying purpose don't have to be painful. Bob Dale challenges us to "dream again" and to be encouraged in seeing those dreams come true.

—*Bo Prosser, catalytic coach and consultant, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*

Whatever God is saying to the church in this era of tremendous cultural change, that word is not coming from the top down—from denominational headquarters or judicatory staff. Rather, it is bubbling up from below—through the dreams of the whole people of God. Bob Dale weaves this bottom-up perspective into a revision of his classic *To Dream Again*. Building on his long commitment to congregational health and faithfulness, Dale urges us to take a more organic and Spirit-led approach to the nurture of our churches. Pastors and lay leaders alike will find much hope in these pages.

—*Jim Kitchens, principal, Pneumatrix; consultant, Center for Healthy Churches*

Few people have had the impact Bob Dale has had for me, and few books have been as influential in my life and ministry as *To Dream Again*. I celebrate that the book has been "born again." This revision and update is fresh and relevant to the 21st-century church. Bob has rewritten this classic in a way that will give it decades more of life and influence for churches and church leaders. He has a sense of what is coming, and he offers practical help for what we can do today to be ready for a world of rapid change.

—*Robert L. Perry, founder and lead consultant, Organizational Health Associates; retired pastor, missionary, and judicatory executive*

Bob Dale's book is a guiding star for church leaders navigating a journey through church renewal and rebirth. Just as Joseph, Mary, and the magi discovered the Christ child and received instruction from God through dreams, so church leaders today have the opportunity to experience God's direction. Dale retrains our clouded minds to dream wisely and practically for the challenges and ministry opportunities ahead. He provides helpful, hopeful tools to understand a congregation's natural life cycle and awakens us to new possibilities and people in our midst to begin God's new future.

—*William D. Shiell, president and professor of pastoral theology and preaching, Northern Seminary*

"Why is your church needed here and now?" That's just one of the pivotal questions Bob Dale raises in *To Dream Again, Again!* It's been my privilege to work with several congregations as they rediscovered mission and purpose with excitement and enthusiasm. Bob's *To Dream Again* provided a framework for beginning action in all of those settings. *To Dream Again, Again!*, though, provides brand new insights for times that are far more challenging than when he wrote the first book. And unlike many authors who just change a phrase here and there, Dale has recast the original in ways that provide far greater insights for current and future challenges. You won't be disappointed.

—*Bob Ballance, senior pastor, First Baptist Church, South Boston, Va.*

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Preface

Glancing Back, Moving Ahead

Why revise a book after more than a third of a century of steady use? For reasons both simple and complex, I'm re-visioning *To Dream Again* because . . .

- The speed of change rockets along at faster and faster rates.
- Congregational life changes, sometimes radically, often reluctantly, but always in the direction of increasing complexity.
- Leadership paradigms morph away from the machine thinking of the Industrial Age to more organic practices for living churches.
- Social media, technology, and global cultures impact local churches.
- Denominations continue to lose momentum, and institutional distrust deepens.
- American culture and churches move in different directions.
- Marketing nudges theology toward the margins in some congregations, prioritizing consumerism over faith formation.
- Gender, generations, and diversity stretch congregations in challenging ways.
- The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, spread fear across our culture and into our churches.
- Support for smaller and midsized churches—the majority of America's more than 420,000 congregations—continues to wane.
- New congregational styles and structures emerge.

- Fresh leadership resources and approaches have developed. Certified coaches add another type of assistance and support for leaders and congregations, alongside consultation.
- The original book, written by a 30-something, is now being reframed by a practitioner with twice the years and three times the experience.

To Dream Again (Nashville: Broadman) came out in 1981. Since then the health cycle model described in that book has provided the diagnostic framework for nearly 500 Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) students' formal studies of congregations. The ideas and the model have shown their durability and usefulness over time.

Some elements and resources are due for an update, however. I've taken a winding road to arrive at this update:

I initially learned about organizational development from Consultant Trainers Southwest in the 1960s. Mostly an Episcopalian and Presbyterian group and part of the human potential movement, they showed me how to diagnose and renew congregations. Added to my own observations of and experiences in healthy and unhealthy churches, I began to develop my own framework for understanding congregations better.

I invested myself in teaching the emerging discipline of pastoral leadership to seminarians during the 1980s, and during that time period taught congregational diagnosis and wrote *To Dream Again*. Then I spent the next 20-plus years directing a learning center for pastoral and church leaders. Along the way, my teaching field expanded and my professional world morphed extensively. As I saw trends more clearly, I wrote about new approaches as they emerged.

First, I came to understand that pastoral leadership is a two-sided discipline—with mission and morale in creative tension. With that insight, I saw *To Dream Again* focused mostly on mission, a natural emphasis for can-do American churches and a key reason for the book's lasting popularity. To provide more leadership balance, in 1988 I wrote *Keeping the Dream Alive* (Nashville: Broadman), an exploration of congregational morale.

Most importantly, the biggest shift occurred in my leadership thinking when I moved from a mechanical mindset to an organic approach in the 1990s. I first wrote about this paradigm shift in *Leadership for a Changing Church: Charting the Shape of the River* (Nashville: Abingdon) in 1998.

That book signaled a major leadership shift in progress but not yet finished. Then in 2005 I wrote a more complete treatment of organic leadership in *Seeds for the Future: Growing Organic Leaders for Living Churches* (St. Louis: Lake Hickory Resources).

With the new leadership paradigm finally in place, I next wrote two books to clarify the practice of organic leadership. *Cultivating Perennial Churches: Your Guide to Long-Term Growth* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008) illustrates how organic churches maintain their health and vitality over decades and even centuries. And, to explore how organic leaders adapt in rapidly changing eras, I wrote *Growing Agile Leaders: Coaching Leaders to Move with Sure-footedness in a Seismic World* (Hickory, NC: Coach Approach Ministries, 2011).

More recently Bill Wilson and I wrote *Weaving Strong Leaders: How Leaders Grow Down, Grow Up, and Grow Together* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith, 2016). That book returns to basics and shows how the theology and maturity of leaders make for team ministry.

Now it's time to update *To Dream Again* and consider the impacts of the bulleted changes listed earlier. Let's explore the dynamics of congregations, especially in your church. For all of us who love our churches, to understand and lead them well is part of our stewardship. This challenge will stretch us in many directions.

We'll begin with leadership practices and expand our conversation about church health from there.

Rooting Congregational Life More Deeply

We try to change congregations as organizations by three actions: (1) We change policies by adjusting the way we do things. (2) We change personnel by firing leaders, purging the ministry staff, or electing new lay leaders. (3) We tweak ministries and programs by reorganizing.

Change policy. Change people. Change programs. Each of these approaches has a host of advocates. But we recommend a fourth way to invite new seasons of congregational awakening, the most organic approach of all: We clarify purpose.

By rooting life and witness in healthy purpose, we can cultivate new life and vitality in our churches. When congregations discern and then act

on their fundamental reason for being, a purposeful dream awakens and empowers them.

To Dream Again, Again! Growing Healthy Congregations for Changing Futures explores the power of congregational dreams. The health cycle model offers an organic, inside-out approach for understanding church health and avoiding pathology. To root churches in redemptive health, we'll identify and apply health cycle discoveries.

This book is for leaders, both clergy and laity, who love their congregations and are committed to keeping their churches healthy and redemptive. These leaders include:

- Ministry teams, infusing new vigor in churches of all kinds
- Congregational planners, cultivating their church's future seasons
- Church planters, seeding new congregations with healthy purpose
- Pastor selection and personnel teams, matching their congregation's dream to the leadership approach of prospective ministers
- Visionary energizers, awakening churches that are ready to dream again and regain health
- Most of all, congregational leaders, focusing, laser-like, on God's kingdom on earth

The model and principles in this book fit most volunteer (and many for-profit) organizations. Applying this model to your church is your ministry opportunity. Why? Because leaders like you are tenders of congregational health.

Ideas Germinating in Community

I owe a debt of gratitude to my "idea family" for these pages: Gayle Engels, Dave Farr, Al Persons, Eleanor Hill, Lyle Schaller, Elaine Dickson, Loren Mead, Bruce Grubbs, Ken Mitchell, Dick Hester, Larry Matthews, George Bullard, Cassidy Dale, Amy Dale, Susan McBride, Bob Perry, Phil Faig, Denny Coates, and others. Experience and discoveries from numerous church consultations have shaped my ideas too.

My appreciation also goes to Carrie Dale, Rose Mary Stewart, David Peppler, and Bob Ballance for their insightful feedback on the manuscript.

I especially thank Bill Wilson, Joel Snider, David Hull, and the consultant team at the Center for Healthy Churches for cultivating Christ's hope and health in so many congregations and for advising me on this revision.

Many other thinkers added encouragement from the sidelines. I'll take full responsibility for the words and ideas that follow, but I thank each of you for the stimulation and feedback that germinated in this revision.

The illustrations in this book represent true accounts of real church situations, with the names disguised to protect the innocent (and the guilty).