



You Must Read This Bit First

In this book expect to encounter revolutionary ideas that will sometimes unnerve you. We hope to reawaken the latent apostolic imagination at the heart of the biblical faith and to exhort God's people to courageous missional engagement for our time—living out the gospel *within* its cultural context rather than perpetuating an institutional commitment *apart from* its cultural context. In writing this book we are advocating a wholesale change in the way Christians are *doing* and *being* the church, and because of this ours is not necessarily a popular message. We've become disturbingly aware through personal experience and observation that those who advocate such a thoroughgoing recalibration of the church will not always be met with open arms by the prevailing church leadership. And yet we feel compelled to lovingly challenge the church to dismantle many of the arcane institutional structures it is now beholden to and to bravely face the future with imagination and courage.

Please be assured that we have not come to this place because of some liberal critique of the church's supposed outdated theology, or merely because of fashionable anti-institutionalism, but rather from a direct sense of obligation to the primal evangelical yearning—that the gospel of Jesus Christ be heard and responded to in our time and in our place. If we do sound somewhat revolutionary, we would like to think we are promoting the selfsame revolution that was precipitated through the world-shattering life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the early Christian movement.

While we admit to being unashamedly radical (in the true sense of that word) in our reexamination of *everything* in relation to standard church practice, we are nonetheless quite deeply committed to the historic, orthodox, Christian faith. Don't be fooled by our somewhat unorthodox approach to life, mission, and church. While we are unafraid to critique church traditions, we are devoted to the Scriptures and unmoving on the core Christian doctrines. So, while you are reading this book and perhaps finding yourself bristling with objections, please be assured that what we are espousing is not unbiblical. Unconventional for the church in the West? Yes. Unbiblical? No.

Some may find that what we are urging is so far from where their churches are today that they can't possibly see any relevance in our words to their situations. But we still believe that hidden in the pages of this book is a message that the church must take to heart. At stake is the ability of the church in the West to both maintain and invigorate its witness. All we ask is that people engage the book as a bona fide attempt by two missional-type leaders to address the malaise of the church in the West. We also ask that you assess our ideas on their inherent merit and not necessarily on our style, provocative or otherwise.

Right up front we want to confess our belief that the planting of new, culturally diverse, missional communities is the best way forward for the church that views itself in a missional context. The challenging context in which we live in the West requires that we adopt a fully missional stance. While some established churches can be revitalized, success seems to be rare from our experience and perspective. We believe that the strategic focus must now shift from revitalization to mission, i.e. from a focus on the "insiders" to the "outsiders"; and in so doing we believe the church will rediscover its true nature and fulfill its purpose. Perhaps an established church can plant a missional congregation within its broader church structures. Others might sponsor and support the planting of new congregations on their doorstep to reach those not interested in the conventional church. But it does seem to us that the real hope lies with those courageous leaders who will foster the development of alternative, experimental, new communities of faith.

In our travels around the world we have encountered a new breed of Christian leadership, young and feisty, willing to experiment with audacious new versions of Christian communities within unchurched subcultures. From Birmingham in England's north to Wellington in New Zealand and right across the U.S.A. experimental groups are blossoming everywhere. Some will fail; others will have great success. But it seems to us they are more likely to succeed when legitimized, affirmed, and supported by the more conventional, established churches and denominational structures in their midst. It's time for the church in general to abandon its spirit of competition and acknowledge that these experimental groups have much to teach the rest of the Christian community about what it means to engage our cultures incarnationally and missionally. As Gerard Kelly in his important book *RetroFuture* says,

Experimental groups seeking to engage the Christian faith in a postmodern context will often lack the resources, profile or success record of the Boomer congregations. By definition, they are new, untried, relatively disorganized and fearful of self-promotion. They reject the corporate model of their Boomer forebears, and thus do not appear, according to existing paradigms, to be significant. But don't be fooled. Somewhere in the genesis and genius of these diverse groups is hidden the future of Western Christianity. To dismiss them is to throw away the seeds of our survival.¹

¹Gerard Kelly, *RetroFuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999).

As much as we wish to address existing churches, it is really for such emerging missional communities and their leadership that we've written this book. It is our attempt to give further missiological legitimacy and a working vocabulary to the emerging church. We hope to base discipleship and life in our postmodern world around a vital Christology and to reframe our ecclesiology *entirely* on missional grounds. And while the reader will find some practical approaches to mission in this book, what we offer here is not so much a *how-to* but more of a *why-to* book written as something of a guidebook for the emerging missional church. Rather than providing a clear step-by-step guide, we hope to offer the reader some important hints of the way forward in the important work of rediscovering a New Testament mandate for the church in the twenty-first century. We don't see ourselves primarily as academics or writers, but as activists and missionaries.

While we reflect heavily on what is happening in the U.S. and the U.K., we are neither American nor British. Michael is Australian-born of Irish Catholic stock. Alan is a South African Jew, now living in Australia. We think this gives us a unique "outsiders" view on the U.S. and the U.K. Australians are used to being *in* the U.S./U.K. world, but not *of* it. It affords us some level of critical, objective distance. We have both traveled extensively throughout the West and have explored and sniffed out traces of the emerging missional church. However, if we appear overly critical of the North American church, we hope U.S. readers will forgive us some of our generalizations. We can assure you that some of the most exciting new thinking about the missional church comes from American church leaders. The critique we have made of the conventional church in the U.S. is nothing we haven't heard many American leaders make themselves.

In order for you to understand our message, we need to define some basic terms, such as *missional* and *institutional*. To begin with the latter, historically the church has defined itself in *institutional* terms. That is, church leaders as well as Christians in general have regarded the church as an institution to which outsiders must come in order to receive a certain product, namely, the gospel and all its associated benefits. In our view, the church should be missional rather than institutional. The church should define itself in terms of its mission—to take the gospel to and incarnate the gospel within a specific cultural context.

As missionaries, we feel in our very bones a great sense of impatience with the increasing irrelevance of the church within Western culture. At times we feel terribly cynical about the ability of the church to reinvent itself. At other times our hearts are filled with hope at the brave experiments that are taking place. And so, read on and evaluate the insights of a pair of hopeful cynics!