A FRESH EXPRESSIONS BOOK

Michael Adam Beck

DEEP AND WILD

Remissioning Your Church from the Outside In

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Seedbed

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Foreword

The best description of Christ to emerge in the second century is this one from the Epistle to Diognetus: "This is the one who was from the beginning, who appeared as new yet proved to be old, and is always young as he is born in the hearts of saints."[1] It is the mission of each generation to help Christ be "born young" in the next generations. Hence the aptness of the metaphor and movement of Fresh Expressions.

The old, old story needs to be told in new ways. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But the only way for him to stay the same is that he has to change. No matter how ancient the well, the Living Water must be drawn daily. New water from the old well. The Bread of Life must be baked in the oven, fresh every morning, if Jesus is to feed a hungry world. The water can't be stagnant. The bread can't be stale. Water and Bread must be fresh and in a familiar enough form for people to want to taste and see.

In fact, one of the ways we know the old, old truths are true is their ability to assume fresh, unimagined, and unfamiliar shapes while remaining themselves and without compromising their integrity. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst'" (John 6:35 NASB).

The Christian faith is meant to be hot-out-of-the-oven bread, always a fresh start. But not from scratch. Rather, from starters of leaven and salt. Each new start is the same but different. What makes it the same is the starter. How did we make bread rise before packets of yeast were available at the local market? Through live-yeast breads. No baker's yeast was used when Egyptians baked bread five thousand years ago or when the pilgrims baked it in the colonies or when gold miners baked it in California and the Klondike.

Sourdough starters are live cultures of naturally occurring wild yeasts, lactobacteria, and fungi. Literally millions of lactobacilli live in one little starter. Carbon dioxide causes dough to rise, and these bacteria produce the gasses that give baked goods their lightness. It feeds on carbohydrates (such as flour or sugar) and produces gas and alcohol (which the old sourdough-miners called "hooch") as by-products. These microorganisms create the rich flavor and add helpful bacteria to our intestines; even when dehydrated the yeast can be fully *revitalized*—just moisten and reheat. Sourdough yeast has bacteria in it that can survive for decades, even centuries. In fact, theoretically, these cultures could live forever. But you have to take good care of your starter. Like a pet, it needs to be fed and cleaned and treated, daily sweetened or freshened. No wonder sourdough starters are called the "bonsai tree of the food world." A starter pot was the most essential ingredient in every wagon on the trail westward.

I am a sourdough, a sourdough-disciple of Jesus. The term *sourdough* arose to describe the frontier cook who religiously guarded his sourdough starter and used it to make the daily bread. The starter is the faith "once delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). The starter is the Scriptures, issuing in tradition, revealed by reason, yoked to experience. The creative genius of Christianity is not that every generation starts over from scratch, or creates something from nothing, but from a starter bakes fresh bread that feeds the hungers

of the culture—whether those hungers be for pumpernickel, rye, challah, buns, boule, biscuits, potato bread, corn bread, chocolate cake, pizza, pancakes. An endless possibility of remixes is possible with every starter.

God invents from scratch and discovers the new. Humans innovate from starter and make the old new or discover the new or combine the old with something else so that something new happens that can be put into practice. According to the most recent research on creativity from a composer and a neuroscientist, the old becomes new mostly in three ways: by bending, breaking, and blending.[2] *Bending* involves altering a property. *Breaking* involves taking something apart and reassembling the ingredients. *Blending* entails mixing the ingredients in new ways. Michael Beck will do all three in this inspiring book. He is a true frontier practitioner of remixing the starter kit in fresh ways.

Fresh Expressions is a sourdough strategy for church revitalization, and this book is a starter pot. But every starter pot should come with a warning: BEWARE. Sourdough yeast EXPANDS. Whatever container you choose to keep it in—plastic or glass or ceramic (never metal)—make sure it's big enough to expand. Biblical faith is a yeast culture, an expansive culture. You can't contain it. You can't predict it. It's organic, but it's explosive. It's the original flour power.

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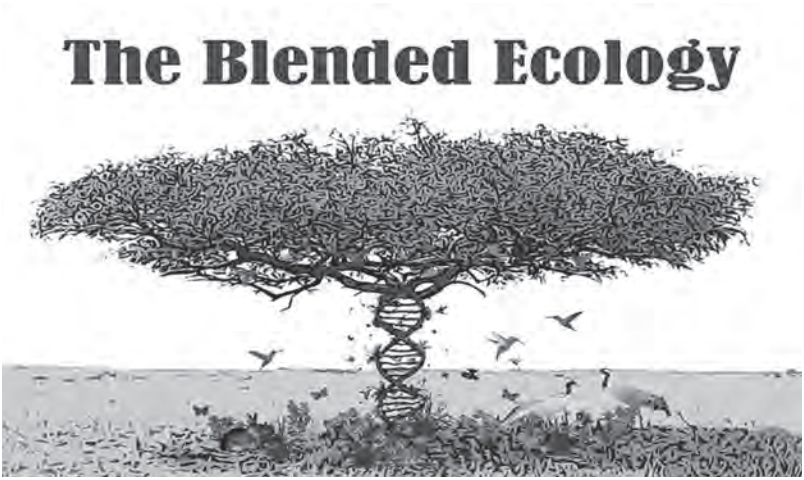
The Opening Vision: A Tree of Life



Welcome back to our three-course picnic at the tree of life! In Book One, "the appetizer," I offered bite-sized pieces of what I now provide here in Book Two as full, heaping portions of a "main course." Book Three, "the dessert," is a workbook with practices, tools, and processes. The three books were created to complement each other in the following sequence: Book One (seeing), Book Two (understanding/assessing), and Book Three (action/implementation), with some blending of the three.

This opening vision is intended to help us enter fully the scriptural imaginarium of the blended ecology. Scripture begins by calling us deep into the imagination of a pioneer God. God imagines what can be, and then speaks it into being by God's own word and will. All of creation starts in God's imagination before it has any substance.

Then the Spirit playfully sweeps over the swirling waters of chaotic nothingness and brings forth elegance, beauty, and life (Gen. 1:2). Later, God gets down in the newly watered dust of creation and plays around in the mud. One of the first images we see of God is God at play. When God plays in the sandbox of his imagination, we get a universe. When God makes mud-pies, we get human beings. God gets dirt beneath his fingernails, then breathes into us the breath of life (Gen. 2:6–7). Beautiful news: God invites us to get down in the mud and play too! With sanctified imaginations, we can play forth new possibilities for our local communities.

Jesus told stories that harnessed the power of imagination. His teaching style was not one of simply sharing data, but in using imagery and metaphor to help hearers enter a fresh kingdom vision from which they could see the world through new eyes. Our Western paradigm is heavily reliant on the impartation of data. When data has taken us as far as it can go, we must trust the power of metaphor. *Metaphor* is derived from the Greek roots of *meta* (over, across, or beyond) and *phor* (to carry), hence literally "to carry across." Interestingly enough, the Bible never explicitly defines what the church is; rather, it shows us a kaleidoscope of images for what the church is like. To break us free from the death spiral of the same-old church questions and church answers, we will use a metaphor to carry us across the bridge into new vistas of possibility.

While this is a serious project based in scholarly research, it is also an exercise in play and imagination. We have been using

Newtonian logic for a couple hundred years in our attempts to reform the church, treating her like a machine in which we need only trade out the broken parts. Let's give imagination a shot. We've been crammed into serious stuffy spaces with whiteboards and gurus long enough; let's try play! Let's get down with the God of mud-pies in the sandbox of our communities and try some missional mess-making.

Creativity, imagination, and innovation are what allow human beings to lean into the future and remake the world. As reflections of the creator God, we generate alternative realities by following the Spirit into the imagination of God and asking "what if?" I want to invite you to ask "what if" with me and engage the Scriptures with a fresh imagination that may open us to what the Holy Spirit is up to just outside the walls of our churches.

Once again, we find ourselves at the tree of life. The tree is a sign of the faithfulness of a God who doesn't waste anything. A God of the remix. It is a symbol of the continuity of God's plan for the renewal of the cosmos, and one of the most consistent images of God's faithful presence. Our story starts at the tree (Gen. 2:9), starts over at the tree from which our Savior hung (Gal. 3:13), and continues eternally back at the tree in the urban garden of new creation (Rev. 22:2). As we journey through the modes of how God dwells among us, we will find the tree—in Eden, tabernacle, temple, synagogue, church, and new creation. Eden remixed.

This tree is the central image of the blended ecology. Across the desert landscape of a post-Christendom US, a network of trees is flourishing on the backdrop of the sweeping waterless void. Springing from the root-balls of these resilient shade-offering organisms are emerging life-forms, new species never seen before, bursting with life in all their splendorous weirdness.

There is a life-giving exchange happening between the *inherited* church, with its rootedness and depth, and these new wild life-forms,

Trailer

> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:10–11)
>
> Come, Lord, stir us up and call us back, kindle and seize us, be our fire and our sweetness. Let us love, let us run.
>
> —Augustine

Thirteen years ago, First United Methodist Church of Fort Myers, Florida, was a thriving congregation. Founded in 1872, for most of 144 years the church was a spiritual powerhouse of the community. During that century-and-a-half season of ministry, many people connected to Jesus, worshiped the living God, and served others. In the 1950s, large buildings were constructed as the church thrived. In the '70s, a preschool began, and in the '80s a large family life center was constructed to keep pace with the church's numerical growth.

In 2016, no longer able to financially sustain the congregation, First UMC, Fort Myers held its final worship experience and closed its doors. They voted to become a campus of a thriving multi-site church nearby, Grace UMC. Just last week of this writing, the awe-inspiring steeple of this church was demolished, leveled to the ground. Compared to the thousands of churches that simply fail and must close their doors every year, this is a graceful way to die. Offering the property up to the hope of a brighter future for the next generation.

The story of First UMC, Fort Meyers is not unique. It is the new normal of US churches across denominational boundaries. We live in a time coined "Post-Christendom," "The Great Decline," and the "Post-Christian United States." We live on a new and uncharted frontier. The land of the so-called "nones and dones," the "de-churched and the no-churched." The United States is now the "largest mission field in the Western Hemisphere and the third largest on earth."[1]

Yet as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed, there is an incredible spiritual hunger among the masses. We find ourselves on the edge of the greatest missional opportunity in the history of the United States.[2]

While the church of Jesus Christ will never die, the church as we know it is dying. You are most likely reading this book because you are convinced that this shouldn't be the case, and there must be a way to revitalize existing congregations.

The big idea of this book is that local congregations that plant fresh expressions of church can indeed experience forms of revitalization from the outside in.

Nones: People who claim no religious affiliation or practice.

Dones: People who once practiced a religion but no longer do.

Churches across denominational lines have poured endless resources into the problem of decline. Many books have been written, attempting to give the silver bullet to church growth and the seven keys to revitalization. Many denominations have doubled up strategies on planting churches, hoping to outpace the rate they are closing. While some of these efforts have proved hopeful, we have, at best, merely stemmed the flow of decline.

In *Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church*, Alan Roxburgh poses the question, "Why have we spent so much energy and resources in processes of restructuring, reorganizing and renewing, but see little actually change?" He proposes that simply restructuring is not enough; we must deal with the "legitimating narratives" from which our structures emerge, join what God is doing in our neighborhoods, and release local collaborative experimentation.[3]

Legitimating Narrative: An overarching story that provides a group (a small unit or a whole society) with a way to express its underlying values, beliefs, and commitments about who they are and how life is to be lived.[4]

The church in the US embraced the legitimating narrative of the twentieth-century corporation. Now for many congregations, the foundational story that undergirds the institutional church has been buried beneath sedimentary layers of bureaucracy and irrelevant structures. We will explore how the blended-ecology way is the deepest legitimating narrative of the church, which flows back to the diverse singularity of the triune God.

Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson discuss the theory of "blue and red oceans" from the corporate world to describe the 60:40 dilemma. Corporations often compete for the same small base of existing customers in the blood red waters of the 40 percent, while ignoring

FIELD INTERVIEW

June Edwards

District Superintendent
North Central District, Florida Conference UMC

For June Edwards, the one constant in her life besides her family has been the Methodist Church. She has the Cradle Roll certificate to prove it. The denomination that she has served as a child, youth, and adult, as both lay and clergy, has been an integral part of her life experience. In August 2016, she began one of the most exciting and daunting roles of her pastoral ministry—that of district superintendent—and was appointed to the North Central District of the Florida Conference of the UMC. There are currently eighty-six churches in the North Central District where she is charged to serve as the chief missional strategist. The majority of these churches are experiencing the decline that the rest of Western Christianity is facing, which proves to be a great challenge.

Can you briefly describe the fresh expression(s) of your district?

When I arrived in the North Central District, I was fortunate that my predecessor, now a bishop in our denomination, had already

begun plowing the ground for fresh expressions. Creating a part-time position for someone who was already cultivating and leading fresh expressions, Rev. Michael Beck, and inviting pastors and churches to consider the possibilities of fresh expressions, I found myself joining a conversation that was already in process. Building on an image that arose out of a sermon I preached at my Service of Installation, a district-wide event was planned. A district Fresh Expressions team was formed and soon planning for "From the Steeple to the Streets—13,628 Going" was underway. Every church in the district was asked to mobilize the average worship attendance of their congregations in order to visit identified locations in their communities and do three things—Pray, Observe, and Encounter. This was preceded by a district training event focused on the fresh expressions process to prepare the churches to begin to envision and explore this whole idea of fresh expressions. Now from gatherings in restaurants, pubs, tattoo parlors, and dog parks to yoga, tai chi, prayer on the porch, and dinner church, people have begun the journey to move beyond the walls of the church to those Jesus would have them meet. We are only at the beginning, barely having started the journey into the new and unknown territory. But the vision and energy of Fresh Expressions has begun to take hold, and I have no doubt it will continue to put down deep roots and bear fruit in that future to come that we have yet to know.

Explain the blended ecology dynamics between the inherited church and your fresh expressions. What kind of tension, if any, goes on between the two?

The challenge before those churches whose pastoral leaders along with the pioneers that join them face when they seek to engage in fresh expressions is the challenge that faces every entrenched system and institution that moves toward innovation and change—there is resistance. The notion that the pastor

will be spending time in the community with those that they do not know, nor wish to venture out to get to know, is mystifying to many in the church as we know it. It is counterintuitive to consider that the church would commit resources—both human and financial, for the purpose of creating groups that are not intended to regularly participate in formal worship or in other ministries of the church that take place on their campus. The cry goes out, "Why them? What about us?!" So, ultimately, the blended ecology can lead to conflict as persons fear the loss that comes from change. However, knowing that from the outset helps in riding the rapids of conflict when it does come. It is possible to hold in tension both the ministry requirements of the inherited church and fresh expressions. One image is that of a new church start within an existing congregation. The necessity of the continued vision casting of the kingdom, combined with a large dose of prayer and patience, goes a long way in helping people embrace a new way of being and sending in the church. Another important factor is the need for solid support by denominational leaders who provide oversight and accountability for local church ministry. This provides much-needed cover for pastors who are ready to respond to the call of innovation and creativity to move beyond the church property into the mission field of their communities. To have a foot in both worlds is hard and exhausting work, but it is possible and necessary.

How have you seen that fresh expressions have a positive impact on the existing congregations? In what ways?

If anything, just having the conversation about fresh expressions has begun to raise the consciousness of some of the need to be the church in the context where they are located. Beyond that, churches that have established ongoing fresh expressions are experiencing renewed energy and vitality, and it is making a difference

CHAPTER 1

The New Missional Frontier

> Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. (Judg. 2:10)
>
> I had to plant the seed in the Masai culture, and let it grow wild.
>
> —Vincent Donovan (referring to sharing the gospel in a foreign context)[1]

Good News First

Surely a book attempting to speak an explosively hopeful word in a scenario of decline should start with good news. So, I want to give you that good news right up front: the church of Jesus Christ will never die! At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus told his disciples, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of [hell] will not prevail against

it" (Matt. 16:18). On a fallible community of Peters and their shaky confessions, Jesus is building his church. Nothing in this world, under this world, no demographic trend, no cultural shift, can ever kill the church of Jesus.

Now unfortunately, my church might die. Your church might die. Denominations might die. The 1950s time-capsule worship as we know it might die (the 2000s time-capsule worship as we know it might die as well). But the church of Jesus Christ, a Spirit-filled body of believers of every race, culture, and nation, the *ecclesia* infilled and equipped by God's own power, and founded and sustained by Jesus himself, that church will never die.

Why, you might ask? Well, that's what this book is all about. As long as there has been a church, the church Jesus is building is always expressing itself in fresh, contextual, formational, missional, and ecclesial ways. In fact, the most consistent aspect of Christian tradition is innovation.

To get outside the cul-de-sac of church questions, we need to explore the complexity thinking of new fields of knowledge. Asking the same old questions will only result in stale answers, no matter how we polish them. I want to lean very much into the wisdom of John Wesley, who said "the world is my parish."[2]

If we dare to dream that the whole earth is our church, and God is already at work there, then what is God doing in other spheres of knowledge? Rather than getting stuck doing doughnuts in the traditional field of religious research, we will follow the Holy Spirit's movement through multiple frameworks: creativity, innovation, entrepreneurialism, sociology, design thinking, organizational management, technology, semiotics, urban planning, ecology, music, and other fields. We will integrate principles from these fields into the readaption of local churches to the shifting mission field.

The Strategic Problem

Disruptive Change and Innovation

Returning to the 60:40 scenario, the strategic problem shows us that, at best, church in its current dominantly attractional form can only reach 40 percent of the people. The twenty-first century has been a time of seismic shifts. We currently live in the post-industrial, knowledge-based era now described as the Information Age. Technology has made the world smaller, in that humanity is now a truly global community. Microelectronic and communication technologies serve as flows that enable us to connect across geographies and time. The new organization of this global community is a complex series of interconnected networks. This new societal order has been termed the "network society."

Network Society: Manuel Castells originally posited that at the end of the second millennium, a new form of society arose from the interactions of several major social, technological, economic, and cultural transformations. Network society consists of a social structure made up of networks enabled by microelectronics-based information and communications technologies.[3]

Flows: Castells posits that the network society is constructed around technologically enabled *flows* of capital, information, organizational interaction, images, sounds, and symbols. Flows are the means through which people, objects, and information are moved through social space. These flows are the social organization, the expression of processes dominating our economic, political, and symbolic life.[4]

While the church exists in a network society, we remain operating under the assumptions of a neighborhood society. Faithfully

engaging this emerging societal structure requires an adaptation of our missional approach.

Lesslie Newbigin wrote, "The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh."[5] David Bosch also speaks of the "illusion" of a pure gospel unaffected by culture and society. Theology will always interact with and emerge from a specific context with its implicit assumptions.[6]

For instance, eighteenth-century Anglicanism blended the scientific method and rational empiricism of the Enlightenment project with natural and revealed religion.[7] Vincent Donovan shows the church and priesthood as we know it is an example of culturization, which originated from the Greco-Roman and Eastern Byzantine world, not necessarily the servant mentality of Jesus or the New Testament.[8]

Every historical iteration of the church, while maintaining fundamental characteristics, reflects the epoch in which it exists. Leonard Sweet reminds us, "Christianity must bring to every culture an indigenous faith that is true to its heritage with Christianity's becoming a culture faith."[9] All faithful expressions of the church should be a result of this culturization process, a faithful interaction between gospel and context.

The dominant Eurotribal form of the US church is the amalgam of a culture that is fading from view.

Eurotribal: Refers to a form of Christianity emerging from Western culture, based in Euro-American imperialism and colonialism. The Eurotribal church resulted from the enculturation of the faith by European Christians, an ethnic expression of the inherited traditions from their countries of origin.

Perhaps it is easy to provide an overly critical analysis of the institutional church with language such as "immobile," "self-centered," and "introverted," or even "an invention of the Middle Ages."[10] Yet, the inherited mode of church is still quite capable of reaching a large share of the population.

Bosch discusses the idea of paradigm shift, which originated with philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn. This is an essential idea for our time. Kuhn shows that when one theoretical framework replaces another it is not an "overnight" event but a process that may take "decades, sometimes even centuries, to develop distinctive contours." Bosch says, "The new paradigm is still emerging . . . For the most part we are, at the moment, thinking and working in *two* paradigms."[11]

Thus, there is a liminality between paradigm shifts, an in-betweenness, while in a sense, the church "in the world but not of it" is never *not* in a liminal space. For "a sharing and intimacy that develops among persons who experience liminality as a group" is the very essence of our *communitas:* the spirit of the community. The church's every present occurs "betwixt and between" God's faithful action in the past and God's promises toward the future.[12] Yet, there are times in history when civilizations themselves are at a threshold, when there is a transitionary phase, marked by instability, ambiguity, and paradox.

Liminality: From the Latin word *limina*, which means a "threshold." Liminality refers to the transitionary process where change occurs. In anthropology, it's a phenomenon marked by the ambiguity or disorientation occurring in the margin (*limen*) where a subject is described as having no particular place, in between a pre-ritual and post-ritual status. Or simply, "in-between-ness, the stage in the middle of change."[13]

While the church is no stranger to liminality, this is most particularly where we find ourselves today. The coronavirus pandemic accelerated this transformation. Following a relatively stable period of Christendom, the church is in a place of disorientation, in-betweenness, and paradox, called post-Christendom. Anything defined "post-" means it exists in liminality, "after something" without clearly knowing what the "next something" will be.

In the postmodern scenario, we live in a creative tension between two ages, even between two ways of understanding the universe. In the early twentieth century, physicists noted numerous discoveries that challenged the core assumptions of scientific materialism. This "gaping hole" in our understanding of matter led to the field of study called quantum physics.[14]

For example, the idea of an "unbiased observer," a fundamental premise in experimental science, has long been questioned by the *observer's paradox*. Quite simply: results are driven by the observer's methods, goals, etc. Quantum physicists have proved patently false the possibility of an unbiased observer. By many variations of the same "double slit" experiments, they discovered that light or matter only behave like particles in the presence of an intelligent observer—the "observer effect." The oversimplified highlight, the *intelligent observer paradox* shows that even measurement by an intelligent observer causes matter-waves to behave differently.[15]

We are learning there is so much more to reality than what we can observe, test, and replicate. Most of our systems and institutions still function in the mechanistic, reductionist framework, while the "new science" develops further, transforming many of our long-held foundational assumptions. Societally speaking, we see the monoliths of the Industrial Age existing together in the emerging Information Age.

In the appetizer, I suggested every church could create a "disruptive innovation department." Let's go further with this concept.

In the 60:40 problem, the "blue and red oceans" of the corporate world, when companies begin fighting in the red ocean for the limited segment of an established consumer base, the 40 percent, they often die cannibalizing each other. The companies that can get out into the blue oceans and innovate value are the ones that often thrive.[16]

One of the ways companies can reach out into the deep blue and thrive in virtually untapped markets is by catalyzing the powerful process of disruptive innovation.

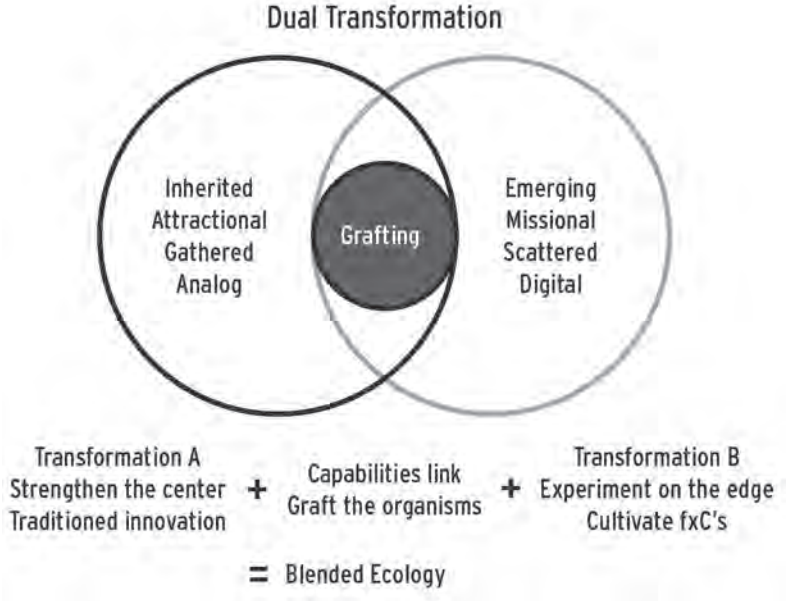
Disruptive Innovation: A technology whose application significantly affects the way a market functions. A term pioneered by Clayton Christensen, "disruptive innovation" brings disruptive solutions to the market that serve a new population of consumers, thus creating a new market and value network and eventually disrupting an existing market and value network.[17]

For instance, Blockbuster, Kodak, Borders Group, and many others were displaced by this phenomenon. One of the ways an organization harnesses the revolutionary power of disruptive innovation is by finding a path to the consumer, outside and beyond the established hierarchy and institution.

Proactive corporations have created disruptive innovation departments within the larger structure of their organizations. This allows continued focus on developing quality enhancement for existing customers (those in the red ocean), while at the same time releasing the potential of disruptive innovation to reach new customers (those in the blue ocean). Rather than being potentially displaced by a smaller entrant harnessing an innovative technology, established incumbents can out-disrupt the disrupters! In the business realm this is called dual transformation; in the ecclesial realm it's called the blended ecology.

Dual Transformation: Dual refers to two simultaneous transformations that reinforce each other, rather than a monolithic process of change. Transformation refers to a fundamental change in form or substance. At the simplest level, dual transformation involves (a) finding ways to better service existing customers, (b) while simultaneously finding ways to reach new customers outside core markets, and (c) then combining the leveraging of a company's valuable assets for new entrepreneurial ventures.

There are three key components involved in the process of dual transformation. For a business, this (a) refers to repositioning and improving the business model to maximize resilience, (b) involves creating a new growth engine, (c) the "capabilities link" involves building on the relevant mix of critical assets, brand, and scale, and managing the interface between the core and the new.[18]



This creates a thriving scenario for corporations, in which existing customers can be properly cared for, while simultaneously harnessing emerging technologies to reach new customers who have been priced out of the market.

The church is perhaps the original pioneer of disruptive innovation, and most renewal movements can provide powerful examples. Adapting the local church in the blended-ecology (dual transformation) way allows every church to have a disruptive innovation department in house, which can catalyze revitalization by reaching new segments of the population. Even churches that have been in existence for hundreds of years can be futurefitted for mission in this way.

Retrofitting: Refers to the addition of new technology or features to older systems. In urban planning, engineers are tasked with retrofitting cities with new green technologies and green spaces to minimize pollution and improve the quality of life.

Futurefitting: Refers to the planting of fresh expressions in communal ecosystems, and (re)missioning inherited congregations in the blended-ecology way, to create a sustainable future. Futurefitting is a more appropriate description of the Spirit's work of cultivating colonies of new creation in existing communities, rather than retrofitting.

More on this later. For now, I am simply making the point that while all the world has shifted around us, the church has failed to adapt. While civilization has been moving at blazing 5G speeds, we have continued to try to attract people to wander the aisles of our rentable materials, desperately attempting to survive through charging late fees and "Be Kind. Rewind" campaigns.

Part of the decline of the US church is exactly because denominations adopted the corporate business model of the twentieth

century and continue to employ it, even though it is growing less relevant in a globalized economy. Thriving institutions are learning to adopt a more fluid structural organization to harness the power of these changes.

The church is an institution in the pure sense of the word. In the current perception, institutions are bad and the enemy of postmodern, revolutionary communities of innovation. But this is simply not true. As Alan Roxburgh argues, institutions are formed from the underlying narratives that give meaning and purpose to our lives.[19]

Institutions are good and needed, but they can often become museums. The inherited church, particularly mainline denominational manifestations, has been a central institution of North American society for much of its existence. Institutions that are responsive to the seismic shifts can adapt, grow, and thrive. Institutions that try to preserve the idealized status quo of ages past typically die. Rigid institutionalism is never a good thing.

Some have described an honest acknowledgment of institutional realities and the kind of innovation needed in the church as "traditioned innovation." L. Gregory Jones reminds us, "For most of American history, faith-based communities led the way in innovative approaches in sectors such as education, health, housing, food, just to name a few." He calls for a rediscovery of Christian social innovation, in which the church takes an active role in building, renewing, and transforming institutions to cultivate human flourishing.[20]

Jones goes on to list the Fresh Expressions movement as a strategy deeply rooted in the kind of disruptive innovation the church needs to adopt—traditioned innovation.[21] He catalogs some of the various past social innovation projects of the church, which have become the major institutions of today's society: hospitals, universities, schools, and so on. The Fresh Expressions movement is an entrepreneurial approach that demonstrates the reemergence

of Christian social innovation. Traditioned innovation is the way forward for the inherited church; it is the blended-ecology way.

> **Traditioned Innovation**: Is a way of thinking and living that holds the past and future together in creative tension, a habit of being that depends on wise judgment, requiring both a deep fidelity to the patterns of the past that have borne us to the present and a radical openness to the changes that will carry us forward.[22]

Every church can be futurefitted with a traditioned innovation department to unleash dual transformation. Dwight Zscheile, a teacher and author in missional leadership, challenges the Christendom assumptions of the church in the West. He speaks of the "The Great Disintegration" combining a plethora of resources to describe the severity of US church decline. He suggests that inherited churches must challenge long-held assumptions, including dedicated buildings and professional clergy, and refocus energy on reaching disaffiliated neighbors.[23]

He proposes innovating simpler, experimental, more cost-effective and contextually specific expressions of church. Zscheile echoes Jones and others in arguing that the church, largely dependent on sustaining innovation, will need to embrace "traditioned innovation." He describes "the innovator's dilemma" referring to the position clergy in declining systems now find themselves: the challenge of sustaining the established organization while simultaneously embracing and harnessing disruptive innovation. Zscheile describes a process that has parallels with the fresh expressions journey: listening to neighbors, iterative small experiments, failing forward, and improvisation. He also suggests this activity can revitalize inherited congregations.[24]

Let's do some imagining and proceed with the metaphor of a time capsule to illustrate the need for traditioned innovation.

Time Capsule Church

Charles Taylor suggests in *A Secular Age*, "Most epochs posit a golden age somewhere in the past; and sometimes this is seen as something which can, in favorable circumstances, be recovered."[25] I am quite aware that there has never really been a golden age of Christianity. The New Testament preserves divisions among the disciples over greatness (Luke 22:34), in the book of Acts we see different factions of the faith having disputes right in the genesis of the movement (Acts 6:1), and Paul's letter to those crazy Corinthians deals at multiple points with the dysfunction of the early church.

While there is no golden age of a perfect church somewhere in the past, there are essential ingredients that make the church the church, and if we can strip down to those first principles, we have a better chance at engaging the new missional frontier.

Some of the greatest contributions to the decline of the church have been of our own making. Our self-inflicted wounds have been some of the most painful. The underlying narratives that undergird the institution have been corrupted and lost. The church in the West has become a kind of time capsule, preserving the artifacts and narratives of a specific brand of Eurotribal Christianity. The problem is, what we have preserved in that time capsule consists of some primarily misguided content. The Christendom version of the church is not exactly the right model for all cultures and all times.

Christendom: The iteration of Christianity that began with Emperor Constantine and is now fading as the dominant form of Western Christianity today. It assumes Christianity as the state religion and is primarily attractional in nature. Bolsinger calls it "the seventeen-hundred-year-long era with Christianity at the privileged center of Western Cultural life."[26]

Imagine today, if someone were to take some cassette tapes, pagers, fanny packs, parachute pants, a Sega Genesis, Walkmans, and a Bible, write a note that said, "Hello from 2020!," place them in a time capsule, and bury it. At some point, someone in a future generation would recover that time capsule. They might behold those artifacts with awe and say, "So this is what 2020 was all about!"

However, those items would not be accurate reflections of 2020, more like accurate reflections of the 1980s or '90s. (Let's hope this time capsule wouldn't spark a '90s renaissance based on those artifacts!) In a sense, the church has become that time capsule. Some of what we are preserving as the "church" is not an accurate reflection of the church at all, but a finite, culturally specific brand of the church, from one perspective in time and place. Primarily, what has been preserved is a marred North American imperial form of Christianity that now has a fragmented connection with the culture. There is a deeper narrative that has been somewhat buried.

We will always need pants, not necessarily parachute pants. We will always need music, but not always listen to it on cassette tapes and Walkmans. Bags of some sort to transport everyday personal items—yes; fanny packs—no. Now some of the contents of the time capsule, like the Bible for instance, are an accurate reflection of an essential ingredient of the church. Those essentials can be boiled down to what one of the first organized groups of Christians discerned back in AD 381 in the Nicene Creed (amended from the earlier version in AD 325).

When they were developing their essential identity and institutionalizing the narratives that gave shape to their lives, they decided upon the words used to describe God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. When they got to the church, they captured it in four words, or what we call the four marks: *one, holy, catholic,* and *apostolic*. Perhaps they demonstrated profound wisdom in choosing those simple words. This allowed the church to travel light, to

remain reflexive, and to become incarnate within the various cultures throughout time and space.

The church in the West, currently existing in this world of *andness*, among the many dualisms, has largely failed to adapt to these changes and find cultural embodiment. This is where the power of the blended ecology comes into view, where both the inherited and emerging modes of church can harness the conjunctive potential all around us.

The Missionary Problem: "Another Generation Grew Up"

Once again, we are in a situation similar to Judges 2:10, "Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and *another generation grew up* after them, *who did not know the* LORD *or the work that he had done for Israel*" (italics mine). A famous quip attributed to Mark Twain states, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." The missionary problem is concerned with the increasing 60 percent of the population that have no connection with the church.

Len Sweet and I propose in our book *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking the Ancient Secret to Mission on the Front Lines* that in these times, we need Issacharian leaders, "Of Issachar, those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chron. 12:32).[27] In this passage, the people are in a liminal space, a time between the times, various constituencies of the tribes are rallying around David in the wilderness. The tribe of Issachar shows up; the semioticians—known as the sign readers—could see the signs and "knew what to do." We need some semioticians to arise, some Issacharian sign readers, who can read the shifts and know how to engage the culture. IQ (intelligence quotient) and EQ (emotional quotient) are important, but some CIQ (contextual intelligence quotient) is sorely missing and needed in the church today.

Contextual Intelligence: From the Latin *contextere*, which means "to weave together"; and the conjunction of two Latin words: *inter*, which means "between," and *legere*, which means "to choose or read." Contextual Intelligence is literally about "accurately reading between the lines" (the threads that intertwine to form a context). So, the ability to accurately diagnose a context and make the correct decisions regarding what to do.[28]

What does it mean for the church to develop some contextual intelligence in this scenario of in-between-ness?

The Greek word for "signs" is *semeia*, from where we get the word *semiotics*. Len Sweet defines semiotics as "the art of making connections, linking disparate dots, seeing the relationships between apparently trifling matters, and turning them into metonymic moments."[29] Sweet goes on to remind us that Jesus instructed us to do semiotics: "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:3).

Has the church lost our semiotic prowess? How can we awaken from our apostolic amnesia, pay attention, see the signs around us, and attune ourselves to the disruptive work of the Holy Spirit? How can we cultivate some contextual intelligence?

Perhaps the greater challenge is to know what to do. If we take our cues from Jesus and the early church, some adaptation is before us. Jesus and his disciples read the signs, immersed themselves relationally in the context of the people's daily lives, and became a community of transfiguration within it.

Hans Küng demonstrates how throughout various epochs of history, the church has mirrored the culture. Christianity is always "shaped by the particular concrete form it takes at a period in history." He writes further, "Every age has its own picture of Christianity which has grown out of a particular situation, lived out and formed by particular social forces and church communities,

conceptually shaped beforehand or afterwards by particularly influential figures and theologies."[30]

We can see strong parallels between the church and dominant societal structures from age to age. The rise and decline of various iterations of the church reflect global cultural movements, as "new forms of faith grow alongside cultural developments."[31] So denominations in the US structured after the twentieth-century corporation can learn from the emergent structures and forms of a globalized network society.

Küng also provides caution that cultural adaptation can of course go too far, when the church "adapts itself and becomes enslaved by the present age or culture, and so abandons itself equally uncritically to the disasters of total changeability. . . . It must not identify itself completely with the programmes and myths, illusions and decisions, images and categories of any particular world or era."[32] This is both a description of exactly what has happened to the church in the US, and a warning for the task of adaptation before us in a network society.

Authors of *Missional Church* write, "There is no culture-less gospel. . . . the church is always bicultural, conversant in the language and customs of the surrounding culture and living toward the language and ethics of the gospel."[33] Perhaps H. Richard Niebuhr missed something in *Christ and Culture*. It's not Christ *against*, *of*, *above*, *in paradox*, or even as *transformer* of culture. Christ and culture are not equitable concepts. Jesus was *with* culture, incarnate within, while embodying a holiness that transfigured it from the inside. Through *withness*, God uses the fallible church to draw people into the *perichoresis*—the circle dance of the Trinitarian life.

Jesus shows us to "empty ourselves," come fully into the space of the other, and incarnate God's love amid a spiritually hungry world (Phil. 2). We can make this love accessible in new ways, if we don't bury our head in the sand and ignore the changes around us.

We can listen, engage, and find fresh ways to offer communal life in Jesus.

So, while the content of fresh and vintage forms of gospel wine don't change, the delivery mechanism—the wineskins of the church's structures—are always changing within a certain spectrum (Matt. 9:17). These forms must be derived from the very life of Jesus. The gospel must be planted to grow wild in ever-changing contextual soils.

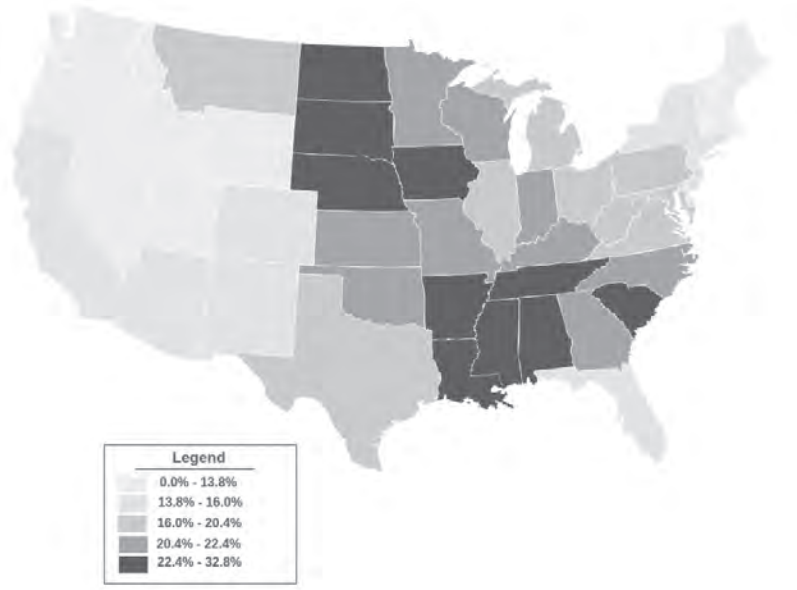
The significance of decline calls for some deep contextual intelligence and some prayerful sign reading. A massive 2010 study by the American Church Research Project, surveying more than 200,000 churches, discovered that about 17 percent of the population attended church on any given Sunday. It is not a secret that the overall population growth rate far outpaces the church's rate of growth. These figures are even more disconcerting than other research that puts regular church attendance much higher (around 40 percent). Unfortunately, numerous studies demonstrate people report going to church more than they really do.[34]

Robert Putnam notes that careful survey comparisons reveal that parishioners "misremember" whether they attended services, overreporting attendance to a tune as high as 50 percent.[35] In clergy circles the term *Chreaster* (those who attend church on Christmas and Easter) has been used to describe these "regular attenders." What some data are really measuring is whether North Americans think of themselves as regular attendees.[36]

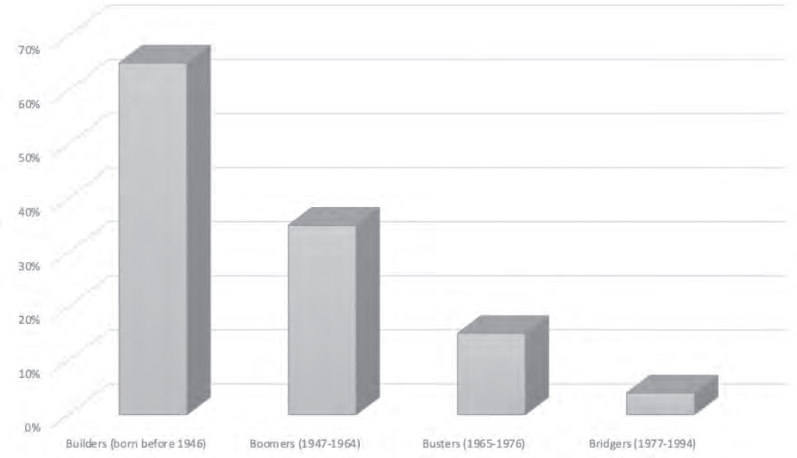
Furthermore, Thom Rainer's research demonstrates that 65 percent of current church attendees come from the "builder" generation, those born before 1946.

These staggering statistics, and the convergence of other forces, led Lovett Weems to write of a coming "death tsunami" for the United Methodist Church. Weems's work can be easily applied to churches across the theological and denominational spectrum.

Churchgoing in the United States[37]



Generations Involved in Church[38]



He advocates for churches in a decline spiral to reset their financial baseline and to reorient their congregations around a new criterion, "reaching people, and the whole system needs alignment toward that goal."[39] Adopting the fresh expressions approach helps churches realign in this way. This is partly what creates the melee that Travis Collins describes as "necessary," as many churches in decline are primarily focused on taking care of their own, preoccupied with money to keep the church alive.[40]

Weems offers staggering statistics showing decreases of what he calls the "people down" trend in United Methodism (decreases of percentages from 1968 to 2009):

Number of churches	80%
Worship attendance	78%
Membership	71%
Professions of faith	57%
Children and youth	44% (from 1974 when reported for first time)[41]

He makes a sobering statement: "Aging members with increased assets and generosity cannot substitute forever for the neglect of the basics on which all giving depends—changed lives and transformed communities."[42] An aging membership, coupled with a projected rise in deaths predicted between 2021 and 2050, places the US church on the edge of a "death tsunami" like something we have never experienced before.[43]

The new missional frontier requires a both/and approach to neighborhood and network.

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For better or worse, Jesus entrusted his mission to "make disciples of all nations" to us, and it starts in our own neighborhood. On the new missional frontier, being deep is not enough—God is calling forth some missional wild ones. We need to be deep and wild!

Across the United States and beyond, the God who makes all things new is up to something. Amid a Christian landscape that looks and feels like a desert of decline, new oases of the Spirit are springing forth. Inherited congregations with long histories and deep roots are experimenting with cultivating wild forms of church called "fresh expressions."

Whereas revitalization often involves internal adjustments (an inside-out approach with better preaching, better coffee, better programs, etc.), remissioning through fresh expressions involves an outside-in approach. This book is a guide to help local church folks, the everyday heroes of the faith, make this much-needed journey toward vitality for the twenty-first-century church.

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