

A **FRESH EXPRESSIONS** BOOK



BRINGING CHURCH HOME

How the Family of God
Makes Us a Little More Human

GANNON SIMS

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Printed in the United States of America

Cover design and layout by Strange Last Name
Page design and layout by PerfecType, Nashville, Tennessee

Sims, Gannon

Bringing church home : how the family of God makes us a little more human /
Gannon Sims. – Franklin, Tennessee : Seedbed Publishing, ©2022.

pages ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN: 9781628249446 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781628249453 (mobi)

ISBN: 9781628249460 (epub)

ISBN: 9781628249477 (pdf)

OCLC: 1296153054

1. Families--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Families--Religious life--Christianity. 3. Home--Religious aspects--Christianity.
4. Church. I. Title.

BV4526.3.S55 2022

249

2022932873



SEEDBED PUBLISHING
Franklin, Tennessee
seedbed.com

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Acknowledgments

My interest and ability to work on this project would not have been possible without an invitation from Tory Baucum and the congregation at Truro Anglican Church in Fairfax, Virginia, who were early pioneers in this work. These friends and partners in the gospel introduced me to Renzo Bonetti, Christopher West, Nicky and Sila Lee, and others engaged in a deeper exploration of the purpose of married and family life. The ongoing teaching and development of curriculum related to Theology of the Body and the work of Bonetti and the Mistero Grande Foundation in Bovolone, Italy, by Chaney Mullins, Hannah King, Alicia Bradford, Brent and Beth Orrell, Tony and Nadia Fraga, and others who have intersected with Truro over the years is a gift to the whole church.

This project has found its way from my head to my heart because I've been able to live it alongside Carey, my bride and coconspirator in our lifelong experiment of self-giving love, and The Center Community

in Fredericksburg, Virginia, who often model the gifts of kinship far better than I. This community of mostly young adults and college students has indeed become part of our extended spiritual family. They have been the priests at my elbow and have grown in me a greater capacity to love.

Haley Randall, who lived in our home during the writing of this book, served as an invaluable sounding board and editor on early chapter drafts. Cheryl McCarthy on the Fresh Expressions team undergirded every step of the writing process with prayer. John Upton and Wayne Faison, who head Ascent and the Baptist General Association of Virginia, and Chris Backert, who serves as the national director of Fresh Expressions US, grasped the importance of home and household as we create ways of being church for those the church isn't already reaching. Jason Byassee, my editor, provided some important theological guardrails and challenged me to push further into the subject than I thought I could. This book is a better book because of you. Holly Jones and the team at Seedbed took this project over the finish line with precision and grace. Thank you for helping the dream become reality.

While no project is fully complete and my words will fall short of articulating what I feel deep within my bones, I'm hopeful that the invaluable permission I've been given to learn and to experiment and to write it all down will somehow help spark an increased imagination at bringing church home.

Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

—JOHN 14:23 (NRSV)

Introduction

This book is about how the church is like a family and the family is like a church. It is not a book about family systems or family values. According to the Scriptures, Jesus didn't exactly stop what he was doing when his parents came looking for him. His life upends and reorients both the family system and family values. And that's important for me to say up front.

Before I get too far along, I should probably tell you something interesting about me. I grew up singing in church. First, in my home church and, later, in all sorts of churches. I was as alive and connected to God while singing "Panis Angelicus" with a pipe organ as I was while singing "Right Now Is the Right Time" from a soundtrack by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. When my wife, Carey, and I met, I was a youth leader at a Baptist church on Sunday mornings and a worship leader at an Episcopal church of the evangelical and charismatic

variety on Sunday nights. Trust me, knowing those little factoids will help welcome you into my brain.

My comfort with the wider church shapes my understanding of the big family of God and it is what led me some ten years ago to find a home of sorts within Fresh Expressions, a mission movement that started in the Church of England and was later given wings in the United States by the grace of God and the generosity of leaders in the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Fresh Expressions serves a unique role in the life of the church. We're quite aware of the seismic shifts facing Christianity in the West, and we're building upon the wisdom of the church throughout the ages as we train and equip church leaders to create new (and old) ways of being church today. In the language of Fresh Expressions, we often discuss how we imagine Christian community in various places—first, second, third, and fourth. The first place is the home. The second place is work or school. Third places are restaurants, coffee shops, gyms, or parks. The fourth place is the Internet. While Fresh Expressions has focused on creating new forms of church in every place, this is our first attempt to articulate a theology for and to tell the story of a way of being church that's rooted in home and household.

From the early days of my marriage, I understood marriage as part of my vocational calling. This idea was bolstered through an invitation to work with a group of Roman Catholics who gave me the language to describe marriage as a little church with the same sorts of hopes and dreams we have for the bigger church: that in its engagement in worship, community, and mission, the

whole church would be for others and not just for us. This perspective has shaped Carey and me in our work of forming a church community alongside mostly college students and young adults in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

The early church was anchored in homes and the scriptures that begin with a wedding. Genesis 2:18 says, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (NRSV). In the beginning, God walks with and intimately communes with creation. The humans are naked before one another and before God. They are unashamed. There is a holy and beautiful innocence to it all. But it doesn’t last.

For much of the rest of the story, God is depicted as the rejected lover and we are the runaway bride. The great drama of Scripture is God’s relentless quest to restore things to the way they were at the beginning and more—not because God wills, forces, or demands it, but because God will always be found waiting for us to find our home in him. God wants us to say yes, but only as a willing response. God is jealous, but God is not selfish. If God kept us for himself, there would be no freedom to love.

God is on a mission to woo us. We are his bride. One of the most obvious and overlooked resources for understanding this relationship is the family itself. Healthy families that say yes to God’s love create little Edens where we can stand unashamed before God and one another. The family has been instrumental for God’s mission all along. But let me repeat: that mission is gathered around Jesus who upends and reorients the family as we know it, pressing us toward the bigger family we have in him.

Too often we’ve been trapped in the idea of the self-sufficient nuclear family, and this places unnecessary

CHAPTER

ONE

Radical Kinship: Shoes and Shared Community

When I finished college, I bought a one-way ticket from Houston to Washington, DC. A few weeks later Wayne and Carolyn Jenkins, two of the pastors at the church I was attending, offered me a room in their home for rent. Their offer was more than a room. What they really did was welcome me into their life.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35 NRSV).

A few weeks before my twenty-fourth birthday, I moved from Wayne and Carolyn’s into a shared house, an experiment in intentional living, with other young men in their early to mid-twenties. Some were from the US; some were from other countries; and I didn’t know any of them. My friends thought I was nuts. They told me I should be moving into my own place. But I was after something different. A friend who thought I was less nuts lent me her copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s little book *Life Together*, and told me to go for it. “It’ll be difficult,” she

said, “but it will change your life.” In a way, the house functioned in the spirit of Bonhoeffer’s community. There were shared meals and shared work. We had simple house rules that were grounded in the Scriptures: *Two are better than one. Be faithful with little things. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger. Work for the Lord and not for people. Be reconciled with your brother or sister.* The community house was located on a street where several other families lived in intentional friendship with one another. Some of the homes had basement apartments with lodgers who became part of the extended household. The kids on the street played together and went to school together. We were in and out of each other’s homes and each other’s lives.

The community house had a couple of designated leaders. Before I moved in, one of the leaders asked me whether or not I felt loved.

“Of course,” I said assuredly.

“You’d be surprised how many people aren’t able to say that,” he said.

When we feel loved, we’re less likely to feel like strangers for very long. Why is that? Because we were made for love. Love is the way we’re known by others and by God. Love shapes our identity and directs us toward the divine life. In 1 Corinthians 12:31 (NRSV), the apostle Paul calls love a “more excellent way.” In the best circumstances we receive love from our family and the friends that grow to feel like family. In the Christian life, these relationships are often found among other Christians, sometimes through becoming part of a local church.

The way we love is easily distorted, however. Most church activities are just an hour or two a week. That leaves so much room for all kinds of other narratives to shape our views of love. In Romans 1:25, Paul noted our proclivity to worship created things rather than the Creator. The Creator is the source of love. Even if we were taught it in church, it's a reality we're prone to forget. Our cultural norms are rooted in self-reliance. This causes us to cut ourselves off from our rootedness in the Creator's love in favor of getting by on love of our own design. Rather than receiving love, we either hide from it or control it for ourselves. When that happens, it's as if the windows of our souls have been closed and the blinds shut to keep ourselves from seeing the light. St. Augustine called this *incurvatus in se*—"an inward turn." When we turn inward, we begin using love selectively, usually as a way of getting what we want—finding ourselves in ourselves while keeping others at arm's length or using them to meet our needs.

True love is quite the opposite—it's a free and generous outward act. It's a call out of hiding and away from control to a place where we're able to *give* ourselves to others rather than using them to get what we want. One of the hopes of this book is that we would be able to reorient and rediscover the way of love as it is intended by the Creator. In this way the windows of our souls that were previously shut are opened and flooded with light. The windows of our souls are not unlike the windows of our homes, of course. If our windows are open, our souls are more likely to be opened as well. If others are invited into our homes and our lives, we're less likely to

live turned in on ourselves and more able to gaze at the world anew, spurred along the most excellent way by a caring community as the Creator first intended.

We belong to God and to one another, but so much of what we read and look at pushes against that claim. There are entire courses and channels created with the aim of helping us find ourselves outside the context of lived community. One article called out the “empty religions of Instagram,” noting the ways that social media influencers have been allowed a position of moral authority in the lives of their followers without ever addressing the deeper question of “What we should believe in beyond the limits of our puny selfhood?”¹ The article contends that celebrity influencers may peddle in secrets of living your best life but aren’t chiefly concerned with “the best use of your life.”² How could they be? Those who know me best know that I’m a big believer in knowing who we are. But at the end, we can’t really know who we are without knowing *whose* we are. We need daily reminders of this from others who actually know us to help us live into this reality.

In his book *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship*, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests that many of us are on a quest for our own *individual* identity but that we often mistake individualism for *isolation* or *privacy*. Privacy is turning

1. Leigh Stein, “The Empty Religions of Instagram,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/opinion/influencers-glennon-doyle-instagram.html>.

2. Ibid.

inward. Privacy says, “leave me alone! Let me do my own thing.” But in the Christian view, “the world is no longer an anonymous collection of [private] individuals . . . the light of heaven penetrates through Christ and the Church into the darkness of the world, so it visibly gives personality to the whole human community.”³ Von Balthasar likens this to a leavening process. While the world is prone to distort our view of love, training us in a form of individualism rooted in private isolation and a form of community rooted in collective tolerance, Christ is the leaven that helps us become fully individual in genuine shared community. In the light, we become a person. In the light, we discover what it means to be human. Jesus—the light of the world—is both fully human and fully divine. He takes our need for privacy and our quest for self-help and bathes it in the waters of baptism where we discover who we are in light of who he is. From there, we begin pulling back the layers of who we think we are or thought we were to discover our true identity in true community. Community in the best sense means that our individual contributions aren’t simply tolerated but treasured, sometimes challenged and always refined in light of the greater whole.

In shared community we find unity in distinction. This is true freedom, and it is what Jesus comes to bring. In true community we find constant companions who acknowledge our distinct characteristics and gifts.

3. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship*, trans. R. John Halliburton (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1975), 34–35.

Then, in community, this acknowledgment allows us to be called higher and nearer to the sacred heart of Jesus. Without a true identity blessed and ordered by Jesus in shared community, the search for self leads to private isolation and loneliness on the one hand or control, attention-seeking, and people-pleasing on the other. It pulls us into the quicksand of misbegotten and inwardly focused identity where we think that no one really sees, cares, or understands.

While I'm not sure I could have named it at first, an experience of shared community was what I was looking for when I moved into the shared house. In my head, I'd worked out the ideal community, but I needed to really live it. It took a few months, but I finally and clumsily took to heart Bonhoeffer's warning that people who loved their *idea* of community more than the community itself would actually destroy the community.⁴ In the house we learned that love was for others. This love, as we'll learn a bit later, was a costly kind of love. It was a fight-it-out (even when you were tired and just wanted to go to sleep) kind of love. This love shaped and transformed a small group of young men who had very little in common other than the meals and chores we shared together.

One didn't even have to be a confessing Christian to live in the house. You just had to learn the five little Bible verses and you had to participate in the daily meals, work, and discussions. I later learned that these simple principles framed what monks and others living in intentional

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 27.

Christian community often call a *rule* or *way* of life.⁵ Because they felt a sense of belonging in the community, several of the guys set aside their atheist or humanist or skeptical tendencies and began reading and later living out the gospel. Life in this house made the world look a little bit more like the kingdom of God.

On Monday nights we had our house meeting. For the first few minutes, we discussed the chores for the week. Who would clean the toilets? Who would sweep the floors? Then we moved on to matters of our relationships with one another. How were we doing? We asked each other if anyone had anything they needed to confess. If they were holding a grudge or needed to discuss a miscommunication or to apologize for anything, no matter how big or small, this was the time. The meeting wasn't over until we'd dealt with our issues.

Then, after an awkward pause, someone would apologize for something small like leaving their laundry in the dryer. We had an unwritten rule that anyone who found someone else's laundry in the dryer would remove it from the dryer and fold the clothes that were left inside. It was a simple pay-it-forward kind of gesture and it all but ensured that perfectionists in the group never left their clothes in the dryer ever again.

One evening during the house meeting these two guys from Benin needed to work out a disagreement they

5. One of the earliest and most universal of these is The Rule of St. Benedict, composed in 516 by Benedict of Nursia. Adaptations of this rule are still in use in many monasteries and Christian communities today.

were having. So they argued with one another. In French. Only the guy from Lebanon would have had any clue as to what they were talking about. It felt like an eternity, but eventually they worked it out. If there was anyone at our house meeting that night who needed to short-circuit their proclivity to flee a good old-fashioned conflict, that was the night to stay in it; to witness an argument, and to see it end in peace.

I shared a room with one guy who got annoyed with me because my shoes were left beside my bed. When he stumbled over my shoes in the middle of the night, he didn't wait until our next house meeting to bring it up. He woke me up right then.

"Gannon, I need you to wake up," he said.

I was startled, groggy, and more than a little bit annoyed.

"Huh?"

"Gannon, I need you to put your shoes away."

"What's going on?"

"Wake up, I need you to put your shoes away."

"Bro, are you serious? Don't you have bigger things to worry about? I mean, there's ethnic cleansing going on in Albania, and you're worried about my shoes?"

"Gannon, I'm your roommate. Don't talk to me about Albania until you pick up your shoes."

After I got out of bed and put my shoes away, we went downstairs to the living room to talk. At the end of these kinds of conflicts, even if they were small, we always offered and received the words of forgiveness. A cool, "No worries, I'm good," never sufficed. We had to say the words: "I forgive you."

“Will you forgive me?”

“Yes, I forgive you.”

In that moment, I had been given grace mediated by Christ through a friend who cared enough to help me deal with something as small as my shoes. I’m glad he did.

I took with me what I learned in that house and the others before it and have attempted over the course of my life—imperfectly, of course—to live out the gospel in every other house in which I’ve lived.

What about your house? What if your desire for love moved beyond your own self-interest to the interest of others? What if your desire for love wasn’t repressed, but able to be fully disclosed and ordered within a community of healthy relationships? What if the way to love was rooted within a family or family-like community that turned each one’s desires outward because they were so transfixed on and transformed by God’s love? What if this way of life transformed the church because we began to realize that this kind of love is what it actually means to *be* the church? In a day where church is no longer at the center of society, what if this kind of family-community love overflowed from our living rooms into our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces where we would begin to see a glimpse of heaven on earth?

It starts when we learn to put our shoes away.

The pages that follow are about how the church can become more like a family and the family more like church by reframing and recovering the radical kinship of shared community life, where there is no *us* or *them*, but just *us*. Here, we’ll show how the family and family-like community—concepts that have been sentimentalized

by some and politicized by others—can be reoriented. When we do that, we can help people experience the love of family who have never felt it before.

In the Scriptures, we read how kinship is shaped by Israel's experience as slaves in Egypt: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 5:15 NRSV, cf. 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22). God reminds Israel not to forget their past. Because of this, space was made for the continuous revaluation of Israel's kinship ties where the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow were welcome. Israel's history as slaves in Egypt and the "invoking of the kinship of fellow sufferers is meant to motivate Israel to offer the kind of hospitality that she herself longed for during her exile in Egypt [cf. Deut. 10:19]."⁶ Because of this, Israel's idea of kinship is reoriented to enfold the stranger into their house and within their gates. They were taught to welcome the stranger because they were once strangers themselves. They had to remember not to forget.

Throughout my life I try to remember not to forget. I remember the time I bought that plane ticket and moved halfway across the country. I remember the people I barely knew who gave me a roof over my head and welcomed me into their life and into their family.

Over time, Israel forgot they were strangers. The practice of a revaluated kinship that included the

6. Mark R. Glanville and Luke Glanville, *Refugee Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 38.

welcome of outsiders lessened. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene in the first century, Israel had clearly defined limits as to who was in and who was out. “A first-century Israelite would have considered any Gentile or Samaritan to be completely beyond the pale, not even *registering* as acceptable to God (Mark 7:24–30).”⁷

This is the context with which Jesus brought his own message to Israel. And it got him killed. Jesus disrupted the family. For him, kinship and family ties depended on those who did the will of God (Mark 3:35). While some whole households aligned themselves with the way of Jesus like that of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, still others of Jesus’ followers left their families to become part of Jesus’ new reordered family where they “found their first kinship with Christ and with the divine Father and then with each other.”⁸

There’s a reason why some Christians call one another *born again* and other Christian traditions consider the baptism as a holy symbol of new birth. Radical kinship in Jesus means that we die to our selves and our family identity and rise again in solidarity and mutual agreement with a family and community identity that is reoriented around communion with Jesus within the larger family of God.

This line of thought requires a reordering of our life. To get here, I had to live it and I had to get my own house in order. I had to wrestle with the purpose of my marriage

7. Glanville and Glanville, *Refugee Reimagined*, 75–76, emphasis added.

8. *Ibid.*, 77.

and my home. Radical kinship isn't just something I experienced as a twenty-something. It's something I'm trying to live with intention every single day. It's been twenty years since my first experiences of kinship with a family and community I barely knew, but those experiences remain instructive for my own understanding of the household. I have no other choice. Ten years into my marriage it became painfully clear that Carey and I were unlikely to have children of our own. The multiple medical consultations and procedures left us with few answers. At the time we were in the midst of our own Egypt. Our only solace was the hope of a reoriented identity around the kind of family Jesus desired to bring. We needed to learn how to care for others like family because family was what we needed most.

One evening at home after reading through the book of Ruth—another biblical story of kinship transcending blood ties—Carey put a basket outside the front door of the little brick rambler where we lived as a symbol of our emptiness. She asked the Lord to *fill the basket*. In the story of Ruth, Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, had lost her immediate, nuclear family and had returned from the region of Moab to the town of Bethlehem where she and her husband were raised. She asked her friends and distant relatives who were present there to refrain from calling her by her given name and to call her *Mara*, which translates "bitter" instead. "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21a).

At the time, Carey and I were bitter and burned-out. In the midst of our struggle with infertility, we'd buried ourselves in the work of ministry. I was helping launch

the new Fresh Expressions US movement while we were simultaneously redeveloping and pioneering new ways of being church on a college campus. We had lots of permission from our denomination but little local support. Five years into this new ministry venture, not only were we feeling empty in our personal struggle, we were feeling empty spiritually as well. If we were going to continue in what we were doing, we needed God to fill the basket.

As we prayed about whether or not to make our exit, the Lord sent us a couple of Ruths—two twentysomethings named Faith and Luke—who pledged to be in the struggle with us. They were from a charismatic Christian background and gave us what they believed to be a word from the Lord. They told us that they felt we would be spiritual parents on the college campus and for young people in our city. This is not a word they took lightly. Over the next few years, that word would unfold before our very eyes.

We loved our little brick Rambler. It was just a mile and a half from the university, but we'd longed to live closer so we could better integrate the rhythms of the collegiate community into the rhythms of home. After lots of searching and multiple meetings with our Realtor, we'd cast that bread upon the water. After resolving to stay in the Rambler and a couple of years after their word, we found a house a block from campus and across the street from several of the college students and young adults in our budding church community. We renovated the attic of our new home and soon it became lodging for Haley, first as a graduate student and later as a first-year high school teacher. When Haley got married and moved

out, she and her husband leased a nearby apartment big enough to share with one of their single friends.

The nature of our household and neighborhood community life might be too radical for some and not nearly radical enough for others, but it's significant for my calling to a different understanding of the household. For us, we have no other choice than for our home to be a place of openness and welcome, a place of grace in the midst of devastation. Otherwise, our marriage might have turned in on itself. Along the way, kinship ties and spiritual children we didn't plan have cropped up because we were running on empty and we asked the Lord to fill the basket.

The older I get, I realize the beauty and limits of my own partiality. When I was young, I was taught I could do or be just about anything. While I'm not one to give up on dreams, the fact is I will never be lots of things. I can only be who I am. So rather than focusing on what or who I'm not, I try to stay focused on who I am in light of who God is. It may sound simplistic, but so is the nature of the radical kinship to which I aspire. It's not rocket science and I can't say exactly how it might take shape in your own life. All I can say is that by accepting my limits, I've found a clearer path toward a very old way of following Jesus alongside others of similarly limited abilities who are trying to do the same.

I choose to live this way because it helps me remember where I've come from. I remember the way I was raised by parents courageous enough not to stop me from buying that plane ticket from Houston to Washington, DC. I remember that when that plane touched the ground,

I was a stranger in a strange land who had hospitality extended to me over and over again. I remember being enfolded into a family who was different from my own. I remember the joys and pains of singleness and childlessness, and every day I try to remember not to forget.

Questions for Reflection

- Do you feel loved? If so, how do you share your experience of love with others? If not, how might an experience of shared community help with this?
- One of the hopes of this book is that we would be able to reorient and rediscover the way of love as it is intended by the Creator. What do you need to let go of to open yourself more fully to God's love?
- This chapter touched on the idea of unity in distinction. How are you learning to acknowledge the distinct gifts and abilities that you and others bring into your experience of community? How might you allow those in your community to call you beyond yourself into a fuller Jesus-shaped identity?
- Unity in distinction means acknowledging our limits. How does acknowledging your limits help you live a richer, fuller life?

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother
and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

—GENESIS 2:24 (NRSV)



In a day of
statistical decline in
church participation, what if
we imagined marriages as little
churches and households as living
demonstrations of the way that God's love
is reoriented around Jesus? In the pages that
follow, readers are invited into a kind of radical
kinship rooted in family-community love.

In his first book, author Gannon Sims shows how our homes can become hubs for mission pointing toward our true home where we—no matter our previous experiences of family or home or love—can find kinship in God.

Gannon Sims's compelling book Bringing Church Home charges our imaginations with a vision of how family life can deepen our experience of life together in the church, and vice versa. Reading this book and taking its message to heart in our local churches will undoubtedly guide us deeper into the rich and interdependent sort of life that God intends for all creation.

—C. Christopher Smith, Senior Editor, *The Englewood Review of Books*, and co-author of *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus*

Gannon Sims is a founding team member of Fresh Expressions US, a movement seeking to bring the church Jesus loves closer to the people Jesus loves. He and his wife, Carey, along with a team of university students and young adults at The Center for Faith and Leadership in Fredericksburg, Virginia, helped give birth to The Center Community—an expression of church that patiently seeks to live out much of what is articulated in this book.



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ISBN 978-1-62824-944-6



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