

# NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH

*Transforming Your Congregation  
into a Powerhouse for Mission*

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# INTRODUCTION

*December 2, 2016, San Antonio, Texas—a federal judge frees hundreds of women and children from two Texas immigration detention facilities. He has deemed the sites unsuitable for holding minors, sending the families into a wet and frigid winter night.*

*Members of the San Antonio Mennonite Church, longtime advocates for just immigration, gather to address the emergency. How can they respond to the crisis? What is God calling them to do? Their answer, just one of many stories highlighted in this book, spurred this community of faith further along the path of incarnational mission.*

Incarnation, from the Latin *incarnatio*, means “the act of becoming flesh.” In various world traditions, it describes the supernatural taking on human form and walking among us. The living lama of Tibet, Vishnu becoming Krishna in Hinduism, or Haile Selassie’s status among Rastafarians are vivid examples.

Incarnation reflects the paradox that spirit and flesh can abide in the same place, that we are able to embody the holy in our own lives, and that the material world is precisely where we experience the divine.

When Christians capitalize the word, Incarnation describes the central event of our faith: Jesus of Nazareth personifying God's purposes during his brief life on this planet. In the Gospel of John's poetic prologue, we have this immortal verse, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth."

What Christians call the Incarnation is certainly not a single act. It is a life-giving metaphor, an invitation to follow for all who will listen. Personally, how can we en flesh the values of love, grace, and justice? As faith communities, how can our collective embodiment of these values shine even brighter? The answers to these questions must always unfold right here, right now, exactly where God has planted us. It will happen *in this place*.

Every Sunday in countless congregations, Christians recite these words from what we call the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." As we mutter this memorized petition, do we grasp its subversive power? What does it mean? Since Jesus taught this prayer as a model, we turn to him for clarity. His entire ministry was a passionate attempt to illustrate *basileia tou theou*—kingdom of God—as his central metaphor. In one graphic teaching after another, including short stories we call parables, he offers us glimpses of this new reality. It is like

- A father who never stops waiting at the window for his wayward son, and when that son returns, the father celebrates with a sumptuous feast
- A smidgen of yeast that works enormous transformation
- A mustard seed, though tiny, that blooms into a mighty, shade-giving tree

- People who instinctively care for the naked, hungry, imprisoned, or foreigner
- A man who imperils his life and resources to help a stranger of another race, his compassion outweighing prejudice or resentment
- A shepherd so mindful of one missing lamb that he goes on a search-and-rescue mission.

Throughout these teachings, a truth becomes clear. If we want to enter into this kingdom—this new way of being in relationship with God and each other—it requires risk and radical realignment. To say “Thy kingdom come” is a revolutionary confession of willingness.

Many of us long for this revolution to take root in our own lives and communities of faith. Hunger for authenticity crosses generations, as shown in multiple studies describing how Millennials view the church and organized religion. Like many of us, they are tired of the old ABCs of church management: **a**ttendance, **b**uildings, **c**ash. Despite a diversity that eludes single catchphrases, common themes shape their approach to mission.

Recently, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary uncovered these commonalities by employing a “listener.” Rev. Mark Yaconelli spent months hanging out where Millennials hang out, asking questions and deeply listening to their answers. He discovered that Millennials seek a way to incarnate their passions: passion for a just world, passion for a less judgmental church, passion for service that actually makes a difference, passion for a sustainable lifestyle. These desires drive them to act, to incarnate, to take risks by becoming the change they seek for our world.

A good example of Millennial ingenuity is Dr. Matthew Hinsley, whose love of classical guitar and the value of

the arts in transforming people's lives led him to create the nonprofit Austin Classical Guitar (ACG). ACG provides guitar classes for over four thousand students in sixty Austin, Texas, schools. Determined to eliminate barriers to accessing the arts, ACG also offers the only daily fine arts class for incarcerated and court-involved youth in Travis County's Juvenile Justice System. Further, they teach a Braille-adapted guitar program at the Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired.

Efforts like Hinsley's are filling gaps that the educational and judicial systems have been unable to accomplish. Our failure as a church to capture the imagination, authenticity, and risk-willingness of this generation is crippling our incarnational capacity. It is symptomatic of our reluctance to get messy with the problems of our communities, and to Millennials it communicates a disinterest in real and lasting change.

Pieter Van Tatenhove, age thirty-six, was raised as a preacher's kid, but veered from mainline faith to attend a conservative Christian university. The rigidity he encountered there swung him hard in the opposite direction. One of his last attempts to fit into organized Christianity was with a church plant in northern California. Initially, its core group valued a diversity of opinions, theologies, and political viewpoints. However, when the pastor decided to align himself with a name-brand denomination, the emphasis changed. There was pressure to adhere to a faith statement, and "evangelism" became a numbers game. Though he recently connected with a progressive Episcopal congregation, Pieter had to overcome deep disillusionment. Here he shares some thoughts about his journey:

Most Millennials reject dated definitions of what a 'community of faith' looks like," he says. "We want

the church to address its internal hypocrisy, to be more vocal about toxic American Christianity that is not recognizing injustice or loving our neighbors. We are seekers first, Christians second (if at all). We are reluctant to make statements of faith because they calcify that part of our brain that seeks new understanding. For me, the idea of going to church again sounded exhausting. I would rather spend time with my chosen community of seekers, where our common ground is our heart and conscience. Most churches no longer seem relevant.

This book joins hands with others in a quest to kindle new relevancy, especially in a country where Christianity is too often a civic religion, supporting a nationalistic worldview out of sync with biblical admonitions for justice. If we are to change, it will require listening to some painful questions and their prophetic challenges.

Consider questions like those posed by Father Jose Marins, a Brazilian priest who has taught a model of congregational incarnation known as *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (Christian Base Communities) since the 1970s. He tells the story of a visit he made to a neighborhood barrio in Los Angeles. It was wracked with violence and disintegration, and yet he observed that there was a church of some kind on nearly every corner. His question to the community was, “Is the church doing anything *at all* about this violence? How can there be so many churches and yet so little transformation?”<sup>1</sup>

Our locales may not be plagued by inner-city ills, but *every* community has its issues. And for many mainline churches, the streets around them have changed dramatically, reflecting shifts in racial and socioeconomic status. It is our calling to incarnate here and now, exactly where we

are planted, even if our old neighborhoods look vastly different than they did a few decades ago.

This is the lesson learned by Christian activist and writer Shane Claiborne, who had the privilege of visiting and working with Saint Teresa of Calcutta before her death and canonization. She appreciated the ardor that led him across the globe, but she had an admonition she repeated frequently: “Calcuttas are everywhere if only we have eyes to see. Find your Calcutta.”<sup>2</sup>

Her words sound like a simple call to charity. But if we slow down and dig deeper, there’s an important, often forgotten piece of Teresa’s story. When she asked for permission to leave her religious compound and minister among the denizens of Calcutta, she had no programmatic intention. She set out with two saris and took to the streets. If asked why, she said she could not minister among the poor without truly knowing who they were and how they lived. She later wrote in her diary that her first year was extremely difficult. With no income, she begged for basic necessities, experiencing doubt, loneliness, and a temptation to return to the relatively comfortable life of the convent.

Like historical lodestars, the examples of prophets—past and present—call us further on our pilgrimage. Their clarion message rings true: the realities that Christ responded to so freely are *everywhere* around us. When the walls of our hearts, as well as our churches, become more permeable, we enter into this need and hear the invitation to practice incarnational mission. We leave our comfort, enter a wilderness experience, and out of that dark interval we begin to trust that God will show us how to respond in our given places. We learn to listen, truly listen, remembering Jesus’ words, “Those who have ears will hear.”



This same journey is reflected in the sea change related to international mission work. The old model of entering a culture with preconceived notions of how to administer justice and convert the populations has thankfully receded in many denominations. The current reality, reflected in the term “coworker,” is to discover the best possible ways to join hands with the labor that others and God are already doing. The key is dialogue. As Paulo Freire so brilliantly said, “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress.”<sup>3</sup>

In his popular, prophetic book *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)*, Robert Ludlum iconoclastically tears down cherished models of service. It is a must-read for anyone intent on incarnational mission. His basic premise is that most of what passes for ministry fosters dependency, ruptures authentic relationships, and squanders valuable resources. Essentially, this “old wineskin” mind-set is disempowering to those on the “receiving” end.

Ludlum says, “Giving to those in need what they could be gaining from their own initiative may well be the kindest way to destroy people.”<sup>4</sup> He believes there is no real way to discern a proper response without relationships.

In the pages ahead, you will find practical tools for developing these incarnational relationships. Though this is certainly—and primarily—a spiritual journey, it draws essential wisdom from the field of community organizing, specifically the power of asset-based community development (ABCD). This method of partnering with others first came to light in 1993 at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Its seemingly

simple approach is Copernican in effect. Rather than focusing on deficiencies and weaknesses, ABCD highlights and amplifies the gifts of individuals as well as organizations within a community. It stimulates an incarnational mind-set, starting with what is present and building on these strengths.

ABCD helps congregations cultivate connections within their communities, mobilizing the capacities of everyone involved to produce change from within. One of its key concepts is to move from a “fixed sum dynamic to an open sum dynamic,” meaning that true partnership discovers and stimulates benefits for *everyone* involved.

Thankfully, others have blazed new trails before us, men and women engaged in new models of mission. You will meet many of them in these pages. You will hear the stories of their joys and struggles as they minister in their settings.

We (Krin and Rob) have over sixty years of combined experience working with congregations in challenging environments. It has been a great privilege, and we share some of our personal stories in this book, found as sidebars to the narrative flow. Our work has been difficult, but the thrill of seeing the kingdom become visible in small and large ways is incomparable. The chapters ahead outline five critical practices we have discerned over the years: (1) converting our perspective from scarcity to abundance, and from self-absorption to our neighbors; (2) learning to listen as an essential discipline; (3) embracing transformative partnership; (4) integrating our buildings in new ways; and (5) sustaining our vision, especially through Spirit-filled worship and the mentoring of new leaders.

We hope that the concepts and stories you encounter here will help you incarnate God’s love and grace right here, right now. *In this place . . .*