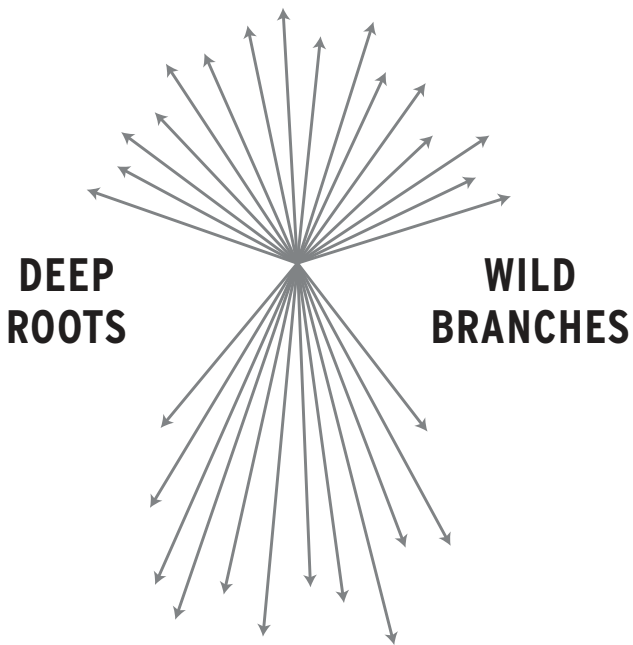


*Revitalizing the Church
in the Blended Ecology*

Michael Adam Beck



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DEEP ROOTS WILD BRANCHES

Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology

Michael Adam Beck



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DEDICATION

To my beautiful bride, copastor, and partner on the mission field and life, Jill Beck. You awakened me with your faithful love.

To all eight of our beloved children in this blended, chaotic organism called the Beck family: Emily, Ariel, Kaitlyn, Caitlin, Donald, Michael Jr., Alexander, and Angel.

To our grandchildren, Jaxon, Gabriella, and Aurora, for the light you have brought to our lives.

To the people called Methodists, who invited a little orphan boy to the potluck table of grace and raised me in a community of love and forgiveness.

To the WildOnes and my fellow pioneers of Fresh Expressions US, for the laughter and the tears we have shared, laboring in Christ on the new missional frontier.

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Parental Discretion Advised

When we were young, most things we truly desired came with the standard parental discretion advisory. Of course, this made us want it even more! The idea of the parental advisory was to give parents the choice if they wanted to allow their children to be exposed to something with violence, sex, or explicit lyrics.

I have always wanted to create a custom Bible with a parental discretion advisory label on the front in the hopes it would compel my children to read it. I mean, if anything in this world needs a parental discretion warning it's the Bible, right? Sex, alcoholism, violence, incest, polygamy, bestiality, genocide, humans beating their fists on the chest of God, children bashed on rocks, epic disasters; it's all in there. Who would let their kids read that stuff or watch that movie or listen to that soundtrack? This book will engage the Bible in a fresh way, so beware.

However, I start with this notice really because I want you to understand that what you hold in your hands is dangerous . . . like dynamite. Dynamite is a peculiar thing.

It can be both highly destructive or highly effective at accomplishing an impossible task. It really depends on the intent of the wielder. For instance, you can use dynamite in a terrorist attack to kill innocent people or you can use it to blow a tunnel through a mountain so you can drive a train through it. What I propose here is explosively hopeful. This dynamite-like optimism could destroy the imaginative gridlock of a “we’ve always done it that way before” church. It could turn obstacles to renewal into shrapnel and it could blow a community apart so that God can reconfigure it in a splendid new creation mosaic.

One thing to be cognizant of is the importance of knowing who is the “parent” wielding the power of discretion in your church, denomination, network, or community. Your episcopal leader, for instance, may not want you reading this. It might be a threat to the established bureaucracy. If you are a clergy person, you probably answer to some human authority, be it a board or a bishop. They might not like it when I suggest that you must understand and reclaim your identity as a mini-bishop and see your community as a kind of microcosm for what has been traditionally known as a conference, diocese, district, and so on. They may certainly get heartburn when you start ordaining/commissioning local missionaries to your community and planting churches willy-nilly all over the town. When you

start releasing wolves into artificial ecosystems, it's messy. Trophic cascades cannot be managed or institutionalized.

If you are just a normal Christian (I dislike the entire clergy/laity distinction because of its weak basis in Scripture), your “momma/daddy” might be your pastor. They may be uncomfortable when you begin to take your place in the “priesthood” of all believers (1 Peter 2:5) and understand yourself as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher to your community (Eph. 4:11). If your ecclesial parental figure has a realistic view of the new missional frontier they will embrace, support, and give permission. They will begin to cherish your contribution as you join the Holy Spirit’s disruptive work in the world. We need ordinary heroes like you, not gurus and professionals.

Unfortunately, some of you who are in unhealthy leadership dynamics may have to shoplift this material, hide it in your underwear drawer, or download it cautiously. This is your parental discretion warning: caution—ingredients could be explosively hopeful; handle with care.

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The Central Vision: A Tree of Life



I want to invite you to a picnic. This is an invitation to sit together beneath the tree of life and share a meal. The picnic is three courses and the book you hold in your hands is the appetizer. I invite you to stay for each portion of the meal, but it's my hope that the appetizer will be delightful enough that you can ingest a new vision for your local church.

The appetizer offers bite-sized pieces of what will be served in full portions in the main course. Yet, there is enough sustenance here for local churches to get started planting their own gardens.

The story of creation features a “tree of life” (Gen. 2:9). When that paradise scenario becomes polluted with sin, we lose access to this tree that we “might reach out [our] hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” in some undead state (Gen. 3:22). Later, we learn of another tree, from which a “cursed” one hung, to redeem us from the pollution of sin (Gal. 3:13). The prophets and pagan kings dreamed of a tree in which life would find shade and birds shelter (Dan. 4:1–12). Jesus takes up that language to describe the small mustard-seed beginnings that bring that kingdom tree into being (Matt. 13:31–32). Our story ends back at that tree in an urban garden. The story of new creation features again the “tree of life,” where all the tribes now gather in peace to taste its fruit (Rev. 22:2).

Perhaps most relevant to our topic of cultivating new communal ecosystems amidst declining congregations is Ezekiel’s prophecy, “I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish” (Ezek. 17:24). Our story is centered on a God who restores creation around the tree, who can make “dry tree[s] flourish.” To begin our journey, I want to offer you a guiding vision. This is a remixed metaphor of the old/new tree story. This controlling image will guide us forward.

The central image is that of a large and beautiful tree in the middle of the desert. Somehow this ancient and resilient structure is standing fully alive in stark contrast to the void of life all around.

As you behold this awe-inspiring organism, you notice in the shade beneath its elegant branches little shoots of life emerging from the root ball. These nascent organisms spring wildly into life, forming a tapestry of color all around the tree roots. These new flowers, plants, and vines cannot exist on their own; they need the shade of the tree. Somehow, they also give life to the tree. This is a symbiotic relationship.

The birds shelter and sing in its branches. Other strange life-forms find a new home. This is the vision of the blended ecology way. It's a resurrection image, a subversive ecosystem in the hostile death-dealing desert. It's an image of generativity—life exploding forth profusely in wild ways—on the backdrop of scarcity. It defies logic and rationality and invites us to turn to wonder. The tree and the emerging network of life is creating an entirely new environment in the middle of the desert. It's a counter-narrative to the greater story of waterless, lifeless void.

The tree is fundamentally a both/and image. It is an organism of Deep Roots *and* Wild Branches. Rooted in God's faithful activity in the past *and* growing wildly toward God's promised future manifesting in the present. In a space of

liminality, a threshold between times, Paul uses this very metaphor to describe the composite nature of the church (Rom. 11:17–24). As communal life in Jesus began to take on new forms among the Gentiles, Paul describes this transformation as grafting, “what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree” (Rom. 11:24).

For us then, the tree itself is an image of the *inherited* church, with its rootedness and depth. It possesses a resilient strength that will not submit to the parched context. The wild new life-forms, dependent on the tree’s shade and nourishing root system, are the *emerging* forms of church. These are the fresh expressions tethered to and dependent upon the inherited structure. There is a life-giving exchange happening between the inherited and emerging dynamic, imparting fresh air and creating new life where there was none before.

My doctoral mentor and my “Paul” in the faith, Dr. Leonard Sweet, says that what the Spirit is up to in the new reformation is not about making a better church, but making a better world. I hope this book will encourage you to join us to start planting the seeds of a new tomorrow by cultivating flourishing nascent ecosystems centered around the churches in your community today.

In the world of urban planning, refitting polluted and decaying cities with green technologies for a sustainable

future is called *retrofitting*. In the world of revitalization, rewiring declining congregations to join the Spirit's work of transforming communal ecosystems is called *futurefitting*.

Let's begin futurefitting your local church in the blended ecology way for life at the tree!

Picnic Talk

I've structured this pocket-sized book in a way that your team can work through the chapters together and hopefully get started cultivating the blended ecology in your local church. At the end of each chapter, I'll offer some questions to prime discussions and later some interactive tools. I invite you to imagine what it will sound like sitting in the shade beneath the tree of life in the new creation. Perhaps playing a track of nature sounds would set the mood? Or better yet, find a place in your community (park, nature trail, playground) and have an actual picnic together as you talk! Try to practice the discipline of presence and listening as each person shares.

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PART ONE

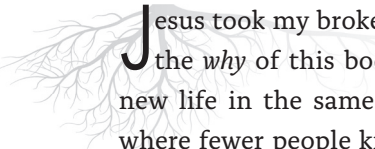


The New Ecosystem

Why the Blended Ecology?

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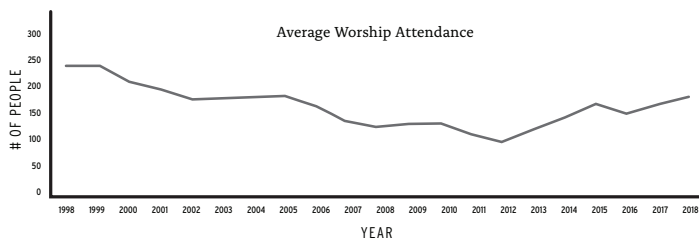
Trailer



Jesus took my broken life and revitalized it. This is partly the *why* of this book. I believe churches can experience new life in the same way individuals can. In a landscape where fewer people know the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, I believe we need every church in every community engaging the mission field to awaken people to that love. Just as we must be willing to go through a journey of death and resurrection, so must our churches.

In May 2012, my wife, Jill, and our blended family of eight children visited the church we would be serving that July. Wildwood United Methodist Church of Wildwood, Florida. Our family of ten nearly doubled the congregation that first Sunday! There were around thirty people in worship, the majority of whom were chronologically mature (precious saints more than eighty years old, sustaining the church with their blood, sweat, and tears). This was not a vibrant season in the life of our church.

During the apex of our history, from the early 1950s and into the 1970s, more than five hundred souls worshiped at Wildwood each Sunday. By 1998, Wildwood reported 240 people in worship. In 2008, just ten years later, Wildwood reported 127 people in worship. In 2012, Wildwood was in a conversation about closure or merger with a nearby thriving mega church. Although the congregation has existed on the same property for almost 140 years, an initial door-to-door canvass of the surrounding neighborhood revealed that residents living within visual proximity did not know of Wildwood UMC.



Wildwood UMC, Average Worship Attendance 1998-2018

Today, around two hundred WildOnes (what we call ourselves) worship regularly in our two different services on Sunday, as well as an additional one hundred in a third service of our sister church, God's Glory Ministries Inc. We share our space and partner in various ways with this African American congregation in the Pentecostal stream.

This is quite remarkable, being that Wildwood was founded in 1881 as a Methodist Episcopal South congregation (a denomination resulting from the split over slavery in 1844). Wildwood looks very different these days. More and more, we are blending our two church families together; this is a sign of Jesus' resurrection power at work.

On one hand, we are a traditional United Methodist congregation with deep roots, a long history, and all the typical offerings: office hours, Bible studies, United Methodist Women, quilters guilds, pews, bulletins, hymnals, candles, and all the smells and bells. In a typical week our pastoral team has all the expectations of a traditional parish to meet. In just one day, we have been asked to be sound technicians, mechanics, janitors, administrators, interventionists, architects, fund-raising gurus, counselors, and preachers extraordinaire.

However, also in a normal week, some quite wild and not-so-traditional things are occurring as many more people are also gathering in the thirteen various fresh expressions. These micro-churches gather around the risen Jesus in tattoo parlors, Mexican restaurants, community centers, dog parks, Yoga studios, libraries, running tracks, and make-shift salons. These little communities of Jesus are littered throughout Wildwood like green spaces to our ecosystem. We are very much a presence in the lives of people where they do life. Disciples are being made. We are witnessing

an emergence—fragmented pieces being blended together into a wonderful new creation mosaic—a community of resurrection.

Here's the thing: we don't know if this revitalization experiment will be sustainable or not! While not-yet-Christians, brand-new Christians (lots of them), and chronologically mature Christians are all existing together in this messy blended-family scenario, we struggle financially to keep the ship afloat. This is long, slow, hard work, and God alone can make the resurrection harvest grow.

The story of Wildwood's decline is not unique. It is the new normal of US churches across the denominational spectrum. 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."

Unfortunately, the story of Wildwood's revitalization is unique. Most churches that decline to this level close their doors. Wildwood is not growing by Christians playing church musical chairs, or already-Christians moving their membership around. The WildOnes are among a small minority of churches across the United States growing by reaching not-yet-Christians ("professions of faith" and baptisms). In the Florida Conference, I serve in a cultivator

role with hundreds of churches. Many haven't had a single baptism in years.



Wildwood UMC chart of "professions of faith"

Wildwood's growth may be unique, but it is not an anomaly. In fact, we are seeing something similar occur in churches across the Western missional frontier. For instance, in England, most fresh expressions are started by smaller congregations. In *Mission-shaped and Rural*, Sally Gaze observes that not only are these small rural churches cultivating fresh expressions, but the inherited congregations are taking on unexpected forms of revitalization as well.¹

Thus, this is not just one story, this is *our* story. Or as Frederick Buechner famously said, "The story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all." Can the spark that's happening in these churches be blown upon by the wind of the Spirit and sweep across the United States like a roaring blaze?

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.

National director of Fresh Expressions US, Dr. Chris Backert, says there are primarily three possible paths through which a church can experience revitalization:

1. *Re-Engineering*: Looking at all the parts of a congregation's life and seeking to re-strategize, re-focus, re-organize to make the current version of the congregation its best version.
2. *Re-Vival*: That occurs through a visitation of the charismatic, a movement of the Holy Spirit that manifests in a powerful supernatural way.
3. *Re-Missioning*: By awakening and practically focusing the efforts of the congregation on the Great Commission locally. Whereas *Re-Engineering* starts with the "church," *Re-Missioning* starts with the "commission." In *Re-Engineering* the church sets the agenda. In *Re-Missioning* the mission context sets the agenda.²

Many of us have tried Option One more than once and we all know, even when it has been effective, the change is typically not lasting. Some would call this revitalization

through church tinkering, in which we tweak what we do in the attractational model. Most books written on revitalization are focused on Option One. Doing church bigger and better: better coffee, better music, better preaching, better hospitality, and so on. This is not one of those books. Approaches that try to solve the crises facing the church from within the church are missing the point.

We are aware that Option Two is always a possibility, although we can't predict or force it to happen. Here we pray and wait. But what if the Holy Spirit is always just as active outside church walls as within them? What if God is calling us to put sneakers on our prayers and join what the Spirit is already doing in our neighborhoods and networks?

Hence, this book is an exploration of Dr. Backert's Option Three, that inherited churches can and are being revitalized by adopting the fresh expressions approach in the mixed economy or blended ecology way. While revitalization is not the goal, it is an effect of joining God's disruptive cause amid the fragmentation and isolation of human community. Cultivating fresh expressions of church births a missional ecosystem in long-declining congregations.

Revitalization is a reaction in a series of more complex chain reactions. A manifestation of *emergence*: synergistic relationships occurring between inherited and emerging modes of church that result in a new complex organism.

Let's clarify some language . . .

The Mixed Economy is a business term used to describe an economy in which some industries are privately owned and others are publicly owned or nationalized; or an economy that combines elements of capitalism and socialism. The fresh expressions movement appropriated this term to refer to a diversity of ecclesial forms in which fresh expressions of church exist alongside inherited forms in relationships of mutual respect and support.

The Blended Ecology refers to fresh expressions of church in symbiotic relationship with inherited forms of church in such a way that the combining of these attractive and missional modes blend to create a nascent form. When churches truly live into the mixed economy for an extended period, we see a transformation occur. Both the inherited church and the fresh expressions of church become a new interconnected creation . . . a blended ecology. Early in the Fresh Expressions US movement, we began to use the language of "blended ecology," which speaks more potently to the new prevalent family forms, current cultural realities, and the ancient agrarian language of Jesus' teaching.

Inherited refers to a form of church passed on as a precious gift by the saints of generations past. As in our parents leaving us an incredibly valuable inheritance that we must now learn how to steward well. Sometimes compared/

contrasted with the emerging church. Also referred to as “traditional, attractional, gathered” church.

Emerging is a contextual form of church that reaches and serves people currently outside the inherited church. They are shaped from a relational interaction between people, cultures, and the gospel. Sometimes compared/contrasted with the inherited church. Also referred to as “modern, missional, scattered,” and fresh expressions of church.

A *fresh expression* is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church.

Who Is This Book For?

It is frustrating to me when people write books on things they have never actually done. Don't get me wrong; we need academics writing books and formulating theories, but we also need more practitioners writing books. We need pioneers who plant their own gardens, prepare their own meals, eat their own fruits and vegetables, and share their recipes.

This book is written for local church people, by a local church person, sharing learnings from the US mission field. It is a 1 John 1:1 kind of work: “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” We have seen the risen Jesus at work in the blended ecology way. We exchange the word *model* for *way*. As I believe the

blended ecology to be a *way* for us to be the church, rather than a corporate business *model* of a new kind of church.

Denominations have tried top-down leadership strategies to reverse decline for decades; perhaps we need to give local, grassroots revolutionaries a chance. We need cohorts of local church leaders who will dig into their contexts and resist the urge to climb the corporate ladders of denominational success. In systems that often reward the politically savvy, corporate-minded ones who oil the institutional machinery and tend the company store, we need risk-taking prophets who will stand in the wilderness, thirsty among the people.

These are the strong poets who give us new language and new visions, not from the seats of power, but from the ranks of the marginalized. These are the pioneers who will stand in the liminal space and organize local people movements on a pilgrimage between the times.

If you are reading this, my hope is that you are that kind of person.

I am not writing as some expert from an ivory tower. There is no such thing as an expert on revitalization, so be careful with folks who make such claims. Only the Holy Spirit can revitalize congregations and there are countless extraneous variables in every context. However, we can adapt and reorganize existing congregations to place ourselves in the flow of the new rivers the Spirit is creating.

I have served as the pastor of several congregations that God revitalized in this way. I know the heartache of life in churches on death's doorstep. I know about trying to love people who would rather die than change. I know about the tears, frustration, and sleepless nights. The beer-bottle fight committee meetings, the betrayals, and the scars. If you know those feelings, too, this book is for you.

I am also writing as someone who is heartbroken that my own adult children identify as Christians but don't go to church. I travel the United States, sharing about the missional movement we call Fresh Expressions, hearing the stories of faithful leaders from many denominations and churches who are telling me a similar heartbreaking story: "We renovated the facilities, we hired the best music people, the most gifted youth pastor, our pastor spends fifteen hours a week preparing sermons . . . and our church is still dying."

There is hope. While the purpose of a fresh expression is *not* to revitalize existing congregations, but to reach people the church is not currently reaching, we are witnessing an interaction taking place. Churches that adopt the fresh expressions approach are being reconfigured in an inadvertent but powerful way.

The effects we can see on inherited congregations are immediately obvious: (1) they force declining congregations to awaken from apostolic amnesia, look outside themselves, and listen to their community (what I will explain in

chapter 5 as breaking the toxic loop); (2) the congregation catches fire with the spirit of evangelism; (3) the “priesthood of all believers” is released as a local missionary force to offer adaptive leadership; (4) people who experience Jesus through fresh expressions sometimes matriculate back to the existing congregation; and (5) the church reorganizes itself around the new disruptive work of the Spirit taking place.

I believe God can and will revitalize churches, but it often occurs through a fundamental recalibration of local congregations. In part 2, I will propose four moves to describe the process of revitalization: *awakening*, *futurefitting*, *cultivating/grafting*, and *releasing*. Each of these moves is broken down into a chapter. I believe the process enables every existing congregation, no matter the size, to become in a sense a multi-site. Inherited churches can launch fresh expressions, harnessing the power of resurrection already in their midst.

Cultivating, Seeding, and Grafting

Let us enter the ecosystem of scriptural imagination with three Jesus stories we must hold together in tension.

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said

to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6–9)

Overall, this is a story of God's patient and persistent love. After being challenged consistently by the religious leadership of his day, Jesus is responding with a story about the barrenness of those leaders and the bankrupt nature of the religious system.

If we see the owner of the field as God, then we understand that God expects trees to bear fruit. We can understand the frustration of the vineyard owner. Here is a tree wasting the space and nutrients of the soil. If we understand Jesus as the gardener, we see his compassionate heart to provide some TLC that will nurse the tree back to health. He gets down on his hands and knees to do the dirty work of fertilization and cultivation. Perhaps the three years are the three years of Jesus' ministry.

We can make some easy connections here to our own context. Jesus gets down on his hands and knees to cultivate new life in people and systems. Speaking of local churches, there are many that appear at times to be wasting the soil of their communities—occupying space but bearing little fruit in the lives of people. The good news is that Jesus doesn't

give up on us. No one likes to be dug up, pruned, or covered in manure, but the transformation process from barrenness to fruitfulness is never easy.

It is the desire of Jesus that all churches should bear fruit, and he is with us, down on his knees doing the dirty work of tilling, pruning, and fertilizing. Just as in the incarnation, he gets dirt beneath his fingernails so the church is called to this work of revitalizing barren trees.

The Parable of the Sower

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"
(Matt. 13:3–9)

The parable of the sower is a story about the profuse, generative love of God. The sower casts the seed far and wide, generously across the landscape. The seed doesn't change; every seed has the potential for new life. The goal of the sower is to produce a crop. The potential of the seed can

be limited by the condition of the soil; seeds can't grow to fruition in rocky, shallow, or crowded soil.

The church is called to profusely and generatively cast the seeds of God's love into the world.

In the blended ecology, both the work of the gardener tilling, pruning, and fertilizing existing trees so that they might bear fruit, and the sower going out to cast the seeds that will one day yield a harvest are equally important. We must do the work of stewarding and caring for the inherited church, that it may produce much fruit. We must hold that work in creative tension with being sent to cast the seeds on the new missional frontier—planting the emerging forms of church, offering God's love to those who will receive it in fresh ways.

The Parable of the Vine

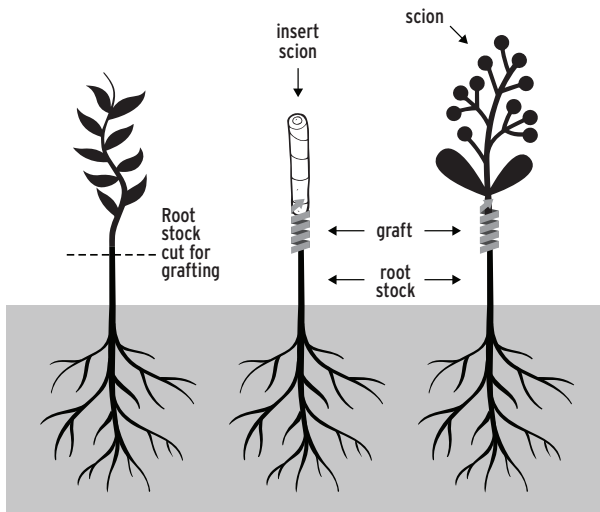
"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and

withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” (John 15: 1–6)

In this parable, Jesus himself is the living organism, the *true vine*, his living essence flows through the whole complex network of the vineyard. The father is the vinegrower. God himself is doing the work of pruning, fertilizing, and removing the parts that do not bear fruit. Once again, the focus of Jesus’ agrarian metaphors is the expectation of fruit-bearing. Who’s doing all the work in this analogy? God! We are the branches; our only function is to abide. Abiding in Christ, our being with him, results in bearing fruit for him. We are all part of the same vineyard, all connected, by Jesus himself.

The blended ecology requires a third move: grafting.

The grafting process involves combining a shoot system (called a scion) of one species with the root system (called a rootstock) of another. There is an exchange at a fundamental level in which the two species not only enter a symbiotic union, but they transform each other. A new kind of grape is created from the union—a new creation. This is the understanding of revitalization I will seek to explore.




The vineyard is a place of deep roots *and* wild branches. It is a complex, interweaving, organic, polycentric, dispersed, networked system. What if local congregations were to base themselves, structurally speaking, on Jesus' parable of the vine, rather than some corporate entity?

We will hold these three images—cultivating, seeding, and grafting—together throughout the book.

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CHAPTER 1

The Desert



We are in a Judges 2:10 situation, “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).

How is it that one God-following generation can endure the wilderness wandering, cross into the promised land, and then fail epically to pass the faith on to the next generation? It happened in Judges 2, and it’s happened again in the twenty-first-century United States. As Mark Twain is reported to have quipped, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”

The inherited church was planted in a different ecosystem. Let’s just say it was like a jungle, a wild untamed frontier bursting with all kinds of life-forms and many diverse challenges. The ecosystem changed, like a desert that swallowed up the jungle. The church in the United States has been through a series of seismic sandstorms. Our instinctual response has been to hunker down in the walls

of our churches, hoping the storms will soon pass. Before we knew it, we were buried in the sands of a new desert ecosystem.

While certainly different than a jungle, a desert is also an ecosystem. An ecosystem is simply a community of living organisms, interacting with each other in a physical environment. A desert ecosystem is typically characterized by little to no precipitation or water sources. Deserts are usually arid, with sparse vegetation and extreme temperatures. However, deserts are not devoid of life; they just have different varieties of life. Think of the various species of plants, mammals, reptiles, insects, and birds that call the desert home. Living things adapt to their ecosystem.

The church is in a new ecosystem, and we have failed to adapt.

The twenty-first century has been a time of seismic shifts. While all the world has changed around us, the church has remained largely fixed in our response to the emerging missional opportunity. While the world has been moving at blazing 5G speeds, we have been stuck on rotary telephones.

Changing Landscape—Post-Everything

I want to now provide six sketches of the major shifts that have contributed to the decline of Christianity in the United States. The multiplicity and speed of change is pushing us into a post-everything age. Much more could be said here.

The six shifts are not meant as an exhaustive list, and I share them in appetizer-sized bites.

1. Economy: From Dead Presidents to Bitcoin

We are in a time of incredible economic change. The housing market crash, persistently high unemployment, a rise in wealth for the privileged minority, income inequality for the masses, and stagnation in standard-of-living growth are the persistent North American hardships of recent years. The economic dilemma of this emerging generation is created by a convergence of unemployment, globalization, automation, foreign competition, a faltering education system, and massive educational debt.¹ The postindustrial digital age has dawned. With this globalized and knowledge-based economy as the new financial reality, there is a growing chasm between the super wealthy and everyone else. The massive unbalanced distribution of wealth has diminished the existence of the middle class that was once the primary volunteer base of churches—what Paul Taylor calls “a hollowing of the middle.”² Members no longer enjoy relatively steady nine-to-five jobs, pension plans, paid vacations, and weekends off. The new US economic landscape is a 24/7 work culture. Many people now work on weekends.

Bitcoin illustrates this shift. Globalized civilization is moving toward redefining and potentially abolishing the center of all current economic systems . . . money itself.

In our lifetime, we may see the decentralization of minted currency. Bitcoin was the first attempt at a decentralized, distributed currency that needed no central bank. It is a shared, networked system of currency powered by a mathematical technology called “blockchain.” This radical technology has the capacity to decentralize most systems. While some see Bitcoin as a failed attempt (it was immediately harnessed and used illegally in the trafficking of narcotics), blockchain has planted the seeds of a disruptive innovation that may be the future of a globalized economy.

2. *Family*: From *Beaver*, to *Brady Bunch*, to *Modern Family*

While using the term *post-family* would be going too far, “post-familialism” is an accurate description of today’s reality to which the church must adapt.³ Even the need to have a family in the sense of settling down and having children is something undergoing transformation.

Just consider the evolution of the sitcoms or situational comedies that have portrayed family life being broadcasted into US homes for seventy years. *Leave It to Beaver* is almost beyond generational memory now, but it captured the 1950’s ideal nuclear family structure (i.e., two parents; a man and a woman; usually two children). By the 1970s *The Brady Bunch* burst onto the scene, in some ways ahead of its time, but reflective of the newly emerging reality of remixed familial structures. Carol and Michael Brady bring their families

together with six children (three boys and three girls), a dog, and their housekeeper, Alice. While the blended family unit was somewhat of an emergent improvisation then, this is no longer the case.

In 2010, *Modern Family* was released. This family is complete with adoptions, multiple habitation, straight, gay, multicultural, and blended traditional. This is an accurate reflection of the change in familial dynamics to date. The blended family, where parents bring children together from previous relationships, and the single-parent family, have been growing steadily as the dominant family forms in the United States.

The definition, structure, and societal expectations of family have changed. *The Mission-shaped Church* report notes several shifts that translate across Western society: rises in divorce, single parents, stepfamilies, adults who decide not to have children, cohabitating couples, and single persons, all contribute to the decline of the inherited church.⁴ One practical implication for the church is the reality of visitation in these new parental arrangements, where non-custodial parents rotate weekends.

For the most part, the church continues to function, structure, and program toward the *Leave It to Beaver* days. Our systems are designed for the nuclear family model. Essentially, we have not even gone *Brady Bunch* yet, much less *Modern Family*!

3. *Religion: From Christendom to Pantheon*

While the population is growing, church attendance is declining. Furthermore, studies indicate that people report going to church more than they really do. Robert Putnam notes that careful survey comparisons reveal that parishioners “misremember” whether they attended services, overreporting attendance by as much as 50 percent.⁵

The “nones” are the fastest-growing group (those that report no religious affiliation). The perspective of those with a growing tendency of disaffiliation is interesting. Certain myths are perpetuated about this group that are not exactly accurate. A 2012 survey offers some insight. Of the 46 million unaffiliated adults, 68 percent believe in God. Thirty-seven percent self-describe as “spiritual but not religious,” and 1 in 5 reportedly pray every day (21 percent).⁶ They are not anti-Jesus, just anti-church.

Perhaps we are seeing the emergence of a new nonconformist movement. People are open and even hungry for spiritual meaning, but the common assumption is that it cannot be found in institutional religion. The emerging spirituality is once again “protest-ant,” protesting and pushing against the established hierarchies.

Within the living memory of some North Americans is the time of the “Blue Laws,” those restrictions designed to ban Sunday activities to promote the observance of a day

of Sabbath. The time of Blue Laws is over. The age of the new pantheon has come. The Roman pantheon syncretized worship to include the noteworthy gods from subjugated peoples. In the syncretistic new pantheonic thinking, all the gods share the same mythical space. They are equally able to meet spiritual hunger and add value to our lives. Most Christians in the United States now report that “many religions lead to eternal life.”⁷

4. *Technology*: From Morse Code to Virtual Reality

Technology is not only changing every industry, it is changing society and the meaning of community itself. Look at the history of broadcasting for instance. Morse code (the wireless telegraph) burst onto the scene in the late 1890s. Commercial radio broadcasting was emerging in the 1920s. In 1939, theater audiences were dazzled by *The Wizard of Oz* as Dorothy walked into Technicolor and realized she wasn't in Kansas anymore. Up until the 1950s most US families rallied around a radio for weekly broadcasts. By the 1960s color televisions were becoming widely available. Since that time, Americans have gathered around their televisions to get their news from the three national broadcasting networks: CBS, NBC, and ABC. New technologies have transformed all of this. Millennials, the first “digital natives,” now use social media to receive and disseminate news.

Through the various livestream features you can experience momentous events as they unfold. Televisions themselves will become obsolete. Now, experimental technologies in virtual reality are not simply providing a one-dimensional optical and aural experience, but full sensory immersion. In the 1970s the clunky personal computer was beginning to become available; today we carry around miniature supercomputers on our wrists or in our pockets.

Tech-driven, knowledge-based systems are helping eliminate extreme poverty, increase mobility, and allow mass access to decentralized education. Mobility is allowing longer commutes, pursuit of jobs, and decreased loyalty to a central space where we would live and work our entire lives. What are the implications of these technological revolutions for the church? Why would a newcomer wake up early, on their only day off, and drive to a church for a highly contextual message for a group of strangers? There is no shortage of inspiring messages available at the command of our voice; it only takes two words: "Hey, Siri." In seconds, a plethora of sermons pop up by professional, polished speakers, not contextually confined to local parishes. Consider the banquet of TED Talks alone, which can be deeply spiritual, may even be equally transformative, not as long, and with no plea for money in the end!

5. *Neighborhood: From Mister Rogers' Neighborhood to Neo's Matrix*

All these shifts contribute to this sketch. Community itself has been remixed. There has been a significant erosion of social capital and the concept of neighboring.

I was one of the millions of children impacted by the incredible life of Fred Rogers. From 1968, on and off to 2001, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was a steady force for positively shaping the development of children. Live on public television, Fred Rodgers subversively taught generations about the importance of learning, the values of neighborly kindness, and compassion.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood is no more—neither the show nor the potentiality it envisioned. We have moved from Fred Rogers' neighborhood into the fictional computer hacker character Neo's *Matrix*.

The *Matrix* films are prophetic in the sense that the kind of fictional community we see there is becoming reality. Beside the urbanization and clustered-but-isolated living arrangements of Neo's pre-red-pill world, the films also capture the sense of people living in two worlds, both the actual and the digital. One is about creating avatars and escaping into a virtual realm, the other is the random daily encounters that happen between the screens we now live our lives on. Television screens, phone screens, work computer screens, dashboard screens, and so on.

In this new matrix of networks, the makeup of neighborhoods themselves are undergoing a major remix. New smaller households are growing faster than the population, due to the familial shifts described earlier. As the population grows, urbanization and the increasing lack of space is creating smaller self-contained, dormitory-like structures. In the network scenario, *neighborhoods* become secondary to *flows* of communication, information, and mobility, enabled by technology. People gather across geographic boundaries around shared *practices* that predominately take place in neutral *third places*. This shift was captured in *The Mission-shaped Church* report, "The Western world, at the start of the third millennium, is best described as a 'network society.' This is a fundamental change: 'the emergence of a new social order.'"⁸

Here we can lean into the pioneering work of sociologist Manuel Castells, who describes this new societal order in depth. Within this post-industrial, knowledge-based era now described as the Information age, technology has made the world smaller. 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. Castells posits 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 micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies.⁹

The emerging societal structure is constructed around technologically enabled flows of capital, information, organizational interaction, images, sounds, and symbols. The *flows* refer to the means of social organization, the expression of processes dominating our economic, political, and symbolic life.¹⁰ Thus, in a network society, culture is now mobile, moving along a complex web of interconnected networks; flows are about the movement of people, objects, and things from one node to another in social space. Cultures consist of bundles of dynamic practices, connected across space and time through structured flows of information and media. *Practices* are simply the activities carried out or performed by a group of people habitually or regularly in these social spaces. Flows are the means through which these movements and connections occur.¹¹

The church is seemingly still stuck in the Fred Rogers' neighborhood model, while existing in a *Matrix* world of networks connected by flows.

6. *Church: From Constantine, to North American Imperial Cult, Back to Caves*

The final shift is within the church itself. The dominant North American version of church goes back to

Emperor Constantine in AD 313 when Christianity became the state religion. Up until then, Christians were a rogue—and periodically illegal—religious movement that experienced several rounds of imperial persecution. At times, the primitive church met in secret spaces, subversively scratching the fish symbol (*Ichthys*) on cave walls to identify meeting places. This small renegade movement, with little resources, no buildings, no professional clergy, and no committee meetings, between the time of Jesus' death on the cross in the 30s and Constantine in the 300s, grew numerically across vast geographical distances. They became a force to be reckoned with.

The blending of religion and state power had both positive and negative effects. Not being arrested, punished, or having your property confiscated was certainly a plus. The days of meeting secretly in caves and catacombs was largely over. Yet, adversely, vast church building projects were launched of unparalleled grandeur. No longer a minority, many good citizens became Christian. This created a need for professional full-time priests to care for the growing masses. This is the attractational model: *build it and they will come*.

The United States has operated in the Christendom assumption that we are a Christian nation and that the church enjoys a central role in Western culture. Protestant denominations adopted the organizational structure of the

twentieth-century corporation and benefited greatly for a season. However, emerging generations are not buying this amalgamation of Christ and empire.

We have built it, and they have not come. More Americans now hold a secular worldview than a Christian one. The Christendom model as we know it, our dominant Western version of the faith, is disintegrating.

Picnic Talk

Reminder—Creating a Habitat of Listening

Scripture Focus: Read Judges 2:10

1. Discuss what impressions you have from reading Judges 2:10. Do you see a parallel with the North American context?
2. Why do you think emerging generations are resistant to the church? Did the generational breakdown start in the home, the church, or both?
3. Has the church done a good job producing disciples of Jesus Christ? Why or why not?
4. Do you find the language of different ecosystems helpful in understanding how the North American landscape has changed? In what ways would you describe our current mission field as a desert?

5. Do you see these six shifts contributing to the decline of Christianity? If so, how have you seen them influencing your church? In what ways?
6. Do your children and/or grandchildren attend church regularly? Why or why not?