

THE FORGOTTEN WAYS

+reactivating the missional church

ALAN HIRSCH



BrazosPress
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2006 by Alan Hirsch

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Published in Australia and New Zealand by Strand Publishing, P.O. Box 5067, Erina Fair NSW
2250, Australia

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Unless otherwise marked, scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hirsch, Alan, 1959-

The forgotten ways : reactivating the missional church / Alan Hirsch.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 10: 1-58743-164-5 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-1-58743-164-7 (pbk.)

1. Church. 2. Missions. 3. Postmodernism-Religious aspects-Christianity. I. Title.

BV600.3.H57 2006

266-dc22

2006015904

introduction

A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling. . . . [We must] play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, and live by improvisation and experiment.

Hans Küng, *The Church as the People of God*

After a time of decay comes the turning point. The powerful light that has been banished returns. There is movement, but it is not brought about by force. . . . The movement is natural, arising spontaneously. The old is discarded and the new is introduced. Both measures accord with the time; therefore no harm results.

Ancient Chinese Saying

Imagine there was a power that lies hidden at the very heart of God's people. Suppose this power was built into the initiating "stem cell" of the church by the Holy Spirit but was somehow buried and lost through centuries of neglect and disuse. Imagine that if rediscovered, this hidden power could unleash remarkable energies that could propel Christianity well into the twenty-second century—a missional equivalent to unlocking the power of the atom. Is this not something that we who love God, his people, and his cause would give just about anything to recover? I now believe that the idea of latent inbuilt missional potencies is not a mere fantasy; in fact there are primal forces that lie latent in every Jesus community and in every true believer. Not only does such a thing exist, but it is a clearly identifiable phenomenon that has energized history's most outstanding Jesus movements, perhaps the *most* remarkable expression of which is very much with us today. This extraordinary power is being recovered in certain expressions

of Western Christianity, but not without significant challenge to, and resistance from, the current way in which we do things.

The fact that you have started reading this book will mean not only that you are interested in the search for a more authentic expression of *ecclesia* (the NT word for *church*), but you are in some sense aware of the dramatic changes in worldview that have been taking place in general culture over the last fifty years or so. Whatever one may call it, this shift from the modern to the postmodern, or from solid modernity to liquid modernity, has generally been difficult for the church to accept. We find ourselves lost in a perplexing global jungle where our well-used cultural and theological maps don't seem to work anymore. It seems as if we have woken up to find ourselves in contact with a strange and unexpected reality that seems to defy our usual ways of dealing with issues of the church and its mission. All this amounts to a kind of ecclesial future shock, where we are left wandering in a world we can't recognize anymore. In the struggle to grasp our new reality, churches and church leaders have become painfully aware that our inherited concepts, our language, and indeed our whole way of thinking are inadequate to describe what is going on both in and around us. The problems raised in such a situation are not merely intellectual but together amount to an intense spiritual, emotional, and existential crisis.

The truth is that the twenty-first century is turning out to be a highly complex phenomenon where terrorism, paradigmatic technological innovation, an unsustainable environment, rampant consumerism, discontinuous change, and perilous ideologies confront us at every point. In the face of this, even the most confident among us would have to admit, in our more honest moments, that the church as we know it faces a very significant adaptive challenge. The overwhelming majority of church leaders today report that they feel it is getting much harder for their communities to negotiate the increasing complexities in which they find themselves. As a result, the church is on massive, long-trended decline in the West. In this situation, we have to ask ourselves probing questions: "Will more of the same do the trick? Do we have the inherited resources to deal with this situation? Can we simply rework the tried and true Christendom understanding of church that we so love and understand, and finally, in an ultimate tweak of the system, come up with the winning formula?"¹

I have to confess that I do not think that the inherited formulas will work anymore. And what is more, I know I am not alone in this view. There is a massive roaming of the mind going on in our day as the search for alternatives heats up. However, most of the new thinking as it relates to the future of Christianity in the West only highlights our dilemma and

1. For a definition of Christendom, see the glossary. The nature, history, and structure of Christendom are more fully explored in chapter 2.

generally proposes solutions that are little more than revisions of past approaches and techniques. Even much of the thinking about the so-called emerging church leaves the prevailing assumptions of church and mission intact and simply focuses on the issue of theology and spirituality in a postmodern setting. This amounts to a reworking of the theological “software” while ignoring the “hardware” as well as “operating system” of the church. In my opinion, this will not be enough to get us through. As we anxiously gaze into the future and delve back into our history and traditions to retrieve missiological tools from the Christendom toolbox, many of us are left with the sinking feeling that this is simply not going to work. The tools and techniques that fitted previous eras of Western history simply don’t seem to work any longer. What we need now is a new set of tools. A new “paradigm”—a new vision of reality: a fundamental change in our thoughts, perceptions, and values, especially as they relate to our view of the church and mission.

And it’s not that reaching into our past is not part of the solution. It is. The issue is simply that we generally don’t go back far enough; or rather, that we don’t delve *deep* enough for our answers. Every now and again we do get glimpses of an answer, but because of the radical and disturbing nature of the remedy we retreat to the safety of the familiar and the controllable. The *real* answers, if we have the courage to search for and apply them, are usually more radical than we are normally given to think, and because of this they undermine our sense of place in the world, with its status quo—not something that the Western church has generally been too comfortable with. But we are now living in a time when only a solution that goes to the very roots of what it means to be Jesus’s people will do.

The conditions facing us in the twenty-first century not only pose a threat to our existence but also present us with an extraordinary opportunity to discover ourselves in a way that orients us to this complex challenge in ways that are resonant with an ancient energy. This energy not only links us with the powerful impulses of the original church, but also gives us wings with which to fly. The book in your hands now is one that could be labeled under the somewhat technical, and seemingly boring, category of *missional ecclesiology*, because it explores the nature of the Christian movements, and therefore the church as it is shaped by Jesus and his mission. But don’t be fooled by the drab terminology—*missional ecclesiology* is dynamite. Mainly because the church (the *ecclesia*), when true to its real calling, when it is on about what God is on about, is by far and away the most potent force for transformational change the world has ever seen. It has been that before, is that now, and will be that again. This book is written in the hope that the church in the West can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, arouse and reengage that amazing power that lies within us.

A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with a Single Question

About four years ago I attended a seminar on missional church where the speaker asked a question. “How many Christians do you think there were in the year AD 100?” He then asked, “How many Christians do you think there were just before Constantine came on the scene, say, AD 310?”² Here is the somewhat surprising answer.

AD 100 as few as 25,000 Christians

AD 310 up to 20,000,000 Christians

He then asked the question that has haunted me to this day: “How did they do this? How did they grow from being a small movement to the most significant religious force in the Roman Empire in two centuries?” Now *that’s* a question to initiate a journey! And delving into this question drove me to the discovery of what I will call Apostolic Genius (the built-in life force and guiding mechanism of God’s people) and the living components or elements that make it up.³ These components I have tagged missional DNA, or mDNA, for short.

So let me ask *you* the question—how *did* the early Christians do it? And before you respond, here are some qualifications you must factor into your answer.

- *They were an illegal religion throughout this period.* At best, they were tolerated; at the very worst they were very severely persecuted.
- *They didn’t have any church buildings as we know them.* While archaeologists have discovered chapels dating from this period, they were definitely exceptions to the rule, and they tended to be very small converted houses.
- *They didn’t even have the scriptures as we know them.* They were putting the canon together during this period.
- *They didn’t have an institution or the professional form of leadership normally associated with it.* At times of relative calm, prototypical elements of institution did appear, but by what we consider institutional, these were at best pre-institutional.

2. Rodney Stark is considered to be the authority on these issues, and in his book called *The Rise of Christianity* he suggests an array of possible answers ranging from conservative to broad estimates. I have tried to average these estimates (according to Stark between 40 and 50 percent, exponentially per decade) and compare this with other sources. These are my findings. See R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins: 1996), 6–13.

3. See glossary.

- *They didn't have seeker-sensitive services, youth groups, worship bands, seminaries, commentaries, etc.*
- *They actually made it hard to join the church.* By the late second century, aspiring converts had to undergo a significant initiation period to prove they were worthy.

In fact they had none of the things we would ordinarily employ to solve the problems of the church, and yet they grew from 25,000 to 20 million in 200 years! *So, how did the early church do it?* In answering that question, we can perhaps find the answer to the question for the church and mission in our day and in our context. For herein lies the powerful mystery of church in its most authentic form.

But before the example of the early Christian movement can be dismissed as a freak of history, there is another, perhaps even more astounding manifestation of Apostolic Genius, that unique and explosive power inherent in all of God's people, in our own time—namely, the underground church in China. Theirs is a truly remarkable story: About the time when Mao Tse-tung took power and initiated the systemic purge of religion from society, the church in China, which was well established and largely modeled on Western forms due to colonization, was estimated to number about 2 million adherents. As part of this systematic persecution, Mao banished all foreign missionaries and ministers, nationalized all church property, killed all the senior leaders, either killed or imprisoned all second- and third-level leaders, banned all public meetings of Christians with the threat of death or torture, and then proceeded to perpetrate one of the cruelest persecutions of Christians on historical record.

The explicit aim of the Cultural Revolution was to obliterate Christianity (and all religion) from China. At the end of the reign of Mao and his system in the late seventies, and the subsequent lifting of the so-called Bamboo Curtain in the early eighties, foreign missionaries and church officials were allowed back into the country, albeit under strict supervision. They expected to find the church decimated and the disciples a weak and battered people. On the contrary, they discovered that Christianity had flourished beyond all imagination. The estimates *then* were about 60 million Christians in China, and counting! And it has grown significantly since then. David Aikman, former Beijing bureau chief for *Time* magazine, suggests in his book *Jesus in Beijing* that Christians may number as many as 80 million.⁴ If anything, in the Chinese phenomenon we are witnessing the most significant transformational Christian movement in the history of the church. And remember, not unlike the early church, these people had very few Bibles (at times they shared only one page to a house church and then swapped that page with

4. Philip Yancey, "Discreet and Dynamic: Why, with No Apparent Resources, Chinese Churches Thrive," *Christianity Today*, July 2004, 72.

another house group). They had no professional clergy, no official leadership structures, no central organization, no mass meetings, and yet they grew like mad. How is this possible? How did they do it?⁵

But we can observe similar growth patterns in other historical movements. Steve Addison notes that by the end of John Wesley's lifetime one in thirty English men and women had become Methodists.⁶ In 1776 fewer than 2 percent of Americans were Methodists. By 1850, the movement claimed the allegiance of 34 percent of the population. How did they do it? The twentieth century saw the rise of Pentecostalism as one of the most rapidly growing missionary movements in the history of the church. The movement has grown from humble beginnings in the early 1900s to 400 million by the end of the twentieth century. It is estimated that by 2050 Pentecostalism will have one billion adherents worldwide.⁷ How did they do it?

These are dangerous stories, because they subvert us into a journey that will call us to a more radical expression of Christianity than the one we currently experience. It is the central task of this book to try and give a name to these phenomena and to try to identify the elements that constitute it. The phenomenon present in these dangerous stories I call Apostolic Genius, and the elements that make it up I have named mDNA; I will define these more fully later. The object of this book is to explore Apostolic Genius and to try to interpret it for our own missional context and situation in the West. These two key examples (the early church and the Chinese church) have been chosen not only because they are truly remarkable movements, but also because one is ancient and the other contemporary, so we can observe Apostolic Genius in two radically different contexts. I have also chosen them because both movements faced significant threats to their survival; in both cases this took the form of systematic persecution. This is significant because, as will be explained later, the church in the West faces its own form of adaptive challenge as we negotiate the complexities of the twenty-first century—one that threatens our very survival.

Persecution drove both the early Christian movement and the Chinese church to discover their truest nature as an apostolic people. Persecution forced them away from any possible reliance on any form of centralized religious institution and caused them to live closer to, and more consistently

5. Another remarkable movement, one that changed the destiny of Europe and beyond, was the Celtic movement. While it is outside the scope of this book to explore the nature of the Irish mission to the West, there are many similarities to that of the early church and of the Chinese church.

6. Stephen Addison, "Movement Dynamics, Keys to the Expansion and Renewal of the Church in Mission," unpublished manuscript, 2003, 5.

7. Grant McClung, "Pentecostals: The Sequel" in *Christianity Today*, April 2006 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/004/7.30.html>); see also, Walter J. Hollenwager, "From Azusa Street to the Toronto Phenomena: Historical Roots of the Pentecostal Movement, Concilium 3, ed. Jürgen Moltmann and Karl-Josef Kuschel (London: SCM, 1996): 3, quoted in Veli-Matti Karkkainen, "Pentecostal Missiology in Ecumenical Perspective: Contributions, Challenges, Controversies" in *International Review of Mission* (88), July 1999, 207.

with, their primal message, namely the gospel. We have to assume that if one is willing to die for being a follower of Jesus, then in all likelihood that person is a real believer. This persecution, under the sovereignty of God, acted as a means to keep these movements true to their faith and reliant on God—it purified them from the dross and any unnecessary churchly paraphernalia. It was by *being true* to the gospel that they unleashed the power of Apostolic Genius. And this is a huge lesson for us: as we face our own challenges, we will need to be sure about our faith and in whom it is we trust, or else risk the eventual demise of Christianity as a religious force in Western history—witness Europe in the last hundred years.

In pursuit of the answer to *that question*, the question of how these phenomenal Jesus movements actually did it, I have become convinced that the power that manifested itself in the dangerous stories of these two remarkable movements is available to us as well. And the awakening of that dormant potential has something to do with the strange mixture of the passionate love of God, prayer, and incarnational practice. Add to this mix the following: appropriate modes of leadership (as expressed in Ephesians 4), the recovery of radical discipleship, relevant forms of organization and structures, and the appropriate conditions for these to be able to catalyze. When these factors come together, the situation is ripe for something remarkable to take place.

To perhaps nail down this rather elusive concept of dormant (or latent) potentials, recall the story of *The Wizard of Oz*. The central character in this well-loved movie is Dorothy, who was transported in a big tornado from Kansas to the magical Land of Oz. Wanting to return home, she gets guidance from Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, who advises her to walk to the Emerald City and there consult the Wizard. On the yellow brick road she acquires three companions: the Scarecrow, who hopes the Wizard will be able to give him some brains; the Tin Woodsman, who wants the Wizard to give him a heart; and the Cowardly Lion, who hopes to acquire some courage. After surviving some dangerous encounters with the Wicked Witch of the West and numerous other nasty creatures, they eventually make it to see the Wizard, only to find out he is a hoax. They leave the Emerald City brokenhearted. But the Wicked Witch, perceiving the magic in Dorothy's ruby slippers, won't leave them alone. After a final encounter with the Wicked Witch and her minions, they overcome the source of evil and thereby liberate Oz. But through all their ordeals and in their final victory they discover that in fact they already have what they were looking for—in fact they had it all along. The Scarecrow is very clever, the Tinman has real heart, and the Lion turns out to be very brave and courageous after all. They didn't need the Wizard after all; what they needed was a situation that forced them to discover (or to activate) that which was already in them. They had what they were all looking for, only they didn't realize it. To cap it off, Dorothy had her answer to her wish all along; she had the capacity to return home

to Kansas all along . . . in her ruby slippers. By clicking them together three times, she is transported back to her home in Kansas.

This story highlights the central assumption in this book and gives a hint to why it has been called *The Forgotten Ways*: namely, that all God's people carry within themselves the same potencies that energized the early Christian movement and that are currently manifest in the underground Chinese church. Apostolic Genius (the primal missional potencies of the gospel and of God's people) lies dormant in you, me, and every local church that seeks to follow Jesus faithfully in any time. We have quite simply forgotten how to access and trigger it. This book is written to help us identify its constituent elements and to help us to (re)activate it so that we might once again truly be a truly transformative Jesus movement in the West.

A Sneak Preview

There is a glossary of terms at the back of the book to assist the reader with definitions and technical terms that are found throughout. There is also an addendum (appropriately called "A Crash Course in Chaos"), which, although not essential in the flow of the text, nonetheless incorporates material that informs much of the present work. We can learn an astonishing amount about life, living systems, adaptation, and organizations from the study of nature and organic systems, and therefore I strongly suggest the reader tussle with it. But put on your helmets . . . it is a crash course, after all.

As will become clear throughout this book, I am committed to the idea of translating best practices in mission developed over the last century in the two-thirds world into that of the first world. This has aptly been called *missions-to-the-first-world* approach, and you will find that I am an ardent believer. Although this book is primarily about the mission of the whole people of God, mission is not limited to the corporate mission of the local church or denomination. Mission must take place in and through every aspect of life. And this is done by all Christians everywhere. Both forms of mission—the apostolic mission of the community—as well as the individual expression of mission by God's people must be activated if we are to become a truly missional church.

I have long been a student of the nature of movements both social and religious. I have tried to learn what exactly it is that makes movements tick, and what makes them so effective in the spreading of their message (as opposed to the more static institution). It is by recovering a genuine movement ethos that we can restore something of the dynamism of significant Jesus movements in history.⁸ The reader will discern this fascination with movements all the way through the book.

8. I will use the term Jesus movements in a way that approximates what David Garrison calls church planting movements. He defines these as "a rapid mobilization of indigenous

Another feature of this work is the consistent critique of religious institutionalism. Because this could be unsettling to some, a word of clarification is needed to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings later on. I am critical of institutionalism not because I think it is a bad idea, but only because through my study of the phenomenal Jesus movements I have come to the unnerving conclusion that God's people are more potent by far when they have little of what we would recognize as church institution in their life together. For clarity, therefore, there needs to be a clear distinction between necessary organizational structure and institutionalism. As we shall see, structures *are* absolutely necessary for cooperative human action as well as for maintaining some form of coherent social patterns. However, it seems that over time the increasingly impersonal structures of the institution assume roles, responsibilities, and authority that legitimately belong to the whole people of God in their local and grassroots expressions. It is at this point that things tend to go awry.⁹

The material itself is structured in two sections.

Section 1

Section 1 sets the scene by referring to my own narrative to assist the reader in tracking some of the seminal ideas and experiences that have guided my thinking and fired my imagination. By narrating some of central themes in my own story, I hope to take the reader through what can be called a missional reading of the situation of the church in the West. This will be spread out over the first two chapters: Chapter 1 looks at the issue from the perspective of a local practitioner trying to guide a complex, inner-city church planting movement through the massive changes that were going on around about us. Chapter 2 explores the missional situation **in which we find ourselves** from the perspective of a strategic and translocal level. These two perspectives, one macro and one micro, are vital in coming to grips with the concepts of a missional-incarnational church.

churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population." See David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake, 2004), 21

9. We can observe from history that through the consolidation and centralization of power, institutions begin to claim an authority that they were not originally given and have no theological right to claim. It is at this point that the structures of *ecclesia* become somewhat politicized and therefore repressive of any activities that threaten the status quo inherent in it. This is institutionalism and historically it has almost always meant the effective expulsion of its more creative and disparate elements (e.g., Wesley and Booth). This is not to say that there does not appear to be some divine order (structure) given to the church. But it is to say that this order is almost always legitimized directly through the community's corporate affirmation of calling, personal character, charismatic empowerment, and spiritual authority. It always remains personal and never moves purely to the institutional. Our role model need be none less than our Founder. It seems that only he can wield significant power without eventually misusing it.

Section 2

Here is where the rubber hits the road. *This* is the heart of the book as it attempts to describe Apostolic Genius and the constituent elements of mDNA that make it blaze up.¹⁰ Those who are impatient, time-restricted, or who feel they do not need to undertake a missional reading of this situation of the church in our current context can jump to this section because the real substance of the book is found in section two anyway. However, I believe that the reader will be amply rewarded by reading chapters one and two, so I strongly encourage it. Einstein said that when the solution is simple, God is speaking. Following this advice, I have tried to discern quintessential elements that combine to create Apostolic Genius and to simplify them to the absolutely irreducible components. There are six simple but interrelating elements of mDNA, forming a complex and living structure.¹¹ These present us with a powerful paradigm grid with which we will be able to assess our current understandings and experiences of church and mission. They are:

- **Jesus Is Lord:** At the center and circumference of every significant Jesus movement there exists a very simple confession. Simple, but one that fully vibrates with the primal energies of the scriptural faith, namely, that of the claim of the One God over every aspect of every life, and the response of his people to that claim (Deut. 6:4–6ff.). The way that this was expressed in the New Testament and later movements was simply “Jesus Is Lord!” With this simple confession they changed the world.¹²
- **Disciple Making:** Essentially, this involves the irreplaceable and life-long task of becoming like Jesus by embodying his message. This is perhaps where many of our efforts fail. Disciple making is an irreplaceable core task of the church and needs to be structured into every church’s basic formula (chapter 4).

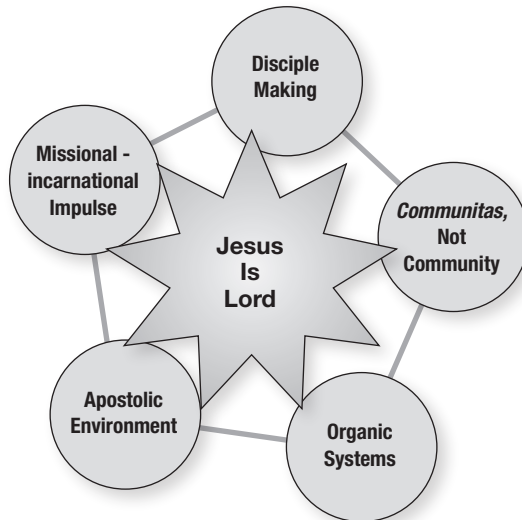
10. When we get to assessing the presence of Apostolic Genius in our own churches, I will introduce the idea of *missional fitness* or *missional agility*. I am currently trying to produce an online research tool that will help churches assess this for their own contexts. See the website www.theforgottenways.org for details.

11. The reader might be able to add more elements in a particular case of phenomenal movements, but I believe that this might not be common in other cases of similar phenomenal movements—hence, the idea of irreducibility and simplicity.

12. Chapter 3 deals with the spiritual center of all manifestations of Apostolic Genius. In trying to identify the essential theological and spiritual energies that motivate parabolic movements, it would be very easy to slip into theological reductionism. But as far as these remarkable Jesus movements go, there is a definite central core around which mDNA coalesces, and so it must be named. But in order to distill the core, explicit motifs in Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom of God, the doctrine of the Incarnation, what has been called the *missio Dei* (the mission of God), and the church’s response to these actions of God have been left out. However, these key themes are embedded in various sections throughout the book. I hope the reader will understand and forgive me for not addressing these more directly.

- **Missional-Incarnational Impulse:** Chapter 5 explores the twin impulses of remarkable missional movements, namely, the dynamic outward thrust and the related deepening impulse, which together *seed* and *embed* the gospel into different cultures and people groups.
- **Apostolic Environment:** Chapter 6 looks at another element of authentic mDNA—apostolic influence and the fertile environment that this creates in initiating and maintaining the phenomenal movements of God. This will relate to the type of leadership and ministry required to sustain metabolic growth and impact.
- **Organic Systems:** Chapter 7 explores the next element in mDNA, the idea of appropriate structures for metabolic growth. Phenomenal Jesus movements grow precisely because they do not have centralized institutions to block growth through control. Here we will find that remarkable Jesus movements have the feel of a movement, have structure as a network, and spread like viruses.
- **Communitas, Not Community:** The most vigorous forms of community are those that come together in the context of a shared ordeal or those that define themselves as a group with a mission that lies beyond themselves—thus initiating a risky journey. Too much concern with safety and security, combined with comfort and convenience, has lulled us out of our true calling and purpose. We all love an adventure. Or do we? This chapter aims at putting the adventure back into the venture.

And so the structure of Apostolic Genius will look something like this:



The Structure of Apostolic Genius

Method in the Madness

As indicated above, the task in this book is to try to identify the irreducible elements that constitute Apostolic Genius. And to do this I will be using both the early church and the twentieth-century Chinese church as my primary test cases.¹³ Having discerned what appear to be distinctive patterns, I then tried to test the validity of my observations on other significant movements in the history of the church, and as far as my own expertise will allow, I have found them thoroughly consistent.

Furthermore, this book is written not from the perspective of an academic but rather from the perspective of a missionary and a strategist trying to help the church formulate a missional paradigm that can take us through the complexities of the twenty-first-century world in which we are called to be faithful. It is therefore painted in broad strokes and not in fine detail; this is consistent with my own personality and approach to issues, but it also ensures that we do get *precisely* the big picture. We are in need of a new paradigm, not a mere reworking of the existing one. It is therefore the whole that counts and not just the individual parts.

The book is therefore more prescriptive than it is merely descriptive. I have written largely with the missional practitioner in mind. This book would appeal most to those who are leading existing churches, to those who are initiating new forms of sustainable Christian community for the twenty-first century (what I will call the emerging missional church), and to those who are involved on the strategic level of ministry, namely that of leading movements, parachurches, and denominations.

Suffice to say here that in exploring these ideas I feel that I am peering into things that are very deep, things that, if recovered and applied, could have considerable ramifications for Western Christianity. I say this as someone who is not claiming something as my own. If anything, like all who receive a grace from God, I feel that I am the humble recipient of a revelation, an unearthing of something primal, in which I am privileged to participate. This book is a stumbling attempt to articulate that ever elusive revelation of the nature of Apostolic Genius—something that belongs to the gospel itself and therefore to the whole people who live by it. Albert Einstein said that when he was peering into the mysteries of the atom he felt he was peering over God's shoulder into things remarkable and wonderful. I must admit to feeling the same sense of awe as I look into these things.

13. I will refer to these variously as "apostolic movements," "phenomenal movements," or "Jesus movements," throughout this book.



setting the scene, part 1

+Confessions of a Frustrated Missionary

If you want to build a ship, don't summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs, and organize the work, rather teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

A great deal more failure is the result of an excess of caution than of bold experimentation with new ideas. The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.

J. Oswald Sanders

In true biblical fashion, a reliable understanding of the nature of things comes out of a narrative—a *story* involving God's dealings with human beings in the rough and tumble of actual human history, including that of our own stories. A good friend of mine once said to me that our stories are vital because they are perhaps the only thing we can say with absolute authority—precisely because they are *our* stories. In setting out to explore the ideas of what makes up authentic missional DNA, I need to place this search in the context of my own story, because it is out of my own personal struggle in mission, and in ongoing efforts to lead the church into a genuine

missional engagement, that I have come to the conclusions that I present in this book. I *can* speak authoritatively from my own story. All I ask you as the reader is to see if it can inform yours.

So if the reader will indulge me, I will tell you my story; it is a story brim-full with redemption. A story about God actively involved in the chaos of the people, communities, and organizations among whom I have had the privilege to minister for the last fifteen years. This account is not incidental to the ideas of this book, just as biblical narrative is not incidental to the ideas that underlie biblical truth but are its context and give it its historical meaning.

“South”

Possibly my most formative experience of ministry was my involvement in a remarkable inner-city church called South Melbourne Restoration Community (SMRC), of which I was privileged to serve as leader for about fifteen years. It’s a little difficult to speak for much of the 140-year history of this church, because I was only an addition that came much later on—1989, to be exact. But for the purposes of this book, the important thing to note was that this church, originally called South Melbourne Church of Christ, had gone through the now familiar pattern of birth (in the late nineteenth century), growth (in the early part of the twentieth), and the rapid decline that has marked so many churches in the postwar period throughout the Western world. When my wife, Deb, and I were called there as rookie ministers in 1989, we were the last-ditch effort to turn it around. If we weren’t successful, the church had decided to call it quits and close up shop. Because of the situation of relative desperation, this church was willing to become a place out of which a whole new community was to develop. And it is *this* story with which I most identify.

This particular story of redemption starts with a somewhat zany, wild-eyed Greek guy called George. George was a drug dealer and a “roadie” (a sound technician for bands), among other things. He had accumulated a number of parking fines that he was not disposed to pay. According to state law at the time, a person could “do time” in lieu of paying fines, and so George decided that this would be preferable from parting with his hard-earned drug dollars. He chose to go to jail for ten days rather than pay the fine. Now, George was a bit of a seeker (some called him a “tripper”), and he loved to philosophize about the nature of things. At the time he was exploring a wide variety of religious ideologies. At the time of his imprisonment, he had worked his way through a long list of religions, and it was time to come to grips with the Bible. And so he took his mom’s big fat Greek family Bible with him to the jail. To his great surprise, while paging through it he

encountered God (or rather God encountered him), and he found new life in Jesus right there in the prison cell.

On release, he hooked up with his brother John, an equally mad radical, and he too gave his life to Christ and became a follower. With characteristic zeal the two of them soon developed a list of all their friends, contacts, and people they sold drugs to and, armed with a big, black KJV Bible and a *Late Great Planet Earth* video (which they used more effectively than the Bible),¹ they met with all the people on their list. Within six months about fifty people had given their lives to the Lord! One of them was later to become my remarkable wife, Debra, and another was her sister Sharon. They were coming down from an LSD trip when they were exposed to the video and decided for Jesus. How could you not, watching *that* movie on acid?

It was an amazing thing, and I mention it here because it says so much about how God works at the fringes of society, in this case through the radical obedience of two slightly wacky Greek brothers called George and John. It was as if through George and John, God had scooped a people to himself from Melbourne's netherworld. In the group were gays, lesbians, Goths, drug addicts, prostitutes, and some relatively ordinary people, although all were rabid party animals. This untamed group of people, following their latent spiritual instincts, immediately began to cluster in houses and build a common life together. It was at this time, about six months after George's radical conversion, that I came into the picture. Although I had come from a similar background, I was then a first-year seminary student looking for something radical to do. Through a series of events, and much to my surprise, I was called to lead this crazy group. On reflection, this connection with the group was to become a defining motif in my life, and in my journey to becoming a missional leader.

That community rocked. And because the community would take in just about anyone who wanted a bed, the main house—thought to be previously used as a brothel—was crammed full of some really strange people. At times there were drug deals going on in the back rooms and Bible studies in the lounge that was filled to overflowing. John and George were arrested a few times for disturbing the peace while noisily trying to cast demons out of some unwitting victim in the backyard. And if this all sounds a bit shocking, let me say that for all the significant chaos and ambiguity in it all, there was something wonderfully *apostolic* about that group of people. They seemed to have a huge impact on everyone who came into contact with them. The Holy Spirit was almost tangibly present at times. It seems at least he was very willing to be present in the chaos. That experience also introduced us

1. For those of later generations, this movie was based on Hal Lindsay's apocalyptic vision of the late twentieth century. Based on a distinct vision of the end times, it was basically a way to scare people into accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior.

all to a model of radical ministry in the form of a remarkable pastor called Pat Kavanagh. Pat, an older man that came from a very different world, was a model of redemptive love in the midst of the mess, and it is largely because of him that the community survived and was transformed.

And because this is a book about missional dynamics, it is appropriate to make a comment about a significant characteristic of Jesus movements at this point. In the study of the history of missions, one can even be formulaic about asserting that *all great missionary movements begin at the fringes of the church*, among the poor and the marginalized, and seldom, if ever, at the center. It is vital that in pursuing missional modes of church, we get out of the stifling equilibrium of the center of our movements and denominations, move to the fringes, and engage in real mission there. But there's more to it than just mission; most great movements of mission have inspired significant and related movements of renewal in the life of the church. It seems that when the church engages at the fringes, it almost always brings life to the center. This says a whole lot about God and gospel, and the church will do well to heed it.

To cut a long story short, most of this group ended up joining us at South Melbourne Church of Christ when we were called there after completion of seminary training. It is here where the two histories, and in many ways the two alternate images of church—the one institutional and declining, and the other grassroots and vigorous—come into contact. And thus begins the remarkable story of which I was so privileged to partake. What is quite remarkable is that here, latent in this spontaneous, chaotic, and unchurched group of people, lay the seeds of an agile, evolving, missional movement, long before we even knew that such concepts existed. And while it did take us a bit of time, with lots of reflective experimentation, to get there, I believe that I can say that “South” has now all the elements of, and is in the process of becoming, a genuine missional movement in the city of Melbourne, Australia.

So what I propose to do with the rest of the chapter is to try to articulate the series of adaptations that had to take place for this fledging phenomenon to become a genuine missional movement. I will embed some of the rationale for these various stages in the narrative so that the reader might be able to discern the evolution of a movement in the story of South. Three distinct stages in the life of this community can be discerned; they are as follows:

Phase 1: From Death to Chaos

This phase involved the reseeded of the established church with the new, and more missional, one. I have to say that nothing in my seminary training had prepared me for the experience of those years. Everything in

my education was geared toward maintaining the established, more institutional forms of the church. The vast majority of the subjects on offer were theoretical and were taught by theoreticians, not practitioners. So we had to learn on the run, so to speak. On reflection, perhaps this is the only way we *really* learn, but certainly at the time this was the way that God chose to somehow make a missionary out of me.

Something about context: South Melbourne is located in the shadow of the central business district of Melbourne, and like many such locations across the Western world, it has become a mixture of yuppies, older working-class folk, subcultural groupings, a large gay population, and upper-class snobs. It was a challenge, to say the least. And I am not ashamed to admit that I had no real idea of what I was doing. There was very little in the way of functional denominational strategy or successful models to refer to for mission in these contexts. So, in terms of approach, we decided that all we would do was build an authentic Jesus community where all who came our way would experience love, acceptance, and forgiveness, no matter what—we *did* know a little about grace as we had all experienced it so convincingly ourselves. On this alone, on a real promise and experience of a grace-filled community, the church grew. We attracted just about every kind of freak in the neighborhood, and soon people began to cluster in communal houses. We had no real outreach programs per se. We simply “did community” and developed a certain ethos based on grace for the broken.

As the church grew and developed, the older folk who were part of the original history of the place began to struggle with all the mess and new life in the place. But to their credit, they did recognize that the future of the church lay in the newer image of church that God was birthing in their midst. And they did not actively resist to the point of ejecting the new, something that happens all too often in similar situations. In fact, one older woman, Isobel, who stayed with us faithfully through all the changes, did attempt at times to find another local church that was less chaotic, but she always returned, saying that no place she visited had the same “life” that we did. In the end, this new adaptation of the church became the predominant one, and thus begins the next phase.

Phase 2: Becoming a *Church-Planting Church*

From very early on, God had birthed into us a sense of missional obligation to those outside of the church. Again we had no real language for this, but we somehow intuited that we were “pregnant” with other churches that would reach unreached people groups in our city. We had a particular sense of calling to those people groups that made up the *subcultural* context in which we lived, the poor and the marginalized—people groups from

which most of us had come, and people who would seldom, if ever, darken the door of the established church as we know it. Again, in doing this we were simply following the apostolic instincts that I have come to believe lie latent in the very gospel itself. In this case, these latent instincts expressed themselves in a desire to pass on the faith by creating new communities that were relevant to the subcultural context but faithful to ancient gospel.

Because of this drive to plant churches, it was at this time that we began to discern that fundamental change was going on in Western culture. It was the early nineties, and postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon was beginning to be felt at the level of popular culture—the great divide was taking place between the old modern and the new postmodern eras, resulting in the breakdown of culture into many different subcultures—what cultural theorists call microheterogenization, or simply subculturization.² So much for the grand cultural phenomena; on the ground in inner-city Melbourne, we had intuitively grasped that some form of neotribalization was taking place. There was a shift from people identifying with a large traditional grouping defined by overarching metanarratives (e.g., trade unionism, political ideology, national identities, religious groupings, etc.) to that of a myriad of smaller, emerging subcultural groups defined around anything from cultural interest to sexual preference. Looking around us from where we stood, it felt just like we were in a sort of subcultural Papua New Guinea, with its 900 language and tribal/ethnic groupings. And it quickly dawned on us that this must call into question our inherited way of engaging in the missional task. We realized that we needed to become missionaries and that the church needed to adopt a missionary stance in relation to its context. It also meant that the days of the one-size-fits-all approach to church were numbered. And so our missionary approach developed into that of targeting specific groupings in the newly tribalized urban milieu.

This phase was to last for about five years. Toward the end of this phase, we had begun to articulate something of the ideas that energized us, and we had developed something of a self-conscious “model.” We felt that we had to become a church-planting church with a regional organization. Again we had intuited that the way to engage in mission across a region required a new form of organization. At this stage I began to study the nature of movements and how they organize. And so the embryonic movement called Restoration Community Network was born, and we renamed South Melbourne Church of Christ as South Melbourne Restoration Community (SMRC). This network subsequently birthed about six church plants in about seven years, some of which have been wonderful experiences of missional church, some of

2. Much has already been made of this, and the reader can get good overviews of this phenomenon from other books dedicated to the subject. See, for instance, Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

which have been glorious failures. There was a lot of struggle and pain in the failures, and feelings of great joy in the successes, but in it all we learned that if we wanted to get missional, we had to take significant risks.

The first church plant was in St. Kilda, Melbourne's red-light district, and was called Matthew's Party. This was a "street church" focused on reaching drug addicts and prostitutes. But with the subsequent sending out of our street-culture people, the sending church (SMRC) underwent a transformation. It morphed into what was then called a "Gen-X church," with the median age between twenty-five and thirty and a somewhat fluid community of up to 400 people, mainly singles, in its orbit. SMRC was fairly unique, possibly even in world context, in that up to 40 percent of the community came from the gay and lesbian subcultures. What made this more unique was that we did not take a politically correct, pro-gay stance, theologically speaking, but graciously called all people into a lifelong following of Jesus, which for some would involve lifelong celibacy; others whose desire and will were strong pursued heterosexual relationships. We still remained committed to ministry on the fringes, only now it was to alienated young adults and gay people.

Our second church-planting project was to Jewish people. I am Jewish, and my brother became a believer not long after my conversion to the Messiah. Both being held by the conviction that the gospel was to the Jew first (Rom. 1:16; 2:9–10), we started Celebrate Messiah Australia. This has been a remarkable story in itself, with hundreds of Jewish people coming to know their Messiah—unprecedented in Australian church history, at least. This has now become an independent agency that is flourishing in its own way. The fourth experiment was to the rave/dance scene. We found it very hard to build ongoing community in such a fluid and "trippy" environment, but it was a great experiment in cross-cultural mission—and we had lots of fun trying. We then experimented with house churches in the working-class western suburbs of Melbourne, but sadly, for various reasons, they did not sustain. I will reflect on some of this when I talk about embedding mDNA. Failures can be great teachers.

The last missional experiment of this phase was for me (and I believe for the church as well) a decisive one. Over the years up to this point two critical things had taken place. First, SMRC, the "mother ship," so to speak, had settled down somewhat from the more heady days of wild and chaotic community. And second, we had become known as a "cool church," and as a result lots of middle-class Christians, who for understandable reasons were alienated from the institutional church in various ways, had made their way into the community and settled down in it. So while maintaining its "groovy" and somewhat alternative vibe, South had inadvertently become safe and more self-consciously yuppie and, as a result, had lost something of its edge. Without anyone noticing, we had lost our original call and missional heart.

At the same time, and through my involvement in translocal ministries with Forge (a transdenominational mission training agency that I lead) and my denomination, my own formation and thinking as a missionary-to-the-West had developed. I had set about to seriously critique the Christendom *mode* of church and had begun to look beyond the *attractional* model of church to that of what I would later call a *missional-incarnational* (outward thrust and deepening seeding) one.³ The missional-incarnational impulse forms one of the six elements of missional DNA that I articulate later in this book. Suffice to say at this point that I had become convinced that the inherited concept of church with its associated understanding of mission was birthed in a period when the church had ceased to operate as a missionary movement and had thereby become somewhat untrue to itself in the process. The Christendom mode of engagement, what I will later describe as *evangelistic-attractional*, was simply not up to the type of missionary challenge presented to us by our surrounding context: a context that required more of a cross-cultural missionary methodology than the “outreach and in-drag” model we had been using to that point.

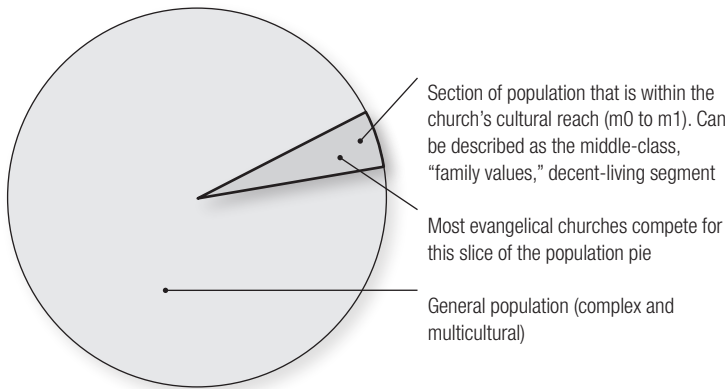
And here I simply must insert some of our rationale by giving you something of a missional analysis. To illustrate, below you will see a pie chart that seeks to indicate the prevailing contemporary, evangelical-charismatic church’s *appeal* to our general population in Australia. Based on my reading of significant research from all across the post-Christian West, I discovered that when surveyed, the average non-Christian population generally reported a high interest in God, spirituality, Jesus, and prayer that, taken together, indicated that a significant search for meaning was going on in our time. But the same surveys indicated that when asked what they thought about the church, the average non-Christian described a high degree of alienation. It seems that at present, most people report a “God? Yes! Church? No!” type of response. This will not be new to most readers; sensitive Christians would be aware of this response to the institutional church—but sadly not many have worked out the implications for the church in missional terms.

A combination of recent research in Australia indicates that about 10–15 percent of that population is attracted to what we can call the *contemporary church growth model*. In other words, this model has significant “market appeal” to about 12 percent of our population. The more successful forms of this model tend to be large, highly professionalized, and overwhelmingly middle-class, and express themselves culturally using contemporary, “seeker-friendly” language and middle-of-the-road music forms. They structure themselves around “family ministry” and therefore offer multigenera-

3. See my book, coauthored with Michael Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) for this concept fleshed out in a more systematic way. I will refer to missional-incarnational impulse in one of the chapters of this book.

tional services. Demographically speaking, they tend to cater largely to what might be called the “family-values segment”—good, solid, well-educated citizens who don’t abuse their kids, who pay their taxes, and who live, largely, what can be called a suburban lifestyle.

Not only is this type of church largely made up of Christian people who fit this profile, the research indicates that these churches can also be very effective in reaching *non-Christian* people fitting the same demographic description—the people within their cultural reach. That is, the church does not have to cross any *significant cultural barriers* in order to communicate the gospel meaningfully to that cultural context.⁴ This situation looks something like this:



“The votes are also in about how much Americans love church.” Sally Morgenthaler reports the following statistics for the American scene. She says

Despite what we print in our own press releases, the numbers don’t look good. According to 2003 actual attendance counts, adult church-going is at 18 percent nationally and dropping. Evangelical attendance (again, actual seat-numbers, not telephone responses) accounts for 9% of the population, down from 9.2% in 1990. Mainline attendance accounts for 3.4% of the national population, down from 3.9% the previous decade. And Catholics are down a full percentage point in the same ten-year period: 6.2% from 7.2% in 1990. Of the 3,098 counties in the United States, 2,303 declined in church attendance.⁵

4. See glossary for a definition of “cultural distance.” We will also explore it further in the next chapter

5. Sally Morgenthaler, “Windows in Caves and Other Things We Do with Perfectly Good Prisms,” *Fuller Theological Seminary Theology News and Notes* (Spring 2005). Can be downloaded at <http://www.easumbandy.com/resources/index.php?action=details&record=1386>.

To intensify the problem we face in the new missional context we are finding ourselves in, George Barna predicts that “by 2025 the local church [as we know it now] will lose roughly half of its current ‘market share’ and . . . alternative forms of faith experience and expression will pick up the slack.”⁶ With these statistics in mind we can intuit that in America the current “market appeal” of the contemporary church growth model *might* be up to 35 percent (as opposed to 12 percent in Australia). But even if it is at this level of appeal, it is decreasing. It’s time for a radical rethink taking into account both the strategic and the missional implications.

Strategic Issues

First, the strategic issues: the vast majority of evangelical churches, perhaps up to 95 percent, subscribe to the contemporary church growth approach in their attempts to grow the congregation, in spite of the fact that successful applications of this model remain relatively rare.⁷ This is a strategic issue for us because various recombinations of contemporary church growth theory and practice seem to be the only solution we have to draw upon to try to halt the decline of Christianity. It seems to be the only arrow in our quiver—this can’t be a good thing. Solutions based on church growth so dominate our imaginations that we can’t seem to think outside of its frameworks or break out of its assumptions about the church and its mission. And that’s tragic, because it doesn’t seem to work for most of our churches and for the majority of our populations. In fact, it has become a source of frustration and guilt, because most churches do not have the combination of factors that make for a successful application of the model.

Missional Issues

Thus, in Australia we have the somewhat farcical situation of 95 percent of evangelical churches tussling with each other to reach 12 percent of the population. And *this* becomes a significant missional problem because it raises the question, “What about the vast majority of the population (in Australia’s case, 85 percent; in the United States, about 65 percent) that

6. Press release on Barna’s new book *Revolution*, from George Barna and Associates, at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=201>.

7. For the vast majority of churches, church growth techniques have not had any significant or lasting effect in halting their decline. Of the 480,000 or so churches in America, only a *very small* portion of them can be described as *successful* seeker-sensitive churches, and most of them have fewer than eighty members. What is more, the church in America is in decline in spite of having church growth theory and techniques predominating our thinking for the last forty or so years—for all its overt success in a few remarkable cases, it has failed to halt the decline of the church in America and the rest of the Western world.

report alienation from *precisely* that form of church?" How do they access the gospel if they reject this form of church? And what would church be like for them in their various settings? Because what is clear from the research in Australia, at least, is that when surveyed about what *they* think about the contemporary church growth expression of Christianity, the 85 percent range from being blasé ("good for them, but not for me") to total repulsion ("I would never go there"). At best, we can make inroads on the blasé; we can't hope to reach the rest of the population with this model—they are simply alienated from it and don't like it for a whole host of reasons.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that if we are going to meaningfully reach this majority of people, we are not going to be able to do it by simply doing more of the same. And yet it seems that when faced with our problems of decline, we automatically reach for the latest church growth package to solve the problem—we seem to have nowhere else to go. But simply pumping up the programs, improving the music and audiovisual effects, or jiggering the ministry mix won't solve our missional crisis. Something far more fundamental is needed.

A Test Case in Proximity Space

This combination of missional experience and reflection led the leadership of South to begin experimenting with significantly more incarnational modes of mission. We decided that in the context of Melbourne, a city obsessed with food and eating out, that we ought to try and see how we can engage our culture on its own turf (missional), rather than expecting them to come to ours (attractational). What drove us to this conclusion was asking *missionary questions*, namely, "What is good news for this people group?" and "What would the church look and feel like *among* this people group?" Both these questions assume that we don't fully know the answers *until* we ask them in the active context of mission. They require that we pay attention to the existential issues confronting a people *as they experience those issues*. And that we try to shape and form of communities of faith so that they can become an organic part of the cultural social fabric of the people group we are trying to reach. For Melbourne, where every third business has to do with food, and which has more cafés per capita than any other city in the world, we concluded that the missional church must seek to redeem the social pattern/rhythm of such spaces—reinvesting it with religious significance—and express what it means to be a people of God in a café-bar context. To this end, we purchased a large working restaurant in a busy café district and established it as a "proximity space."

A proximity space is not a church; rather, it involves the creation of places and/or events where Christians and not-yet-Christians can interact meaning-

fully with each other—effectively a missional space.⁸ We called the café-bar Elevation. And for us it was a defining experience—both positively and negatively. Positively, because it was a marvelous way to do mission and relate our way into people’s lives—and it was a significant learning experience. Negatively, because we were unable to sustain it financially and had to shut it down. We started out way too big, and September 11, 2001, along with some bad management decisions, knocked us out of business. However, I still believe that if we had been able to operate sustainably with our intended purpose and values, Elevation could have become a very effective form of mission in our city. The driving desire of the project was to engage people in a meaningful dialogue around Jesus and spirituality in a meaningful and organic way. To do this we ran art classes, interactive drama groups, philosophy discussion groups, guitar workshops, CD launches, book launches and discussions, and open mic nights (where people get to share poetry and music) as well as regular music nights. These are natural ways for people to engage organically in discussions of meaning, the essence of art, spirituality, etc. These were in addition to a regular offer of a large menu of good-value meals and hospitality, which formed the economic engine room of the project.

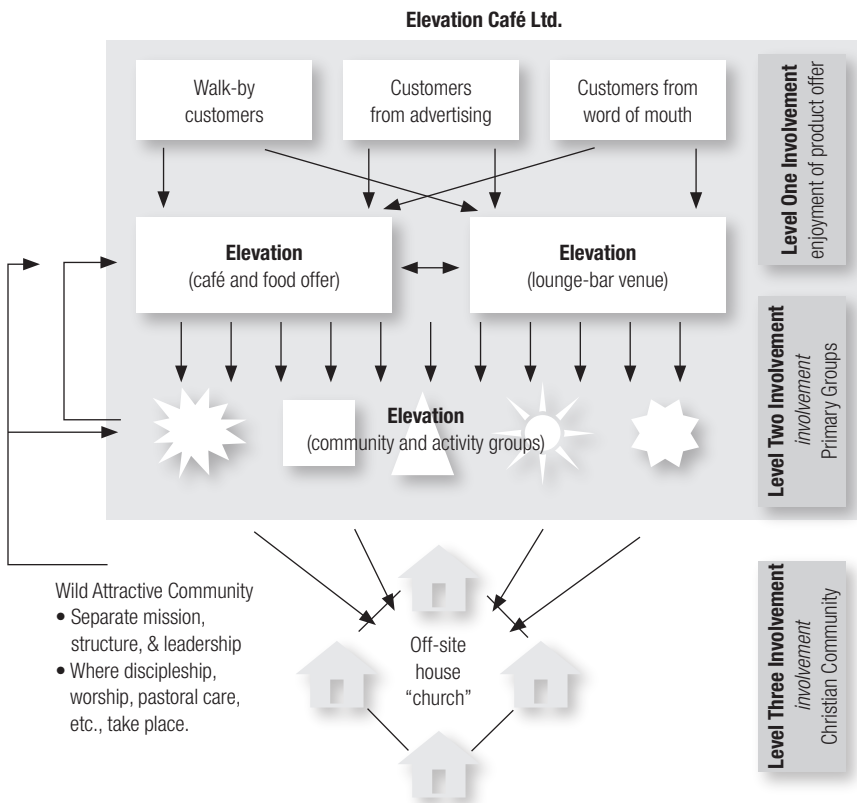
Our initial analysis estimated about 60,000 customers per annum at the café. Most of these people consumed sit-down meals and hung out in the lounge-bar. Through engaging advertising of our various interactive forums, we invited people into an organic dialogue, where we could get to know their names and at least start a relationship. It wasn’t about overt evangelism in the first instance; that, we reckoned, would come later, through meaningful relationships.

Here’s how the numbers work: of the 60,000 customers alone, half might express interest in the various forums on offer. Of those who express interest, half of these might make an effort to find out more. Of those who make an effort to find out more, only half might actually come along to a group. This means that around 4,000 people might well come to the groups, whether art, open mic, spirituality, or others. If we add those who might come for reasons other than a meal at Elevation, we would have a profitable, sustainable venue with its own vigorous cultural and spiritual life.

8. Michael and I report on such phenomena in our book: “Around the world Christians are developing cafés, nightclubs, art galleries, design studios, football teams etc., to facilitate such proximity and interaction. If the church service is the only space where we can meaningfully interact with unbelievers, we’re in trouble. In Birmingham, England, Pip Piper, the founder of a design studio called One Small Barking Dog (great name!), runs a monthly gathering in a local café, the Medicine Bar. He has negotiated permission from the publican to deck the premises out as a ‘spiritual space.’ Using incense, projected images and ambient religious music, he designs a spiritual zone he calls Maji, and artists who would normally patronize the Medicine Bar as well as invited friends can hang out, experience the ambience and talk about faith, religion, spirituality.” See *Shaping of Things to Come*, 24.



While we viewed Elevation as a proximity space, a genuine missional approach should aim at ultimately creating communities of faith around Jesus. This is how we modeled the project so that it formed faith communities.



This is presented as something of a working rationale for such approaches to mission in the hope that it will inspire others to do the same. For SMRC, it represented a new mode of missional engagement. It was the logical next step of our approach to mission in this phase of our movement. It was a definite move away from the predominantly attractational mode into which

SMRC had comfortably settled. Its failure to sustain hit us all hard, but it drove me into something of a depression as well as a highly reflective process that probed the value of our work and the spiritual condition of SRMC specifically and the church generally.

When things were going bad for us, the directors of the café made a series of special appeals to the church community to get behind the project and make every effort to come along, bring a friend, and enjoy a meal, a drink or two, and some music together. What really unsettled us was that even after a number of these urgent appeals, the support for the project did not significantly increase. Possibly only about a third of the church really backed it, another third were mildly supportive, and the other third didn't even bother coming along. I have to say this really shook me up and made me reflect deeply on the impact of my own leadership and ministry at SMRC.

As the key leader I must, and do, take major responsibility for some bad decisions, and for not getting as much ownership as I ought, but once people were aware of what was at stake and yet did not respond as maturing disciples ought to, it deeply affected me. And it led me to ask what we had we really created over those last few years of ministry, in what by all external estimates was an effective and outstanding church. How does one assess the fruitfulness of fifteen years of ministry when it comes to this?

My reflections led me to investigate biblically how we really measure the effectiveness of a church and its missional impact. How *do* we know we are being fruitful? With what measures will we as God's people be weighed? How does God assess our effectiveness? (Is that not the inner meaning of judgment?) Because evidently he does (John 15:1–8, Revelation 1–3) and will (1 Pet. 4:17) judge his people. All this led me back to the questions about the nature of the church as the Bible defines it, and how we are to know that we are actually doing what we were meant to do in the first place. These are deep questions that led me, and in fact our whole leadership team, to a place of profound repentance and to new development and growth.

For us as the leadership team, the turning point was in asking the hard questions about how to determine the fruitfulness of the church. And this in turn drove us back to ask questions about the nature of the church and its innate purpose according to the scriptures. We had to go back to the essence of the church's function and purpose in the world. In order to do this we had to identify what comprised the essential components that together form a church. What are the irreducible minimums of a true expression of ecclesia? We came up with the following—a church is:

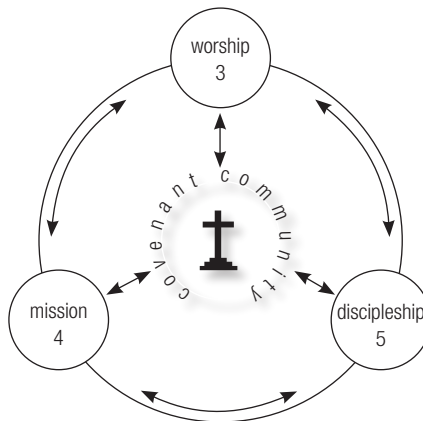
- *A covenanted community*: A church is formed people not by people just hanging out together, but ones bound together in a distinctive bond. There is a certain obligation toward one another formed around a covenant.

- *Centered on Jesus*: He is the new covenant with God and he thus forms as the true epicenter of an authentic *Christ-ian* faith. An *ecclesia* is not just a God-community—there are many such religious communities around. We are defined by our relationship to the Second Person of the Trinity, the Mediator, Jesus Christ. A covenant community centered around Jesus participates in the salvation that he brings. We receive the grace of God in him. But, more is required to truly constitute a church.

A true encounter with God in Jesus must result in

- *Worship*, defined as offering our lives back to God through Jesus.
- *Discipleship*, defined as following Jesus and becoming increasingly like him (Christlikeness).
- *Mission*, defined as extending the mission (the redemptive purposes) of God through the activities of his people.

It needs to be noted that practically as well as theologically these are profoundly interconnected, and each informs the other to create a complex phenomenon called “church.” This definition is important because it distills the core aspects of what constitutes a faith *ecclesia*. Graphically represented it might look something like this:



What’s in a definition? Actually, the way we define church is crucial because it gives us a direct clue to the critical elements of authentic Christian community. It also highlights for us the major responses that constitute Christian spirituality, namely, worship, discipleship, and mission. We will

be weighed up by God on the basis of the innate purpose of the church and thus our capacity to

1. Make disciples: people who are learning how, and what it means, to become Christlike,
2. Engage in his mission to the world, which is our mission (his purposes flow through *us*), and
3. Develop the authenticity, depth and breadth, of our worship.

If we were not fruitful in these areas, then we could not claim to be a faithful church *as God intended us to be*. And in this situation, just as in the seven churches of the Revelation (Revelation 1–3), we were in danger of having our lampstand removed. They too were judged and were called to repent. But for us, the central failure lay primarily in our inability to “make disciples.” Our worship and mission were therefore enfeebled; they had no real foundations. I came to the horrifying conclusion that we had built much of SMRC on sand because we did not build it on discipleship (Matt. 7:26). What’s the use of salt if it loses its saltiness (Matt. 5:13)?

Phase 3: From a Church to an Organic Movement

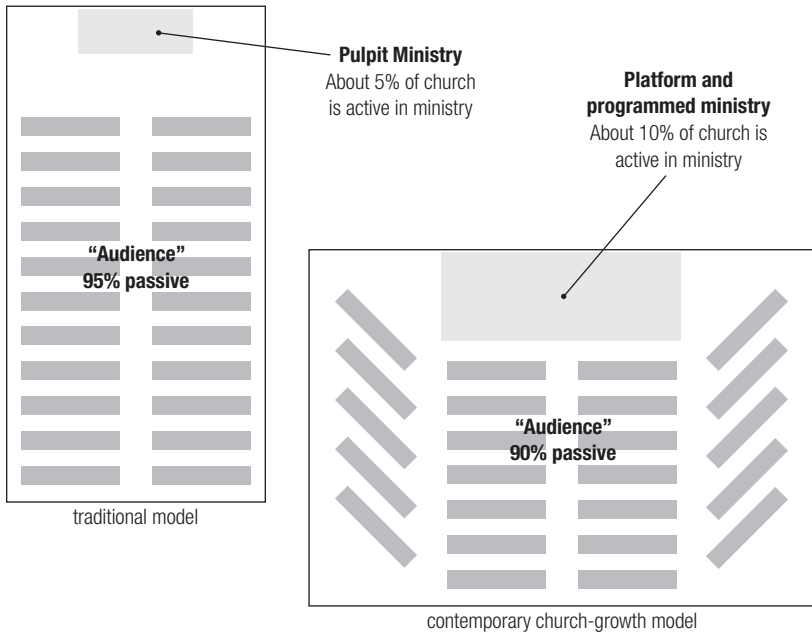
Our assessment as leaders of South at the time was that we as a community had lost our edge and our heart. When the chips came down, we could not draw upon the deeper resources of discipleship and an enduring sense of obligation and mission. It seemed to us as leaders that we did not really *value* God’s, and therefore our, distinctive mission as a central function of the church. In fact, to our shame, at that point we had not seen any conversions to Jesus in the preceding two years! And this in what was possibly one of the most accepting and relevant churches in our city (you don’t have 40 percent gay-lesbian attendance, many of them not-yet-Christians, without being accessible and open).

What was wrong? Our assessment: *we had not been successful at the task of making disciples, and therefore we were not fruitful in mission*. That in neglecting these two essential elements of *ecclesia*, we had become little more than a worship club for trendy people alienated from the broader expressions of church. The other two dimensions of fruitful *ecclesia* were almost completely missing. We were forced to the conclusion that all we had done was further cultivate a consumerist approach to Christianity. Like most churches in the modernist-Christendom mode, we had built the model of the church on a consumerist model and, in the end, paid the price.

Sound harsh? Didn’t church-growth proponents explicitly teach us to mimic the shopping mall and apply it to the church? In this they were

sincere, but they must have been unaware of the ramifications of this approach, because in the end the medium always becomes the message.⁹ They were unaware of the latent virus in the model itself—that of consumerism and the sins of the middle class. Much of what can be tagged “consumerist middle-class” is built on the ideals of *comfort* and *convenience* (consumerism), and of *safety* and *security* (middle-class).

Winston Churchill once remarked that we shape our buildings, and then they shape us. How true. When we build our churches, the architecture and the shape say it all. See this:



In the above figure, the vast majority of the church is *passive* in the equation. They are in a receptive mode and basically receive the services offered. That is, they are basically *consumptive*. They come to “get fed.” But is this a faithful image of the church? Is the church really meant to be a “feeding trough” for otherwise capable middle-class people who are getting their careers on track? And to be honest, it is very easy for ministers to cater right into this: the prevailing understanding of leadership is that of the pastor-teacher. People gifted in this way love to teach and care for people, and the congregation in turn loves to outsource learning and to be cared for. I

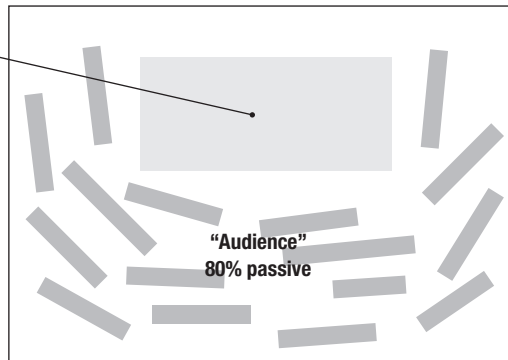
9. See *ibid.*, ch. 9, esp. 149ff.

have to admit that this now looks awfully codependent to me. Following the consumerist agenda, the church itself has become both a consumable and a service provider, a vendor of religious goods and services. But this “service-provision” approach is the very thing Jesus didn’t do. He spoke in confusing riddles (parables) that evoked a spiritual search in the hearers. Nowhere does he give three-point devotional sermons that cover all the bases. His audience had to do all the hard work of filling in the blanks. In other words, they were not left passive but were activated in their spirits.

To be sure, at SMRC we had moved away from monological sermons to dialogical discussions. We experimented like mad in different forms of worship and connecting with God. We had developed a loungelike feel with couches in a semicircle and pop art all over the walls. We experimented in multisensory communication, and more. But in the end all we had succeeded in doing was making 20 percent of the community *active* in ministry, while leaving about 80 percent passive and consumptive.

**Highly participatory,
alternative worship.**

About 20% of community
is active in ministry



alternative church model

In fact, it seemed that we actually made matters worse for the participants, because all we did served to refine their already latent consumerism. Their “taste” in church had evolved. We discovered that if a community member left SMRC, for whatever reason, they found it much harder to go back to a “meat and potatoes” style of church, because they had acquired a taste for “spice and garlic,” so to speak. We found that a lot of the people who left just wandered around and couldn’t reconnect anywhere. This was very disturbing and it drove us to seriously ask, What was the end result of our engaging way of doing alternative church? Was it to make matters worse? My alarming answer is that I think so. Below is my reasoning . . .

God’s gracious involvement aside, if you wish to grow a contemporary church following good church growth principles, there are several things you must do and constantly improve upon:

- Expand the building to allow for growth and redesign it along lines indicated in the diagram above (contemporary church-growth model).
- Ensure excellent preaching in contemporary style dealing with subjects that relate to the life of the hearers.
- Develop an inspiring worship experience (here limited to “praise and worship”) by having an excellent band and positive worship leaders.
- Make certain you have excellent parking facilities, with car park attendants, to ensure minimum inconvenience in finding a parking space.
- Ensure excellent programs in the critical area of children’s and youth ministry. Do so and people will put up with less elsewhere in the mix.
- Develop a good program of cell groups built around a Christian education model to ensure pastoral care and a sense of community.
- Make sure that next week is better than last week, to keep the people coming.

This is what church-growth practitioners call the “ministry mix.” Improvement in one area benefits the whole, and constant attention to elements of the mix will ensure growth and maximize impact. The problem is that it caters right into consumerism. And the church with the best programs and the “sexiest” appeal tends to get more customers.

Let’s test this: What do you think will happen if elements of the mix deteriorate or another new church with better programming locates itself within your region? Statistics right across the Western world where this model holds sway indicate that the *vast majority* of the church’s growth comes from “switchers”—people who move from one church to another based on the perception and experience of the programming. There is precious little conversion growth. No one really gets to see the problem, because it “feels so right” and it “works for me.” In fact, the church is on the decline right across the Western world, and we have had at least forty years of church-growth principles and practice.¹⁰ We can’t seem to make disciples based on a consumerist approach to the faith. We plainly *cannot consume our way into discipleship*. All of us must become much more active in the equation of becoming lifelong followers of Jesus. Consumption is detrimental to discipleship.¹¹

10. In a dialogue between Michael Frost, many members of the faculty of Fuller’s School of World Mission, and me, it was generally acknowledged by all there that church growth theory had, by and large, failed to reverse the church’s decline in America and was therefore something of a failed experiment. The fact remains that more than four decades of church growth principles and practice has not halted the decline of the church in Western contexts.

11. This will be further explored in the chapter on discipleship as a key element in mDNA.

With all this in mind, we felt that we had to rebuild the church from the ground up around the key biblical functions of the church (Jesus, covenant community, discipleship, mission, and worship). For the whole leadership team it was this or resign en masse. Here are some of the philosophical foundations on which we proceeded to rebuild the church.¹²

1. We wanted to transform from a static, geographically located church to a dynamic movement across our city.
2. In order to ensure that we fulfilled the church's mandate to "make disciples," we simply had to reverse the ratio of active to passive (from 20:80 to 80:20) in order to move away from being a vendor of religious goods and services. We wanted the majority of community members to becoming active and directly involved in the journey of becoming like Jesus.
3. We wished to articulate and develop a fully reproducible system built on simple, easily embedded and transferable ideas (internalized DNA).
4. The movement had to be built on principles of organic multiplication, including operating as a network, not as a centralized organization.
5. Finally, mission (and not ministry) was to be the organizing principle of the movement

And here's what we came up with . . .

1. The basic ecclesial (church) unit was to become much smaller so as to transition from the active:passive ratio from 20:80 to 80:20. The larger unit simply cannot allow for maximum participation by all people present. In other words, we were moving to being a cell-based church. But not a cell church in precisely the same way as previously configured (à la Ralph Neighbor et al.), because to our thinking these groups were to become *the actual primary experience of church* rather than just being a program of the church. Each of these groups is a church in its own right. This is a big shift.
2. We would not develop a philosophy of ministry per se, but rather a covenant and some core practices. Behind this thinking was the belief that when we talk about core values, the appeal is to the head. I have yet to see a set of core values in any church's philosophy that I cannot agree with. They are, in some cases, little more than "motherhood statements" in confessional communities. What we wanted was to

12. These new, more distinctly missional foundations will represent an integration of the ideas in section 2 of this book. This is a working application of the reflections provided there. This is not an easily transferable model. It is my hope that by proposing what SMRC did to move from being a church to a movement, I can demonstrate how one church applied the concepts of mDNA.

covenant ourselves to a set of *practices that embodied* the core value and demonstrated it.¹³

3. Each group (and therefore the majority of the individual members of the group) had to be engaged in a healthy diet of spiritual disciplines—the only way to grow in Christlikeness that we were aware of. Being a slightly naughty church, we came up with what we called the TEMPT model.

	CORE PRACTICE	SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE
T	<i>Together We Follow</i>	Community or togetherness
E	<i>Engagement with Scripture</i>	Integrating scripture into our lives
M	<i>Mission</i>	Mission (this is the central discipline that binds the others and integrates them)
P	<i>Passion for Jesus</i>	Worship and prayer
T	<i>Transformation</i>	Character development and accountability

Each group / church has to be engaged in all the practices each time it meets to be part of the movement. How they are to do these is entirely up to them and depends on the individual makeup, the leadership, and the missional context of the group. We encourage them to explore and develop new ways of practicing TEMPT. We call these smaller cellular churches TEMPT groups.

4. We would organize the movement in three basic rhythms: a weekly cycle featuring the TEMPT groups. There would be a monthly (tribal) meeting featuring all the TEMPT groups in a given region, and a biannual gathering of all the tribes in a movement-wide network. Each of these levels has a leadership structure appropriate to each level. Primary discipleship, worship, and mission would take place at the level of the TEMPT groups—the DNA of TEMPT would ensure that. Regional (tribal) coordination would ensure healthy leadership development and facilitate pastoral referrals and healthy networking. And the movement-wide leadership would facilitate the strategic level—and thus provide what will later will be called “apostolic environment.”
5. In terms of DNA, other than movement-wide commitment to the practices of TEMPT, the only other requirement to belong to the movement is that each TEMPT group is covenanted to multiply itself as

13. We came up with the concept of practices because we felt that the word *discipline* would put off our Gen-Xers. But really, we had just given a new name to tried-and-true spiritual disciplines.

soon as it is organically feasible and possible. This ensures healthy multiplication and embeds an ongoing sense of mission.

All this was not done quickly and did not come easily. People accustomed to “being fed” are generally loath to move from passivity to activity. However, we did transition the church over a two-year period by using a healthy model of change where all were invited to give feedback and participate. South Melbourne Restoration Community (renamed The Red Network or simply Red¹⁴) now stands on new ground and faces a new future. When we go through the various aspects of mDNA in section 2 of this book, refer back to this story as a primary example of the application of missional church principles.

The strange thing is that after fifteen years in ministry and mission in this community, Deb and I have felt that after transitioning the church into new possibilities and repositioning it for organic mission in the twenty-first century, we have felt a calling to leave another missional project in order to explore elsewhere. And while this has been hard for us both, and has not always make a whole lot of sense, we believe that it has been absolutely right.

Clearly the problems of the church in our time can't be settled without some form of subjective involvement in the living issues of the day. It is not particularly useful to stand on dry land while trying to give swimming lessons. We need to be involved. Debra and I are still learning about mission from the local perspective, as we are deeply committed to local practice. In starting something new we get a chance to do it all again, hopefully not to repeat the same mistakes.

14. <http://www.red.org.au/>