

11 INNOVATIONS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH:
HOW TODAY'S LEADERS CAN LEARN, DISCERN AND MOVE INTO THE FUTURE

A Book Review

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Casey Benjamin Hough

B.A., Louisiana Tech University, 2006

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Biographical Information

In *11 Innovations in the Local Church: How Today's Leaders Can Learn, Discern and Move into the Future*, Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird collaborate to write a book that is "intended to make the reader think."¹ Essentially, the authors want their audience to consider the different methods that other churches have implemented and consider how they can use some of those principles in their own context with the goal of reaching people for Christ.

Book Summary

The book is broken up into eleven chapters, a conclusion, and two appendices. Each chapter considers a particular type of church and closes with an evaluation of what can be gleaned from the examples and what things are somewhat concerning about the examples. In chapter one, the authors address the Organic House Church. This type of church is focused on reproduction as opposed to numeric growth and longevity. According to the authors, the "concern is about reaching people and making disciples."² At the center of this movement is the decentralization of the community from large buildings to more intimate, personal settings like a house. Of the things that the authors brings out regarding what can be learned from the Organic House Church movement, the importance of community in the life of Christian is one of the central things to take away from it's example.

In chapter two, the authors focus on the Recovery Church. In many ways, the name says it all; these churches are built around and focused on ministering to those plagued by addictions and disorder. While recovery is an important part in many churches, these churches focus the

¹ Pg. 22

² Pg. 25

majority, if not all, of their energy on helping the helpless. As for things that should be considered, this book addresses the need for churches to be mindful and care for those that struggle with such sins.

In chapter three, the Multi-Site Church is considered. At the heart of this model is the desire to disseminate the message of the Gospel to as many people in as many areas as possible without complicating matters with large building programs and unnecessary, high-risk debts. The multi-site church overcomes these issues by establishing multiple campuses through out a geographical region, then piping in a video feed from a central location. Most of the remote locations are rented areas in strategic locations. Essentially, the authors glean the need to reach different people through different venues with a focus on simplicity. The reviewer was not particularly crazy about this movement, but this chapter was helpful in presenting a balanced assessment of the movement as a whole.

In chapter four, the author introduced the Ancient-Future Church. In essence, these churches are an attempt to take the best of the past and mesh it with best of the future. One of the examples in this chapter is The Journey Church in St. Louis, Missouri, where Darrin Patrick serves a pastor. This church is referred to as an example of the Ancient-Future church because it meets in an old Catholic cathedral but has "retrofitted" it with new technology.³ In many ways, this distinction is less about content and more about presentation of content and style.

In a similar way, chapter five considers the City-Reaching Church. Essentially, this type of church is making a deliberate effort to reach the communities that they either find themselves in or those they have specifically targeted. The basic thrust of the chapter is the need for churches to engage their respective urban centers. In one sense, chapter six is related to chapter

³ Pg. 102

five in that it has a focus on a specific geographical area. In the case of chapter six, the change is from targeting a city to do good in a specific community as the church of Jesus Christ. The principle that the author points to is how this model is similar to the way that the early church "turned their world upside down." Furthermore, this chapter considers the need to reach out in mercy ministry to the poor. Coupled with chapter five, these chapters constitute some of the best material in the book.

In chapter seven, the authors tackle the Cyber-Enhanced Church. This church is all about impacting other through the use of the Internet. There are a lot of good ideas mentioned in this book regarding the use of the Internet to train their members. Unfortunately, there are also some examples that all but totally annihilate a biblical understanding of the nature of the church. Of the things to take away, it is important to see that the church that does not utilize the Internet as part of their ministry is woefully behind the times.

Chapter eight focuses on what the authors call the "Nickelodeon-Style Children-Focused Churches." Though the authors had plenty to say about these types of church, there is very little redeemable material in this chapter. It is commendable for a church to have a good focus on a nurturing spirituality in children, but a church that is primarily focused on children is missing the whole point of the church. Having said that, one can certainly be encouraged by this chapter to not neglect ministry to this demographic in their church or their outreach strategy.

Chapter nine deals with the Intentionally Multicultural Church. There are a lot of good qualities about this chapter, but one of the major concerns is to make sure that genuine community is preserved in the context of intentionality. The leadership has to work well together in these settings to avoid culture polarization. The best thing about the chapter was the fact that it

acknowledge this model to be the biblical ideal. It makes one wonder if the "homogeneous unit" principle of men like McGavran is becoming a thing of the past.

In chapter ten, the book introduces the reader to the Decision-Journey Church. The major focus of this type of church is the continual nature of the believers journey in Christ as opposed to the initial decision. Rightfully so, the focus is on discipleship over "decisionism." In chapter eleven, the book presents the last example in the form of the Attractional Church. As the name says, these churches are seeking to attract people to their church. Some aspects of this approach are good, but others tend to focus too much on what unregenerate people want instead of being committed to what scripture prescribes for the church of Jesus Christ.

The book concludes with a synthesis of the material and affirms the importance of the church while sounding an alarm of caution regarding the extent of innovation in the church.

Strengths and Weaknesses

One of the book's greatest strengths is its readability. It is written in a very simple and engaging way. The stories help to provide examples of the different methods in action. Furthermore, since multiple authors wrote the book, it is able to provide several different perspectives. Though all of the authors are experienced in this particular area of study, their wide range of experiences lends credibility to the findings.

Another one of the book's strengths is its practical application of the timeless principles that are derived from the examples in the chapter. This helps to make the material immediately applicable to the reader's context. Also, the authors give the reader enough latitude in application to make every chapter applicable in some form or another.

Lastly, a third strength of this book is the church-oriented nature of the content. On page 239, the authors write, "Although the church is not the center of God's plan, it is central to the

plan of God." This perspective is sadly lacking in many churches today. Fortunately for the readers, the authors affirm that the church matters. This is a good affirmation.

As for the weaknesses of the book, for all the benefits that the stories might have added, it seems like the material in this book would have easily fit into a small booklet and conveyed the same message. At first, the stories added something to the content, but by the time the reader gets to the end of the book, they are simply overwhelmed. Unfortunately, the benefits of the book in terms of content were somewhat overshadowed by all the stories. Illustration is good, but this book is a bit overboard.

Another weakness of the book is found in how the authors derive principles from seemingly contradictory contexts. In other words, the authors do not seem to respect the principles that already function within the context of the churches that they are profiling. The result is a book that seems at times to essentially be saying, "None of these churches are totally right in their principles, so look at the principles that we have come up with that transcend the context of the example churches." For the reviewer, this seems disrespectful to the example churches in one sense and almost postmodern in another given the relative nature of the truths that are extrapolated.

On a final note, one of the greatest weaknesses of the book is what seems to be the promotion of a ministry philosophy that adopts an "ends justifies the means" mentality regarding ministry. The discerning reading cannot help but wonder about the health of these churches that have employed some of these methods. For instance, the attractional church model is all but non-existent in the New Testament. Churches and Christians were expected to live in a way that would adorn the Gospel and commend the message that they were preaching, but many of these models are more consumed with bringing any new people instead of nurturing the spiritual life of

those who are in the church. The New Testament church was concerned about the edification of the body of Christ that would ultimately lead to a people that were equipped to do the work of ministry, which in turn would result in people coming to know Christ through their evangelistic efforts. This book, along with many of the churches that are represented, promotes a more evangelistic view of the church ministry that would seem to make reaching the lost the primary purpose of the Sunday gathering. Yet, this approach has no grounding in the New Testament. Admittedly, not all of the churches and approaches in the book would fall into this category, but they are unfortunately slanted in that direction when a church is more worried about meeting the expectations of the unregenerate instead of preparing the sheep to be evangelist in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, this book accomplishes its stated purpose, but it takes a fairly "roundabout" way to do it. The principles that were brought out by the authors were helpful, but they would have been much more powerful and would have commended themselves for application in a much more convincing way if the primary source would have been scripture instead of examples of other churches and the personal experience of the authors.