

***Flipping Church:
How Successful Church Planters are
Turning Conventional Wisdom Upside Down***

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Foreword

by Mark DeVries and Kenda Creasy Dean

You hold in your hands one of the first scouting reports of the cartographers of the church of the future. The women and men you will meet in these pages are pioneers, mapping uncharted territory and forging new congregational life-forms. What may one day be obvious and “normal” for congregations fifty years from now may seem strange and foreign to the average early twenty-first century church-lover.

To make a map is less an act of mathematical precision than a way to tell a story.¹ Early cosmologists drew the universe with the earth at its center; medieval cartographers made detailed drawings of the world they knew, and simply left blank unexplored expanses (someone later annotated one of these maps with the warning, “Here be dragons”). Storytellers know the value of a map: Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* sprang from a map painted

by his twelve-year-old stepson; A.A. Milne conceived the Hundred Acre Wood; before drafting *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, J.R.R. Tolkien (who had charted enemy trenches during World War I) doodled a map of Middle Earth on an examination paper at Oxford and spent years revising it, gluing successive versions on top of former ones. “If and you’re going to tell a complicated story,” Tolkien explained, “you must work to a map; otherwise you’ll never make a map of it afterward.”²

The twenty-first century church is nothing if not a complicated story, and church leaders—like mapmakers and storytellers—must try to make sense of this world for those who come after us. The church planters in this volume have stories to tell. Like cartographers, they all draw their landscapes with the colors of their own biases, assumptions and experiences. They do not prescribe as much as demonstrate how they have judged their cultural terrain, and responded to it as a mission field that God has already embraced.

This last point is crucial. Thankfully, this is not a generation of missionaries who believe they are responsible for God’s travel plans. They don’t think of themselves as bringing Jesus to people who lack him. They view themselves as explorers and discoverers, people on the lookout for where God is already at work in neighborhoods and in people who may or may not had anything to do with

² Brian Sibley and John Howe, *The Maps of Tolkien’s Middle Earth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 5-7; for one of many accounts of the origins of *Treasure Island*, see <http://www.treasureislandtheuntoldstory.com/robert-louis-stevenson.htm>; http://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/link-suggestion/wp/d_2008-09_augmented/wp/t/Treasure_Island.htm (accessed November 10, 2015).

¹ Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2007), 11.

churches. As pastors, they dust the scene for divine fingerprints that point to the fact that Christ has already been there, and point out pockets of resurrection wherever they exist.

Of course, they (and we) don't always get it right. Like all good adventurers, church planters see possibilities for Christian community that are not obvious to the rest of us, and not all of these ideas will stand the test of time. Yet the bold creativity reflected in these pages—and the sheer courage of those willing to turn “normal church” on its ear for the sake of the gospel—inspires us, and we're willing to bet it inspires you too. Heaven knows, the church needs pioneers right about now. Perhaps you are called to be one of them.

Pioneers are not a terribly efficient lot. Instead of taking the well-worn path where progress (or at least the illusion of progress) is rapid and rewards are clear, they head for the “road less travelled,” following breadcrumbs more often than pavement because they are convinced that God lives among the weeds as well as along the highway. Few obstacles stand in the way of church leaders who want to form yet one more committee; this can be easily done. But too often, the well-worn path simply circles around the altar to the-way-we've-always-done-it-around-here.

In this book you won't meet many committee-creators. Instead, you will encounter inefficient pioneers, people who are still whacking their way through the brush as they cut their own path toward the future church. It's a much slower journey, to be sure, than replicating the present, and it's a hike without an absolutely certain destination. Some of these paths will lead to dead ends, but a few, maybe

a precious few, will usher us into an undiscovered expanse for ministry.

Having spent so much of our lives in the world of youth ministry, the *de facto* research and development department of the church, we have a deep affinity for creativity, and for the need for innovation to go mainstream in Christian communities. Young adults in our time have little patience for the tedium of what a southern pastor friend of mine refers to as “chicken-eatin'-do-nothin'-meetings.” They are weary of churches battling passionately (more often than not, against each other) over all the wrong things. They have had enough of churches that spend the vast majority of their energy and resources on survival and self-promotion.

Okay, let's be frank. It's not just young people. We feel the same way.

In the organizational life cycle, there are those on the leading edge and those on the “bleeding edge.” The latter are so far ahead of their time that they will face steep resistance, leaving them bloody and limping from their foray into innovation. The former, the leading edge folks, are the ones who come just behind the bleeding edge, those who take radical ideas and turn them into a widely embraced new normal. We are unspeakably grateful to Mike Baughman for rounding up both kinds of characters and enterprises for this book (and for being a bleeding/leading edge character himself).

There is a little doubt that, two or three decades from now, the church as we know it will be a very different place. With shrinking resources, most will no longer have the luxury of standing still. Most will be required to either innovate or die. We think that is great news for the church, because it forces us to take a good hard look at who Christ

calls us to be and navigate to that point, whether we have maps to guide us or not. Let's go even further: we happen to think this is the best opening for ministry that most churches have had in a few centuries. We can take nothing about our current church organizations for granted; we can assume that no future we have imagined so far accurately depicts the future God has in store for us. This is the grand adventure of ministry: to hold tight to Christ and follow wherever the Spirit leads—which, we can be sure, is a journey that won't end where we already are.

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