

The fragrance: the missional church in c:/21

"In the end there are only two attitudes which Christians can adopt toward the world. One is escape and the other is engagement"
– John Stott¹

Jan's gaze dropped to her cup of peppermint tea. She was quiet – beyond tears and even fury over the betrayal, abandonment and conflict which accompanies a relationship breakup. Even though they were "partners" and not spouses, ripping apart a decade of shared life is no different from legal divorce. My wife gave her a momentary silence to withdraw into herself. Then, upon a gentle touch, deep wordless grief came.

This is our reality. Forty years of social progress has seen "progress"; positive advances but also a wake of dysfunction, social disintegration and endless tears. We hear so much wonderful news about the clean, green, innovative New Zealand. Simultaneously we ignore the other side; horrific levels of spousal abuse, abortion, undocumented euthanasia, world-leading cannabis and methamphetamine abuse, suicides – particularly teen suicide – high divorce rates, higher co-habitation rates and relationship failures amongst those couples. Our postmodern, post-Christian society is predisposed against anything that smells of our cultural past, including Christianity and its morality. Instead it intentionally craves immorality, legitimises prostitution, endorses and promotes lifestyles that defy God's design, and justifies alcohol abuse.

We no longer thirst to breathe God's breath. We're satisfied with the few "on our side" who give us laud, come to "the show" and agree

with our every argument – which works if you already believe. We justify our lack of real burden for the ninety percent plus of Kiwis on the track to eternal damnation. Such talk is regarded too negative and pessimistic. After all, "she'll be right, mate." The sad and cynical faces we encounter daily (I'm talking Christians) betray that something is dreadfully wrong.

However, our pointed fingers railing against society do not expand the Kingdom. Something is wrong with God's Kingdom people, called as lights on a hill, salt in the food, the fragrance of Christ, and

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living epistles of love read by our generation. There are many books written either deconstructing the traditionalist church and the delusion that Christendom still exists, or marketing Jesus in a modernist fashion, the same way we sell the latest shoes fad. We build our "proverbial shopping-mall churches" programmed to satisfy every interest group. We latch on to "silver bullet evangelism" that promises to bring "breakthrough". Our increasing irrelevance is not solved by slick music, shallow "life-coaching styled teaching" that anyone can get in any bookstore self-help section, or programmes to fill every waking hour. It isn't solved by cool buildings, evangelism proclaiming answers to questions not being asked, or evangelism to "close the deal" before they escape. We could

continue the cerebral transfer, amassing information, creating Christian academics instead of disciples, convincing ourselves that knowledge equals spiritual maturity. I predict, from working cross-denominationally across New Zealand, one third of New Zealand churches will die in the next ten years. The decade following will be worse. Not convinced? The New Church Life Survey (NCLS) in 2001 reported that 61% of the New Zealand church was over fifty, 41% over sixty and 25% over seventy.² Rather than whine and lose hope, let's courageously step out.

Where to from here?

I don't claim to have "the answer". I have lots of unanswered nagging questions. All I do is share what I see working. It isn't slick, overly organised, or super

theological. Most of Jesus' ministry wasn't either. He simply lived out and shared his vision: "The Kingdom of heaven is like..." He told us to imitate him. Yet we prefer the miraculous and miss the powerfully mundane! We overlook Jesus' posture in loving people. No programmes, just authentic and sacrificial love encountering whores, beggars, thieves, tax collectors, even Imperial Roman Army officers. This incarnational Gospel touched even more lives when God's people chose to live it together (e.g. see Acts 2 and 5). When you study Acts, there are actually few miracles are recorded, just lives that smelled different.

1. Paradigm shift away from Sunday-centric church

We must break free of our deception to "just keep doing what we're

doing and one day it will click and secular people will come flooding in". We must lead a paradigm shift away from a Sunday centric expression of church. Even contemporary "hip" churches are unintentionally alienating to most secular people. Our culture is foreign, strange. My barber, a good pagan mate, gives me stick every month on how much the church is 1) money-grubbing, 2) equally immoral, only worse, as we cloak ourselves with God's guilt trip, 3) blindly following some laughable nonexistent made-up god, and 4) bigoted, arrogant and condescending, forcing the majority to live by our self-imposed rigid morality.

The truth is, most of society is predisposed against us. I know you can tell me about someone who walked off the street to investigate your church. Fine; I can point to thousands who drive by, "tsk, tsk" and mockingly roll their eyes. While we compete with each other for the few that will come, our failure to change shows that we apparently don't give a damn about the myriads that won't. Bottom line: They don't care about "our show" and will not come to our "religious events" on our "religious days" in our "religious buildings". They see our religiosity as a life sentence, sucking the life out of them. John Wimber, Vineyard's founder, reacted the same way: "You're trying to tell me that I gave up my life and signed up just to do this Church thing every Sunday?"³ Given the morally rotting society and its predisposition against the church it sees, how do we get traction in peoples' lives? Bottom line is that we have to get over and discard our religiosity and our expectations of how church is "supposed to be expressed". To be deathly honest, I think we really hold deep in our subconscious Sunday services as a sacramental theology and orthopraxy much more than we are willing to admit.

Jan and her daughter have a safe place where they belong. It costs our family, intruding at times. But we intentionally create "white space" in our lives that allows us to

incarnate Christ to people already in our lives. We aren't perfect, but we try. My wife practises the secret Christian disciplines of keeping peppermint tea in the cupboard, daily taking Jan's daughter home from school with us while Jan works, including her in our boys' gymnastics, swimming and T-ball routine. We make ourselves available to help, but mostly we give hugs, add another dinner plate and ask them to join us Christmas afternoon to celebrate Jesus' birthday. Jan wondered what Bible to get her daughter for Christmas, and asked us to recommend one. She then asked which Bible would be good for her, to help her understand. She then joined us for Christmas Eve worship.

2. Pursue Jesus, not an ideology

I'm tired of "the next great conference", the latest programme to reach the masses! Why do we spend ourselves organising complex methodologies, with no time for intimate relationship with Christ or to simply love people? The way forward begins with actually pursuing, following, and relating with Jesus. We read books about doing church, but don't value relating with Jesus. Christianity is not an institution, not an ideology, but our behaviour often reflects that we value it as one. Our behaviours reflect our real values and our beliefs. We must realign ourselves to walk and know him and spend less time protecting an ideology.

3. Smell like Jesus

John tells us that if we dare claim to be Jesus' follower, we must "walk like Jesus walked" (1 Jn 2:6). We can only live like this out of an intimate relationship, the biproduct of an intimate love with him. In a desire to offer a sacrifice pleasing to God, an act of worship, I bought a chocolate bar last week and threw it across the car park to the attendant who regularly services my car. His smile and bemused stare in my rear view mirror revealed a questioning. In the simplest to the most complex behaviours, attitudes, emotions, acts, and reactions we must reflect

the light of Jesus, leaving his fragrance. This is the only language our world – predisposed against us – will understand.

This kind of relationship with Christ, the result of a paradigm shift from an ideology to a love affair, implies abandoning an expectation of living lives focused on comfort, safety, and predictability, to ones postured and open to what God has for us. This calls us to live our lives, looking for opportunities to incarnate Christ in every encounter and spend ourselves on relationships with people who need Jesus. The divine tension in engaging the lost is illustrated in my sons. We want our sons to grow up walking with Jesus, like Jesus. Instead of insulating them we believe they must be inoculated to live in the real world and society we're in today. Practically this means they have secular friends. We're helping them discern the differences between our values, our world view, and the world's. We are teaching them why others see the world differently. Their friends' parents are becoming our friends, and their worldview stands in vast contrast to ours. We wrestle to incorporate them into our lives, allowing our boys to be friends with their boys, yet simultaneously being the influencers and not the influenced. It is not foolproof. Our boys are catching a central non-negotiable value: we want to love the lost around us like Jesus loves them, right where they are, unconditionally; and we want to earn the right to be heard. Our sons are watching, asking questions, and they smell the difference. The journey continues.

Bill Hybels estimates that the journey for the average American to embrace the Gospel is four years.⁴ Many of my friends estimate that Kiwis, being cynical, more suspicious, and more post-Christian, require an average journey of six years. This is why the programmes aren't working. They will not come to us. Therefore we must go to them. Our "making disciples" begins with authentic relationships, earning the right to be heard. This

means abandoning the idea of evangelising with the modern “propositional truth” methods where we “win the argument” and prove to them “God is”. When we do this they see us as arrogant, boasting in our closed thinking. They don’t care if we win. The old over-used cliché is now more true than ever: “They don’t care what we know, until they know we care.” Knowing we care takes a long time.

I defer to Jesus in the situation where the Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery. Leaving the motive and pretence of the Pharisees aside, Jesus engaged the woman, obviously guilty, and extended grace; he gave no lecture. Sinners know (in their hearts) their sin. They are created in God’s image, as much as we are (Gen 1) and they have eternity written on their hearts, just like us (Eccles 3:11). Our expression of grace – unconditional and sacrificial love, listening to understand, and a commitment to walk the journey with them – like Dorothy with her trio of pilgrims on the way to see the Wizard of Oz, overcomes those predispositions, speaks a language they can understand, and allows them to walk close enough to Jesus to actually smell him. I propose and urge that we change how we see the world and the people in it away from “us-them” and “in-out”. Instead we need to see ourselves as all equally needing Jesus and all equally on the journey as pilgrims and sojourners. This is what I see in Jesus’ life.

4. Be a tribe

From individual intimacy with Christ flows the collective and interdependent expression of Christ; as his people, tribe, village, church. Passionate spirituality is the most common lowest-measured factor in the Natural Church Development Survey of the evangelical church throughout the world.⁵ We arrive at church as evangelicals to learn more about him or as Pentecostals to experience the Holy Spirit in an emotional passion. We come to our liturgical churches to pay homage, not to

gaze in his eyes. Whatever the tradition we live, our diaries are filled with the duties of membership that consume our energies and resources. Sadly we miss the very people Christ commands us to go to, from the petrol attendant, café employee, to our neighbours, co-workers, classmates, family, and friends. Wash feet rather than putting on so many shows. This is the living sacrifice incarnated.

I recently did several word studies in my Bible, first using just my Bible (Thank the Lord for computers!) and then expanding it to some reliable commentaries. They included words such as kingdom, salvation, and holiness; holiness was the most interesting. I concluded that it is more a “setting apart to” something than “from” something. Jesus was set apart “to” the world, not “from” the world. This is foundational and the antithesis of what the western church commonly understands as being holy. This has huge implications for how we live out and incarnate Christ to our world. My family and tribe intentionally work at this. In an attempt to be a collective fragrance my tribe frequents the same cafés, barbers, and shops. It works at building bridges at the office, with parents at the pool, gymnastics, and school. When Jan needed some work done on her house, we connected her with a friend in the building trade. When we ask her over to dinner, we include some of our tribe or my wife’s family. When she invites us,

we strive hard to be there, even if it means rearranging a commitment with people in our tribe. They understand and ask no less from us in their own situations. Note that this catalytic power I describe isn’t expressed in a programme. First and foremost, it is centred here. The place and effectiveness of programmes must follow (much later) in a pilgrim’s journey. They first must relationally progress to belonging and becoming fellow sojourners.

5. Evangelism = serving real needs

Don’t be fooled, we do need our safe space, alone and with his people. But, sharing life together without mission has a shelf life. I commend to you that this is why most home groups die after two years. You can only have so many cuppas together without a reason, especially men!

I recently caught a lift to the airport with Brad Carr, pastor of Botany Life Church in Botany Downs, Auckland. Brad shared a practice his church began last year. They went to the local primary school and asked how they could serve the school over two full days. Afterwards, he learned this event was known all over the school district, and Brad now has a relationship with this principal. This year-old church is known all over the community because they are making a difference. I am convinced biblical evangelism, discipleship, and community are interdependent and therefore

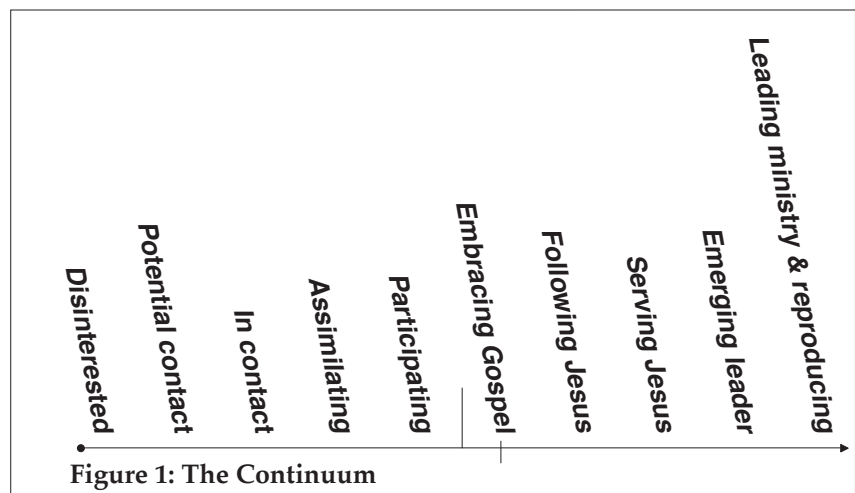


Figure 1: The Continuum

distorted when dissected and considered apart from each other. When applied together each component helps us understand what the others mean, and how to apply them in our lives, as a kingdom community of faith.

6. Be intentional

We're all tired of the form of church that has programmes that exist long after people have forgotten why they were begun. Yet most churches still do so many things and never ask why. Churches striving to be intentional think strategically, recognising the natural, organic continuum from engaging disinterested secular people, to being reproducing disciples. I ask pastors and their leadership teams to answer three questions:

- 1) "Where is God working here?"
This usually is met with lots of silence.
- 2) "Where are things apparently going okay, but in truth, you're not really moving?"
There is a bit more response here.
- 3) "Where you don't see things moving, what is especially discouraging you?" After a good venting, I have to cut them off!

I then share with them the metaphor of how farmers (crop and livestock) have a farming system where there is an annual crop or flock perpetually ready for "harvest." I then relate that to our development of leaders and our journeying with people yet to embrace the Gospel. I use the scale in Figure 1. At the left is "potential contact", "in contact", followed by "participating" and then "belonging". The centre is "embracing the gospel" (ETG). People naturally belong before they believe. In the past churches have had that backwards. They accepted and assimilated people after they professed faith. I say "embracing the gospel" because most people process the implications of the

gospel over a period of time. The disciples also went through a process. They had already listened to Jesus when he approached them and said "Follow me." They did not understand what they were getting into when they got up and followed. They did not know, love or believe in him. It took time. He accepted them and they came to love and believe. It is the same today.

To the right is "serving". Lastly, there is the reproducing disciple. This last term is more than expecting saints to evangelise, as everyone beginning with "belonging" forward is involved in evangelism as a natural rhythm of their lives. It is defined by people who empower and develop people in spiritually maturing.

I then ask them to place their ministries (a.k.a. programmes) on

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the continuum. They often find themselves disproportionately to the right of "embracing the gospel." Of the churches with programmes to the left of ETG such as Mainly Music, many do not understand the concept of helping people move forward in their spiritual journey. There are programmes that gain contacts, but few grasp how to move people from one to the next. Most don't have an intentional system and are discontinuous as a result.¹ This occurs in a relational informal manner, not through structures. Those who do get it, as Rob Harley illustrates so well in his video series *Friends for Life*, know it happens "organically". Organically means that it happens when a small circle of people befriends secular people in a natural way and begins sharing life with them, in ordinary life rhythms. Sharing life looks like

a coffee, a barbeque, going shopping or to a sports game, baby-sitting each other's children – a.k.a. friendship. It might begin through already existing relationships, or they might intentionally initiate natural relationships through community sport, schools, social circles, etc. The key is that it is a two way relationship. We must forget the paternalistic rescuer vision we have of ourselves.

Don't get me wrong, I am not against organised ministry. In fact, it can become a huge catalyst to forward people in their pilgrimage. Ministries such as Mainly Music, soccer clubs, and parenting courses all provide inroads for the fostering of these organic relationships. Without the intentionality of these relationships, they are merely nice programmes to consume resources rather than activities that propagate the making of disciples.

7. The bottom line of missional church is mission

The church is here for one reason, mission! Our arrival in heaven will instantly improve every-

thing, with one exception; mission, introducing people to Jesus. Our mission, our sole reason to get up in the morning, is to know Christ and be the kingdom people of God, a people centred on bringing the kingdom to the world.

I have a brief comment regarding those courageous saints experimenting with new expressions of church. Right now there are many trials at an "incubation stage" throughout the English speaking world. This is not necessarily the missional church. I applaud efforts to culturally express the church in a more relevant and authentic form. They are as cross-cultural as going to Mongolia. But, "missional church" must be centred around mission. "Cool" is not mission. Gathering saints from other places because of style preference is no different to a mega-church building

itself through transfers from small local churches. Mission is making disciples and reproducing leaders who will lead the tribe (church) in making disciples. When the people we reach today become leaders, we'll truly know what the 21st century church is to be. Keep experimenting – but focus on mission!

Missional implications

Do not merely take the “costume jewellery” and completely miss the real wealth. Being missional is possible within any polity and any church culture. The implications I will explain are not the recipe, but the by-products of a missional tribe, the fruit of living lives that incarnate Christ to everyone they encounter. Don't confuse this.

1. **Missionary posture:** We seek to understand the culture, language, habits, and norms of the host culture, with the same degree of serious study and the same weight of respect as a missionary in a foreign land. Christendom is dead – get over it. Grieve and then get up and realise that we're aliens in our own land. Our passport means nothing. Be aware of culture, think cross-culturally. This ends the expectation that “they will come to the show” next Sunday. This has huge implications for where pastors spend themselves and define their roles. If you show me your diary and your cheque book, I'll tell you what you truly value.
2. **Interpreters:** The missional church must interpret Jesus to those out there. They don't understand our language and they misinterpret our intentions. They must first see our values, smell our intentions, and experience our Kingdom. Then they'll dialogue (relate) with us and over time, understand. Interpreting takes time, and involves personal relationships; eyes gazing into eyes building an album of shared memories.
3. **Humility:** Face it, throughout history we've stuffed it up in

many ways. We've alienated and been hypocritical, arrogant, and condescending. We've suffered horrendous moral failures from our idols, oops – I meant heroes. We evidence the same dysfunctions, and we're preoccupied with the same consumer preoccupations as the society we condemn. We don't evidence the hope we proclaim. The missional church must be humble, demonstrating the essence of the incarnate Christ. It cannot be an institution comfortable with a self-absorbed pride.

4. **Holistic:** We separate sacred and secular. We have our church areas of life, and then everything else. Most Christians never consider the majority of their life in the light of their relationship with Jesus. Instead of this false dichotomy we must subvert

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society through humble service in ordinary ways. Meeting needs is no different to opening God's word and no less sacred than my wife brewing Jan's peppermint tea. Taking care of the neighbours' kids is as equally holy as practising collective worship. Holistic is all of who we are, all of our daily lives being part of living for Christ, our worship. Missional saints strive to not merely get people going to heaven, but to make a difference here in this world. This incarnates the kingdom, creating hope and encouraging faith because Jesus so loves the world.

5. **Sacrificial:** Yes, sacrifice is unpopular today. Loving people requires that we have margins in our resources (time, money, stuff, energy, relationships). We must therefore practise deference, choosing to not

partake in every opportunity, but setting aside all our resources to be available for mission. It is a heart endeavour, willing your desires, your heart, to bend towards God's heart and His values (Rom 6:2, 10; 12:1-2; 2 Cor 5:17, Gal 2:19). Franciscan friars have a code of poverty, chastity, and charity. Poverty and chastity refer to not allowing the world's passion for power, fame, riches to hold their hearts, to not control people, and not be enslaved by the world's addictions. We see poverty as being in need, but their definition is more true to its definition of not amassing wealth. We have mistakenly reduced chastity to abstinence from sex. Yet more accurately it is not possessing another person through manipulation or control. Do these not manifest the heart of Jesus? We've equated middle-class values with those of Jesus. Consumerism, individuality, and self-centred comfort is not biblical. We must repent, embracing Jesus' heart.

6. **Strategic thinking:** The missional saint and church takes Rick Warren's Purpose-Driven Life, Ministry and Church seriously.² Missional saints take Bill Hybel's “Contagious Christianity” to heart.³ This perspective is reflected in the scale described earlier. Being authentic with secular people – yet as shrewd as wolves engaging and helping people on their spiritual pilgrimage – is non-negotiable. To have spiritual children and be satisfied with a nursery full of babies that never grow up is ludicrous. This means intentional leadership at multiple levels within the tribe. This is illustrated biblically from Jethro's counsel in Exodus 18, through the church in Jerusalem, and to Paul's direction to the apostles and churches throughout the Roman empire. Mission requires a culture of change, risk, intentionality, and empowering and releasing leadership. Church planting cannot be denied! Did I

go and say the forbidden words, church planting? Oops, did it again. Why do we birth sterile churches that never reproduce?

7. **Living with Post-Exilic Israel's heart:** When you read the Chronicles and Ezra/Nehemiah you see God's story told from a much different perspective. It oozes, not with grandeur, but with the humility and focus to forge the values and ethos of God's people after the painful exile. These books communicate God's story and Israel's place in it, their identity, their values. It is more about "being" God's people than achieving victories and yet it does not deny God's end victory. In our postmodern, post-Christian world, where western civilisation is changing tremendously, our influence is at best marginalised if not completely discarded. Possibly we should focus, considering post exilic Israel's posture, (re)focusing on who we are supposed to "be"; God's people living God's values. Somehow, we got distracted and forgot that "doing" comes out of "being", not vice-versa.

I close this article hoping you catch my heart. Don't confuse my tongue-in-cheek criticisms, my blunt perspectives, my directness as a lack of love or respect for the church. On the contrary, I love the bride, and this fuels my passion. It's not my desire to communicate disrespect for any form or church tradition. I value them all. Each contributes uniquely to recognise and celebrate different aspects of Jesus. Yet it's hard to respect foregoing mission and refusing to sacrifice our own comforts, choosing instead our own preferences. I pray and hope you are challenged and propelled towards missional life, leading the church to become missional.

For further reading (in order of usefulness)

Erwin McManus, *An Unstoppable Force* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2001).
Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2003).

Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2004).

Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future* (London: SPCK, 1998).

Randall Arthur, *Wisdom Hunter* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1991).

Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 2003).

Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

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Brian McLaren, *The Church On The Other Side* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

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Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002).

Endnotes

1. John R.W. Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1995), 14.
2. See Alan Jamieson, "The Future of the Church in New Zealand" in *Reality* (43): 8ff.
3. Alexander Venter, *Doing Church* (Cape Town: Vineyard International Publishing, 2001), 23.
4. Source unknown.
5. Christian Schwartz, founder of Natural Church Development, shared this with a group of New Zealand leaders in Hamilton in September 2004. It was hosted by International Resource Network.
6. Most churches have a lot of programmes, but have inherited programmes and

ministries that no longer fulfil their original purposes and people involved have no idea of what or why they exist. Even when we do know why we do these things, there is no coherent strategy from the leadership to step back and see all we do as a community of faith, and recognise and organise a system of naturally progressing people spiritually, much less as leaders. There is no intentionality. Therefore, we have gaps in many areas, and over resource others. The most obvious is most churches expend most resources on modalic ministry for people in the church – more to keep or entertain as consumers who need to "get something out of it" – "for themselves." Little is focused on sodalic (mission) to engage and reach pre-embracing the Gospel. Yet we say we value reaching the lost. I say, we believe it, but we don't value it, because we don't vest yourself in time, money or people in it.

7. See Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1995) and *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

8. See Bill Hybels, Mark Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

Mike Brantley and his wife Susanne are members of a global Christian order called to empower leaders for the church and the church that needs to emerge. They live in Wellington with their two sons, Logan and Jordan.

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