



## TRAVELING INTO TURBULENT TIMES

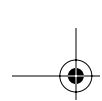
Our Jeep careened though the center of Hyderabad, India, during rush hour at forty-five miles an hour. It was an amazing achievement, since nothing else was moving more than fifteen miles an hour. Parents with kids and elderly folks spilled off the congested sidewalks into the gutters on both sides of the street. Bicycles, rickshaws and water buffalos competed with people for that gutter space. This barely left one solitary lane down the middle of the road for cars and trucks going in both directions.

Only an hour earlier, I had had a relaxed lunch with my four traveling companions. Over a wonderful dish of coconut chicken curry with fresh papaya and lime, they briefed me on small recycling businesses that poor families had started in Hyderabad. Now we found ourselves on a ride from hell.

We escaped multiple near-death experiences in that forty-minute race. We narrowly avoided colliding with a petrol truck, a crowded bus and three different rickshaws. Our young Muslim driver didn't speak English, and we couldn't find any way to communicate that we weren't in a hurry. While I tried to pray, I kept remembering what I had recently learned: more missionaries are killed in traffic accidents than from any other cause.

Suddenly our driver's reflexes weren't quick enough. He whipped the Jeep abruptly to the left and hooked the handle bar of a bike, dragging it and its rider thirty yards before skidding to a stop. The bike was mangled, but fortunately the rider wasn't injured. The two young Indians stood there yelling and waving their arms at each other until our driver abruptly jumped back in and took off as if nothing had happened. Thankfully, after the mishap our driver slowed down, my blood pressure returned to normal, and my prayers became less frantic.





### TURBULENT TIMES, A CHANGING WORLD

Tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, terrorist attacks, a storm brewing in the Middle East and volatility shaking our new global economy—doesn't it feel like our world has been on a harrowing ride, where no one is at the wheel, since we raced into this new millennium? I suspect this ride won't slow down anytime soon. We are rapidly becoming part of a global society in which the challenges are likely to escalate. Change and uncertainty are likely to become increasingly comparable to the reality that our poorest neighbors have always known—particularly economic uncertainty and crisis.

Some are working tirelessly to reduce the life-threatening uncertainty that the global poor have to contend with every day. These activists succeeded in persuading over 180 nations to commit themselves to the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals of cutting global poverty in half by 2015. As I write halfway to that target date, it is clear that nations that signed this pledge have failed to follow through with the promised investments. Recalling that 150,000 people lost their lives in a Southeast Asian tsunami at the beginning of the millennium, the passionate advocate for the poor and U2 lead singer Bono declared, "In Africa, 150,000 lives are lost every month. A tsunami every month. And it's a completely avoidable catastrophe."<sup>1</sup>

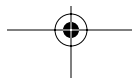
You can be sure that these chaotic events are keeping end-times prophecy buffs very busy, but my passion is for discovering what God is doing in these turbulent times, and how I can be much more a part of it. For followers of Jesus, times of challenge are always times of opportunity to give new creative expression to God's love for a people and a world. The character Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* reminds us that we can't choose the times in which we are born, but says, "We are responsible for the time that is given to us."

### TURBULENT TIMES, A CHANGING CHURCH

Not only is the world experiencing a harrowing ride, the Western church is

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<sup>1</sup>"Bono's Prayer Breakfast Speech," *Extracts: 54th Annual National Prayer Breakfast, Washington D.C.*, February 2006, accessed January 27, 2007, at <[www.micahchallenge.org.uk/uk/pages/content.asp?plid=122](http://www.micahchallenge.org.uk/uk/pages/content.asp?plid=122)>.





as well. While the church in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia is experiencing remarkable growth, this is not the experience of the church in the Northern Hemisphere. Not only mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, but increasingly evangelical and charismatic churches in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States are struggling with rapid change and declining participation.

Leaders in the emerging church in Britain argue that much of the focus, language and programs of traditional institutional churches no longer connect with a post-denominational, post-Christendom, post-Christian and postmodern culture.<sup>2</sup> Alan Roxburgh vividly describes our situation:

We are all in the early stages of a massive transition. . . . We cannot return to the past like some nostalgic *That 70s Show*, nor can we jump over the present to go bravely where none have gone before, like some kind of *Star Trek* series. We are more like the strange, motley crew of creatures struggling to make sense of their situation on board the space station *Babylon Five*.<sup>3</sup>

In his book *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch reports on a predominant concern of contemporary church leaders: "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 a massive, long-trended decline in the West."<sup>4</sup> Declining levels of attendance, participation and giving are likely to have a major negative impact on the Western church's ability to sustain its present levels of support for local and global missions, much less develop innovative responses to the new challenges coming at us from tomorrow's world.

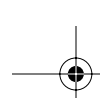
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<sup>2</sup>Post-Christendom is a discussion comprised of those who are interested in connecting to the pre-Constantinian church, which saw itself as an exile movement within the dominant culture.

<sup>3</sup>Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Sky Is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle, Idaho: ACI Publishing, 2005), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup>Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), p. 16.





## JOINING THE NEW CONSPIRATORS

In spite of these daunting challenges, God is stirring up some small renewing streams that are cascading over the dry roots of traditional churches, carrying the promise of new life. Though God works in all generations, as my wife Christine and I wander the world, we see the Spirit of God working largely through the vision, creativity and initiative of a new generation—through emerging, missional, multicultural and monastic streams—as well as in traditional churches that are hungry for a more authentic, vital, mission-centered faith. This book is written to invite you not only to support what God is doing through these renewing streams but also to join this conspiracy of compassion.

Brian McLaren, discussing the emerging church, observes a distinguishing perspective of young Christians in each of these renewing streams: “It’s not about the church meeting your needs; it’s about joining the mission of God’s people to meet the world’s needs.”<sup>5</sup> Those involved in these streams almost always tend to be more outwardly focused, seeking to engage urgent needs in their communities and the larger world.

One of the other characteristics is an igniting of the imagination in ways I haven’t seen before. Emerging church leaders, for example (I suspect because of their postmodern inclinations), are keenly involved in the arts, film and popular culture. A worship service Christine and I attended at Fremont Abbey in Seattle, led by Karen Ward, on the Sunday immediately after the 2005 tsunami, sensitively and artfully blended footage of the tragedy with ancient symbols and liturgy. We were drawn powerfully into both the pain of the event and the providential care of God.

These young leaders carefully read the cultural context of a particular community, then create a setting—a café or an art center, for example—to engage individuals in the surrounding community. A gathering place called Malt Cross Café-Bar in Nottingham city center, for example, offers hospitality and acceptance to young people out with their friends and neighbors.

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<sup>5</sup>Brian McLaren, as quoted by Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today*, November 2004, p. 39.





An outreach team helps those in the neighborhood who struggle with addiction issues, overdoses and other crises. The innovators who created this gathering place find their own nurture in a spiritual growth community called The Friary.<sup>6</sup>

I find this same kind of inspired imagination among those in the monastic stream. At Papa Fest, a gathering in Tennessee that brought together all kinds of U.S. Christian communities, the event planners created an innovative barter economy for the gathering. They also involved kids in the playful arts of clowning, juggling and improvised drama.

Russell Rook, a young officer in the Salvation Army in Britain, was part of the first wave of emerging church leaders in the early 90s. Out of the deep desire to see mission moved back to the center of the church, he was given permission to reimagine and reinvent the youth division of the Salvation Army in the U.K. as a mission preparation process.

Instead of running a standard youth program that focused inwardly on the needs of Christian young, Russell and his compatriots renamed the division ALOVE, focusing on God's love for the world. ALOVE now trains youth in an eleven-month program in a number of mission activities, including planting mission-centered churches. One of Russell's imaginative ideas is to persuade leading English chefs to share some of their best soup recipes. Young people from tough parts of Liverpool and London learn to make the soups as part of a job-training program. They then sell the soups back to local businesses to help fund new church plants.

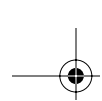
### JOINING THE CONSPIRACY OF THE INSIGNIFICANT

In spite of the fact that our world is changing at blinding speed and the church is going through some very tough times, God is still at work in ways that aren't always immediately apparent. For some reason, God seems to delight in conspiring through the small, insignificant and ordinary to renew the church and transform the world. Eugene Peterson wrote, "The met-

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<sup>6</sup>Dave Ward, "Malt Cross Vision," *Stories*, October 2006, accessed January 27, 2007, at <<http://emergingchurch.info/stories/maltcross/index.htm>>.





aphors Jesus used for the life of ministry are frequently images of the single, the small and the quiet, which have effects far in excess of their appearance: salt, leaven and seed.”<sup>7</sup>

Nearly thirty years ago I wrote a book called *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* to explore an idea out of the teachings of Jesus:

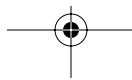
With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown on the ground, . . . it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. (Mk 4:30-32)

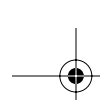
I was taken aback by the hundreds of people who wrote in response to the book. Their letters described a host of creative ways in which they took the risk of discovering how God could use their mustard seeds to make a difference in the lives of others. Some started building homes for Habitat for Humanity or formed Mustard Seed groups on their university campuses to reach out to the poor in their communities. A few started larger ministries such as Christmas Cracker, a British organization that raised large amounts of money for the poor abroad. The Mustard Seed Foundation in the United States provides start-up grants for new ministries all over the planet.

Both the world and the church have changed enormously since 1981. But God’s strategy hasn’t changed. Jesus let us in on an astonishing secret: God has chosen to change the world through the lowly, ordinary and insignificant. This should give us all hope.

Changing the world through the conspiracy of the insignificant has always been God’s strategy. God chose a ragtag group of Semite slaves to be the insurgents of a new order. God sent a vast army to flight with three hundred men carrying lamps and blowing horns. God chose a shepherd boy with a slingshot to lead his chosen people. And who would have dreamed that God would choose a baby in a cow stall to turn the world right side up?

<sup>7</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 25.





Paul reminds us that “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor 1:27-29).<sup>8</sup>

Shane Claiborne quotes British songwriter Martyn Joseph as he writes about the quiet revolution of Jesus:

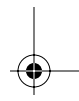
“What a strange way to start a revolution . . . and what a strange way to finish your world tour.” We worship the seed that died. The revolution will not be televised. It will not be brought to you by Fox News with commercial interruptions. . . . It will not be sandwiched between ads to accelerate your life or be all you can be. There will be no reruns. The revolution will be live. The revolution will be in the streets. The revolution will be cleaning toilets and giving another blanket to Karen. The revolution will not be talking about poverty in hotel banquet rooms. It will be eating beans and rice with Ms. Sunshine and watching *Back to the Future* with our neighbor Mary. Get ready, friends . . . God is preparing us for something really, really—small.<sup>9</sup>

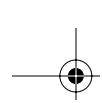
This book is an invitation to become a part of something “really, really small,” a quiet conspiracy that is destined to change our lives and God’s world. We will particularly focus on what God is doing through the emerging, missional, mosaic and monastic streams of the church. But we are all invited to join the creative edge by more fully discovering how God might use our mustard seeds to be a part of this conspiracy of compassion and hope.

The God who has always been a part of our stories invites us to become much more a part of God’s story, and to see what will happen. If you are discontented with a “business as usual” faith that seems to have little impact on either your life or God’s world, then this book is written with you in mind. If you are interested in what God is doing through the new con-

<sup>8</sup>Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1981), pp. 11-12.

<sup>9</sup>Shane Claiborne, “The Marketable Revolution,” *The Simple Way Online Newsletter*, March 2006, accessed at <[www.thesimpleway.org/mailings/marchnewsletter.pdf](http://www.thesimpleway.org/mailings/marchnewsletter.pdf)>.





spirators, this book will put you in touch with those on the innovative edge. If you want to join followers of Jesus all over the planet who are creating new ways to give expression to the kingdom, then keep reading.

### GLOBAL POSITIONING TOUR

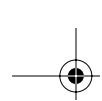
We will rapidly cover a broad terrain in our journey together. I have the gift of disorientation and get lost a lot as I travel. But I really don't want to lose you. The major stops on our journey together are conversations that explore God's quiet conspiracy and how we can be much more a part of it.

*Conversation I: Taking the new conspirators seriously.* I want you to meet these young leaders who are creating imaginative new expressions of life, church and mission. I also want you to get acquainted with those of all generations who are fashioning new monastic communities where they devote their lives to relationships, prayer and working with the poor. And I want you to meet those who are giving new expression to their faith in art, advocacy and celebration. I suspect you will be as challenged as I am by these poets, monks, clowns, prophets and other conspirators.

I organized these creative conspirators into four major streams: emerging, missional, mosaic (multicultural churches reaching out to a new generation) and monastic. Throughout the book I will share creative examples of how God is at work through these four streams and grapple with the provocative questions they raise for all of us regarding what it means to be faithful disciples of Jesus in a rapidly changing world.

*Conversation II: Taking the culture seriously.* I will also be taking you on a tour of a post-9/11 world. We suddenly find ourselves in a new neighborhood, a one-world economic order raising a host of new opportunities and challenges for our lives, our churches and God's world. I will particularly examine how globalization is increasingly seeking to define what is important and of value for people everywhere. I will offer a robust critique of the ways in which I believe the new global economy magnifies the values of modern and postmodern culture, and promotes them all over the planet. I am particularly concerned that these values are increasingly replacing the values of ancient faiths and traditional cultures. In fact, I am convinced that the





storytellers of the new global mall are trying to persuade us to make our home in the imaginary world they have fashioned in order to influence us to buy into their notions of what constitutes the good life and a better future.

***Conversation III: Taking the future of God seriously.*** I believe that numbers of us have settled for a narrow, spiritualized eschatology that is divorced from both the urgent issues that fill our world and the important decisions of our daily lives. We will seek to offer an eschatological vision that not only more directly engages our world but also offers direction for our individual lives and communities of faith as well.

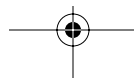
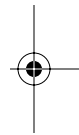
In this conversation, I will take you on a tour of some ancient/future images of hope that offer us a new way home. I will attempt to show that these images of hope offer an alternative view of the good life and better future from the one offered by the global mall. In other words, I will argue that we need a fresh grasp of God's new order as more than a kingdom theology we salute on Sunday; it's a reason to roll out of bed on Monday.

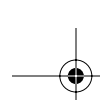
Shane Claiborne, of The Simple Way Community in Philadelphia, and a number of his friends conducted an impromptu demonstration regarding the new global economy and its impact on the poor. In front of a large crowd in a plaza on Wall Street in New York, he reimagined the focus of God's kingdom:

Some of us have worked on Wall Street, and some of us have slept on Wall Street. We are a community of struggle. Some of us are rich people trying to escape our loneliness. Some of us are poor folks trying to escape the cold. Some of us are addicted to drugs and others are addicted to money. We are a broken people who need each other and God, for we have come to recognize the mess that we have created of our world and how deeply we suffer from the mess. Now we are working to give birth to a new society within the shell of the old. Another world is possible. Another world is necessary. *Another world is already here.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 188, emphasis added. The Simple Way is now the name of the nonprofit organization associated with The Potter Street Community (formerly The Simple Way Community).





That's it! That's the imagery that is at the very center of the future to which the creator God is giving birth—"Another world is already here!"

In their important study of the emerging church in Britain and the United States, Ryan Bolger and Eddie Gibbs report that this is also the vision of the emerging church movement. One emerging church leader said, "We try to live into that reality and hope. We don't dismiss the cross; it is still a central part. But the good news is not that he died but the kingdom has come."<sup>11</sup>

In the classic film *The Lion in Winter*, Eleanor of Aquitaine (played by Katharine Hepburn) declares, "Anything is possible in a world in which a Jewish carpenter is raised from the dead." Indeed, not only is anything possible, but by the power of the risen Christ, we can passionately affirm that a new world has indeed broken into this one. Another world is here! Jesus came announcing this very good news, and he invites us to be a part of it, not with the leftovers of our lives but with our entire lives.

**Conversation IV: Taking the turbulent times seriously.** It is essential that both those in traditional churches and those embracing new expressions learn to lead with foresight, so I will outline specific ways to both anticipate and creatively respond to new challenges before they fully arrive on our doorsteps.

Then we will examine in more detail how the global context and the church are likely to change in the next ten to fifteen years, and we'll consider innovative ways we might respond to those changes. I will particularly identify some of the new problems and perils that are likely to confront all of us—the wealthy, the middle class and the poor. I will also present new challenges facing the troubled church and will describe creative ways in which followers of Jesus are responding to these challenges as well.

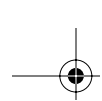
**Conversation V: Taking our imagination seriously.** Finally, I will take you on a global tour of ordinary people who are finding a broad spectrum of new ways to imagine, create and live into that world that is already here. These



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<sup>11</sup>Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 54.





people are inviting God to ignite their imaginations to be much more a part of God's quiet conspiracy. A number of them inhabit one or more of the four streams, but others are simply followers of Jesus in conventional congregations.

I will share new models of whole-life faith, communities of celebration and subversion, ancient liturgies, transformational forms of missional church, new models of social entrepreneurship, and new ways to party the kingdom 24/7. Please understand that I am not simply calling people to be innovative for the sake of innovation. Rather I am encouraging you to invite the Spirit to ignite your imagination for two very specific reasons:

- to more fully and authentically give expression to the world that is already here in every area of life, community and mission
- to more effectively respond to the mounting challenges coming at us from a changing world and a changing church

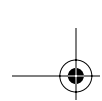
This book is an invitation to be much more a part of something really, really small that is quietly changing our world. But it is also an invitation to revisit our images and understandings of the story to which we have given our lives.

### REIMAGINING LIFE, FAITH, CHURCH AND MISSION

I find that many older evangelical Christians assume that all the important questions were answered decades ago and that we got all the answers right; now all we need to do is to simply improve our tactics and strategies. But as I look at the contemporary expressions of Christian life, church and mission, I am not convinced that we have gotten all the answers right. I am going to echo some of the tough questions I hear being raised by younger leaders on the conspiratorial edge. I am going to invite us to the challenging task of revisiting five important questions about life, faith and mission:

1. Did we get our eschatology wrong?
2. Did we get what it means to be a disciple wrong?
3. Did we get what it means to be a steward wrong?





4. Did we get what it means to be the church wrong?
5. Did we get what it means to do mission wrong?

#### NOT AN EASY RIDE

I am deeply grateful for what I am learning from a new generation. I realize my style is more modern than postmodern, and as an aging author I may not fully grasp all that God is doing through the young and the risk-taking. As a white author who has always been a part of a culture of privilege, I am certainly not the best one to write about multicultural expressions of the church. I have my share of broken places and blind spots. But I have attempted in this journey to candidly share both the growing problems and the new possibilities that are before us.

During this tour, you will confront some daunting challenges rushing at us from tomorrow's world. I don't expect you to agree with all my views or the views of the new conspirators. But I do hope to provoke a serious conversation about what it means to follow Jesus in a changing world and a changing church.

At the end of each section I will invite you to join the conversation. This book is designed to be used as a study or textbook. Questions are included at the end of each section, and a study guide is available on the Mustard Seed Associate website ([www.thenewconspirators.com](http://www.thenewconspirators.com)) for faculty and discussion leaders. I will invite you to think through new ways to give expression to what God is stirring up within you. I would also welcome hearing from you about your creative mustard seeds, your questions, critiques and humorous responses. You can contact us through our web address.

Welcome to a journey to discover how to become an active participant in something really, really small that is quietly changing our world!

