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**FORMING CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITIES
IN A SECULAR AGE**

Recovering Humility and Hope

Tim Dickau



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Thanks to Gord King for planting the seed in me to write this book during my early months of recovery. I also want to thank Gord for shepherding the process at each stage, for his own editing work, and for making sure that the book made it over the finish line!

A skilled, knowledgeable and passionate editor is a find. When that editor has known you and your community for over twenty years and operates with a shared theological vision, that find is invaluable. My editor, Karen Hollenbeck Wuest, is all that and more. I cannot imagine writing a book without her passionate assistance. Thanks Karen.

I also want to thank a number of other contributors to this book. Barry Morris, Jason Byassee, Karen Reed and Charles Ringma all gave me valuable feedback on the manuscript. Karen also filled in her neighborhood-building story which I narrate. Jamie Spray gave her detailed attention to the narration of our engagement with the Truth and Reconciliation commission and sharpened that section up significantly, as did Loren Balisky in the same chapter around Kinbrace's work in impacting the entire Canadian refugee system. Ed Siamacco drew the sketches in chapter one that give flesh to the ideas of Charles Taylor. Ed has a marvellous ability to express these ideas with a fresh clarity through his art. Thanks to

Andrea Armstrong for creating the thoughtful cover of the book in short order.

As you will read about in this book, the last two years of my life when I wrote this book have been years of recovery and transition for me vocationally and personally. I have been blessed to have such caring and competent caregivers in these years, people who I have been helped and blessed by. This group includes my addictions physician, Paul Sobey, and my counselor and spiritual director, Jeff Hayashi. Jeff met with me weekly for the first months and regularly since. His ability to ask penetrating, eye-opening questions and to discern and name the movements of the Spirit in my recovery from burnout kept me on the path when I was discouraged. I do not know how I could have navigated these years without you, Jeff.

My family cared for me in such deep and loving ways over these two years that it brings tears before words when I think about them. To Mitch, Taylor and Leanne, Thomas and Emily, my parents Leroy and Gladys, Brenda and Neil, Larry and Jan, Kathy and Bob, Charles and Rita, Nita and Laurie, Jim and Maureen, Sam, Johnny, and Barry – I want to thank you for being such a deep source of healing. Our first grandchild, Asher, gives me great delight as I observe his delight in the world. To Mary, the one whose loving pursuit of me has been boundless over our whole marriage, I owe the sweetest debt of love.

I am grateful too to Ross Lockhart and Jonathan Wilson who invited and called me into the vocational transition that has infused me with renewed life and energy. In my new roles, I look forward to sharing the mysterious and grace-filled ways in which the Divine One is weaving our restoration amidst the fallen powers in other contexts. Indeed, in this season of my life, I am excited to walk alongside other communities and congregations that desire to tread the way of divine love towards restoration in the places they inhabit in this world.

ENDORSEMENTS

There is no one alive from whom I would rather learn about ministry in the local church than Tim Dickau. He is the best combination of the biblical scholarship of an N.T. Wright, the creative institution-building of John Perkins, and the Anabaptist grit of the new monastics. This book's engagement with such luminaries as Charles Taylor and Willie James Jennings is a feast. Tim is Canadian so he won't brag. Let me tell you: this book is a must-read for pastors.

Jason Byassee

Vancouver School of Theology

Rarely does an author so effectively draw together threads of cultural and historical analysis, rich personal and pastoral experience, and community examples and wisdom into a single work. This challenging, engaging, and accessible book is written with deep humility and hope-filled insight. I highly recommend it!

Christine D. Pohl

Professor Emerita, Asbury Theological Seminary

Tim Dickau's *Forming Christian Communities in a Secular Age* is a must-read book for churches who want to live faithfully in the twenty-first century. Not only does he help readers navigate some of the most important social thinkers who help us understand the times in which we live, he also gives us imagination and guidance on how we might live faithfully together in our churches today.

C. Christopher Smith, Founding Editor of *The Englewood Review of Books*, and author of *How the Body of Christ Talks*

The church in the West today faces dual dangers of shrinking into irrelevance or waving defiant flags of self-destructive division. This

book calls for leaders to listen with humility to what the Spirit is saying to the church through the culture. Speaking with clarity and conviction, the author challenges us to consider what the church needs today to thrive in our place as a transformative community. Rather than programs and simple repetitive solutions, at this crucial juncture in western culture the church needs clear thinking and contemporary engagement that is theologically reflective and practically applied. The church needs this book.

Anna Robbins

President and Dean of Theology, Acadia Divinity College

“There are many and various voices advocating for the church’s revitalization of its inner life and its mission in the world. But this book is a must read. It provides a sustained analysis of contemporary society, a vision of church as an embodied community in the neighborhood sustained by a sacramental life in Christ through the Spirit, and engaged in a mission to the world that touches all the domains of life, including probing the nature of the ‘fallen powers.’ And there is more - the book pulsates with a probing humility that makes it winsome and invitational.”

Charles Ringma

Emeritus Professor Regent College, Vancouver.

People are always asking me for resources that might help them strategize in and with their communities about how to bring about lasting and meaningful change. Dickau offers us a weapon for righteousness or more precisely a weapon of humility that will help Christians see rightly their world and their work in it. This is a book for pastors, churches large and small, and for all Christians who believe that faithful witness to the gospel must be a witness in place and a witness of place.

Willie James Jennings

Associate Professor of Theology and Africana Studies, Yale Divinity School, Author of *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*

I was profoundly shaped by my time at Grandview. What Tim articulates here is humbly grounded in decades of work, prayer, and study in one place—the Grandview-Woodlands community in Vancouver—but his insights are a clarifying and empowering call for all The Church across North America. A powerful, rich, brilliant book.

Shad

Canadian Juno award winner. Host of HBO's Hip Hop Evolution and former host of CBC's Q.

This book shows how the disintegration of the church in a secular context presents the opportunity to reimagine the church and give hope to those wandering through a divided and despairing world. Tim Dickau deftly bridges the scholarly and the pastoral to display a realized vision of a congregation sharing the hardships and dreams of a neighborhood. The practical examples of liturgy, peace work, and alternative economic practices show what humility and openness to God's Spirit can allow to happen.

William Cavanaugh

Professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University and author of *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World*.

Tim Dickau's book grew out of decades pastoring a church along "pathways of fidelity to God's kingdom within our secular culture" The book weaves together three strands: his own story of burn-out and recovery; stories from Grandview Church in Vancouver as that community sought to be a Christian community; and Dickau's wide-ranging study, in many disciplines, seeking to understand our present context. He provides that rare book: a description of things done alongside the reasons we are called to do them now. He offers a welcome glimpse of church coming to life.

Jo-Ann Badley

Dean of Seminary, Ambrose University

With warmth and wisdom, Tim Dickau invites us on a transformative journey narrating the steps of how we find ourselves today in a post-Christendom landscape. As both a missional practitioner and scholar, Dickau offers the reader a thoughtful and encouraging exploration of Christian witness in our secular age. Rather than simply giving up or giving into the powers that challenge the gospel, this book demonstrates how small communities of Christian faith can lean boldly into the future God is bringing, with sanctified hope rather than naive optimism. Dickau's grounded and gracious reflections on discipleship leave the reader better equipped to express love of God and neighbor in a world searching for meaning within an immanent frame.

Ross Lockhart, Dean of St. Andrew's Hall, Vancouver and
Founder of The Centre for Missional Leadership.

PREFACE

*O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!
 O sublime humility!
 O humble sublimity!
 The Lord of the universe,
 God and the Son of God
 so humbles Himself
 that for our salvation
 He hides Himself
 Under an ordinary piece of bread!
 Brothers, look at the humility of God
 And pour out your hearts before Him!
 Humble yourselves
 That you may be exalted by Him!
 Hold nothing back of yourselves for yourselves
 That He who gives Himself totally to you
 May receive you totally!
 –St. Francis of Assisi¹*

Humility as a Lens for Illumination

“Humility, honesty, and openness,” I told Mary, my spouse, as I lay in a hospital bed after having an accident with our van two blocks from our home. I had stopped at the pub to watch a football game that night and had drunk too much before foolishly driving home. After I hit some trees and a light pole, I was taken to the hospital as a precautionary measure—sore, but very grateful that no one else had been involved in the accident and that I had not been hurt.

¹ Francis of Assisi, “A Letter to the Entire Order,” 27–29 in FA:EDI, 118.

These three words became the focal point of a new period in my life, one where I was compelled to examine why I had been drinking more in the previous months to distract myself from what my doctor and counselor later diagnosed as burnout from nearly three decades of pastoring in East Vancouver as part of Grandview church.

After the accident, our denomination gave me a year of discipline, which at first came as a blow, but eventually emerged as a gift because it afforded me much-needed time to rest, seek recovery, and reflect upon the unhealthy patterns and pride that had taken root in my soul. This pride was related both to my unwillingness to accept my own limits as a person as well as my reluctance to ask for help with my burnout and drinking. That year of leave plus the next year where I changed vocational roles also granted me distance from my work and involvements so that I could reflect more honestly and openly about my own and the church's journey over the previous three decades.

My desire to cultivate honesty, humility, and openness became a way for me to return to the path our church community had embarked upon when Mary and I had first arrived to be part of the church in 1989. At that time, many people considered that the church was approaching its inevitable end. The average age of our congregation had ascended into the sixties and seventies, and the number of folks participating in worship had dropped to around sixty on most Sundays. The majority of members had relocated far from our church building. Most people had given up on the idea that the existing congregation could connect with any of our neighbors. As one congregational member put it, "I don't think we can reach the people in this neighborhood anymore." We found ourselves where so many churches in North America find themselves today—deep in survival mode, with infirmity, death and burial all within sight. The fading of Christendom reflected in the departure of the adult children of our members left the remaining members very aware that the church was headed for extinction if it continued to decline.

Yet this very desperation led us to seek a new way of being the church. As a mentor once told me: "humiliation sometimes precedes humility." Our impending demise as a church led us to ask some

hard questions about our life and mission and why we had become so disconnected from the people and struggles of our neighborhood. We had to ask ourselves if we really believed in the God who could regenerate what had degenerated. As we asked these hard questions and searched for the recovery of our corporate vocation, we realized how dependent we were on the work of the Holy Spirit.

We began the difficult process of acknowledging and naming our desperation requiring us to take up a stance of honesty and humility. These actions enlivened our church to enter into the dynamic transforming work of God through the life-giving Spirit of Christ. Looking back, I would say that the posture of humility and honesty launched us toward a new beginning, a sort of resurrection. This posture also enabled us to listen to our neighbors, to consider their concerns for the neighborhood, and their perceptions about the church and faith, and to join them in seeking the common good of our shared neighborhood of Grandview-Woodlands.

Three decades later, as I reckoned with my own impending demise after my accident, I had to ask myself similar hard questions and search for my own path of recovery as I also sought the movement of the Holy Spirit in my life. Looking back, I realize the serendipitous gift that I had received during those first six months of my tenure at Grandview, in being able to listen to what was going on in the neighborhood and ask our neighbors all sorts of questions about our local community and how we could work together for its good. As our small congregation joined me in this humble practice of listening, it took us to the streets and into the homes and businesses of our neighbors.

A few years later, we entered a fourteen-month visioning process during which we honestly explored where we had come from, where we were, and where we were headed. This visioning exercise eventually spurred us along four trajectories as we embraced a shared life of hospitality, the diversity of our neighborhood, a commitment to seeking justice for the least, and the practice of confession. Over the next fifteen years, as we sought to discern the collective gifts and energy that the Spirit was cultivating in our midst, we developed numerous ways of responding to our neighborhood and

bearing witness to God's new world. These responses included the development of a meal and overnight shelter initiative, housing and support for refugee claimants, social enterprises, a community arts program for children, community housing and an urban retreat space. I wrote about this story after our first twenty years at Grandview.²

In that story, the postures of humility, honesty, and openness served as a springboard towards rediscovering and participating wholly in God's renewing mission for the world. Our journey confirmed the frequent biblical affirmation that God lifts up the humble,³ and yet this pathway was not easy or predictable, and the congregation often felt a sense of doom and desperation. While many gracious factors contributed to our renewed life as a congregation—including welcoming newcomers from other countries and cultures, engaging theological students who were motivated to be creative and work hard, connecting to generous funding sources, and seeking to resolve potentially destructive disagreements and conflicts—I doubt we would have taken the necessary risks in order to travel along these transformative trajectories without first embracing a posture of humility, honesty, and openness in listening to God, one another, and our neighbors. In the months following my accident, I was invited to return to these three postures as I sought to listen to God, the Grandview community, and the people with whom God had surrounded me to speak into the transformative trajectories within my own life.

The Hubris of our Secular Age

In examining Grandview's story and other stories of other Christian communities that have experienced renewal while also reflecting on as my own recovery journey,⁴ I concluded that the posture of

² See Tim Dickau, *Plunging into the Kingdom Way: Practicing the Share Strokes of Community, Hospitality, Justice and Confession* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

³ For a few examples, see Micah 6.8; 2 Chronicles 7.14; Luke 1.46–56; 18.9–14; James 4.10.

⁴ I have been privileged to be a part of a group of fifteen people who are creatively forming churches and communities of mission throughout the U.S. (I was the lone Canadian in my cohort). This group has met for several days a few times over the past years to explore the future of Christian community in North America. We have gathered at the beautiful St.

humility can stimulate the recovery of mission for the church. Furthermore, I suggest that humility can launch us towards the recovery of our human vocation in a secular age. *New York Times* columnist and author David Brooks spurred a public debate in this direction through his book *The Road to Character*, in which he develops a “humility code.”⁵ In this code, Brooks builds a fifteen-point argument about how pride remains the central vice that is holding us back from pursuing the “Good” in our secular age. Brooks’ large readership illustrates how the audacious retrieval of humility and holiness in forming an ethical vision aimed towards God and the Good can still grab the attention of an easily distracted population.

Even so, Brooks’ humility code is an anomaly within our North American culture, where humility is certainly waning as a virtue. Many political, business, and governmental leaders treat humility as a weakness that should be shunned in favor of neo-Nietzschean superman images of leadership. As leaders reach for personal charisma (or perhaps just infamy) and techno-rational control, trying to convince us that they can make anything happen so that we will put our faith in them instead of God, our culture seems to be mimicking ancient Israel in clamoring for a human king and rejecting Yahweh’s kingship.⁶

While pride is a recurring problem throughout biblical and human history, it often manifests itself in subtle ways. One subtle manifestation of pride is our culture’s pursuit of secularism. The historian and philosopher Charles Taylor describes this form of secularism as a way of being in the world that excludes or ignores a transcendent vision generally and God’s transforming activity more particularly.⁷

John’s Benedictine Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota at the behest of Bill Cahoy, with generous funding from the Lilly foundation. We have also connected with the Nurturing Communities Network through David Janzen. I have been struck by the humility of the creative leaders in all these communities.

⁵ See David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 240–270.

⁶ See 1 Samuel 8.7–10. “And the LORD told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.’”

⁷ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Taylor argues that we live within an “immanent order...understood as impersonal. This understanding of our predicament has as background a sense of our history: we have advanced to this grasp of our predicament through earlier more primitive stages of society and self-understanding” (542). In other words, we have reached a new stage of maturity, which, for the most part, finds meaning apart from God as we navigate our way in the world. Thus, a world infused with transcendent reality is hidden or veiled.

Taylor contrasts this form of “mature” secularism with “subtraction theories of secularization,” which suggest that as science and rationality ascend, the authority of the church recedes and therefore religious narratives or myths lose their power, thereby resulting in an inevitable departure from belief in God. Taylor rejects such subtraction theories by identifying intentional movements within Western church history and theology that located our meaning apart from God. These movements narrowed our Western imaginations so that we could function within an immanent framework, enabling us to slough off God and ignore God’s purposes within our everyday lives (although some of us push through this immanent frame in an attempt to recover a transcendent frame).

Theologian William Cavanaugh extends and challenges Taylor’s argument by looking further back in history to argue that the preponderance of this immanent frame in the Western mindset can also be viewed as a new expression of the age-old problem of idolatry.⁸ Rather than viewing the present world as disenchanting, Cavanaugh contends that the holy has migrated from God and the church to the ever-present self, the state, and the market. Each of

Taylor describes this form of secularism as a “social imaginary” within an “immanent frame” (18). All future page references to this book will be in parenthesis in the main text of the book. To say that our current form of secularism is susceptible to pride is not to say that all secularism is a move towards pride. Taylor argues otherwise, and I agree. However, I also lean towards William T. Cavanaugh, Willie Jennings and others who believe that Taylor underplays the idolatrous nature of our allegiances within the immanent frame. One might note that Taylor approaches these questions primarily as a historian and philosopher, whereas Jennings and Cavanaugh approach these questions as historical theologians.

⁸ See William T. Cavanaugh, “The Invention of the Religious–Secular Distinction,” in *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, ed. William Barber Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 127.

these spheres can become sites of our allegiance and worship.⁹ While Taylor describes this idolatry as a naïve acceptance that belief is optional, Cavanaugh argues that modernism has been not only an experiment in living within an immanent frame, but a very deliberate attempt to locate meaning apart from God or divine purposes.

Theologian Willie Jennings purviews this same time frame (from the 1500s to the present) to ask why our Christian imagination succumbed to colonial pathways that failed to direct us towards the social vision of fraternity and intimacy engendered in Jesus' mission.¹⁰ Jennings tells the story about how the gaze of "whiteness" that emerged in the colonial age not only permeates Western culture and academia, but also our theology. For Jennings, "whiteness" is not a biological term, but an evaluative term that identifies people according to the color of the skin—and apart from their land or place. This racist identification organizes people into a column, with "white" folks at the top and "black" folks at the bottom.¹¹ This idea of "whiteness" promotes a vision that others can attain or achieve. Anyone can fight their way to the top of the column and become "white." Those who occupy the world from the top of this column are continually susceptible to the temptation to displace God's call to love their neighbor. Rather than developing relationships of mutual intimacy, they must commodify people and places in order to control their position at the top.

Two features distinguish Jennings' critique of colonialism from the multitude of other critiques. First, he highlights the utter failure and corruption of Christian theology to address the powerful social currents of race and territory that were largely unexplored by Taylor. Second, he demonstrates how the organization of people according to race, and apart from their land or place, is at the root of many of our current economic, social, and political problems. In these ways, Jennings reveals a new layer about how the gospel

⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

¹⁰ Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Jennings distinguishes race from ethnicity or ethnic culture. Historically, race denotes a power relationship while ethnicity denotes a benign description.

was distorted and undermined by colonialism. Because the gospel has been distorted, many people contest its goodness and cannot believe in the God whose story it tells, nor in the society that it has generated.

While many other voices have contributed to our understanding of secularism, this book will focus on these three writers, who lift the shroud that is covering the hidden hubris lurking beneath the secularism of Western society.¹² This hubris has both distorted the Christian faith and paved the road towards unbelief. This underlying pride and overconfidence in our ability to control life has certainly been exposed and questioned recently by the Coronavirus pandemic, but it remains strong nonetheless.

When we embrace humility, as described by St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) at the beginning of this book, we unmask this hubris. If we define humility as having a realistic assessment of our self and our abilities, along with a willingness to occupy a lower position in society, then we can embark on the “Road to Character” as we seek a society of fraternity with one another, especially with the least. Going even further back in history, if we acknowledge, with Augustine (c. 354–430), that we are creatures who are dependent upon our creator, we may well find ourselves rediscovering the road back to a sacramental way of life.¹³ By engaging Taylor’s thesis around secularism, I will cast a vision for how embracing this posture of humility might lead churches or intentional communities towards a more faithful response to the gospel, one that may even compel our neighbors who identify themselves as religious

¹² For a brief and concise analysis of sociological research on secularism and religion in the last fifty-five years, see Joel Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill/Queens University Press, 2015), 13–30.

¹³ For the distinction between an early Christian view of humility, as held by Augustine and the monastics, and a philosophical view of humility, as it is understood today, see Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride and Christian Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Dunnington argues that for early Christians, humility inherently includes an understanding that our life as creatures is dependent upon God. Dunnington suggests that, for Augustine, this element of creaturely dependence rests upon one’s ability to trust in the limitless and faithful love of God. Augustine also observed that those with much learning were the most resistant to the gospel.

“nones” to reconsider their responses to the God of agape love, who continues to be for us, from one age to the next.¹⁴

Telling our Stories with Humility¹⁵

Church leaders today are not exempt from the forces described by Taylor, Cavanaugh, and Jennings. My own unwillingness to acknowledge my burnout and to live within my personal limits are symptoms of this hubris. Even in writing this book to share some of what our congregation has learned over the past thirty years of walking this road, I am aware of the danger of reducing our story to a techno-rational approach, one that could imply, “do it our way” to achieve “success.” Read within an immanent frame, our story could easily ignore the renewing and restoring actions of God, suggesting that if you embrace the correct technique or adopt the latest program, you can “grow” a church just like this one for the kingdom *with or without* God. Yet our experience has taught us otherwise. At many junctures, we have been confounded about what to do, and rather than landing on the “right” path, we have tried to discern together how the Spirit is leading us or redirecting us.

Nor is our story as a church (nor the other communities that I will write about) so much one of ongoing progress, but at some junctures more akin to regress. The year of reflection after my car crash brought to light areas where a good portion of our leadership was overstretched. Indeed, there have been numerous occasions in our journey together when we would have imploded if we had not received an infusion of divine grace and mercy. I think that any long-lived Christian community would narrate its story with a strong sense of God’s grace in each chapter.

The prevalence of divine grace is not the only reason for telling our stories with humility. A major deficiency or delusion in a more

¹⁴ See Sarah Wilkins-LaFlamme and Joel Thiessen, *None of the Above: Non-religious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: NYU Press, 2020). See also Luis Lugo, “Nones on the Rise” (*Pew Research Center*, October 12, 2012).

¹⁵ I will alternate between the language of church and Christian community, as I am envisioning a wide variety of configurations for what communal Christian formation might look like on the ground.

modernist “a + b + c = x” way of telling stories of “church renewal” is the way they seem to suggest pridefully that we alone have discovered all the best techniques and programs while downplaying the forces we are up against in our culture—even when churches are impacting their neighborhoods for the common good. On the one hand, studies such as Robert Putnam’s *American Grace* in the United States or *The Halo Project* in Canada illustrate the positive ways that struggling churches can build social capital and create social benefits within our cities and municipalities.¹⁶ Many of these stories remain under the radar and do not receive the public attention of journalists or politicians.

On the other hand, this is not the whole story. Many churches feel pressure to pursue a successful model that is often defined essentially as adding people, money, or activities. One can be “successful” in this mode while remaining disengaged with or naively engulfed by the secular forces that are shaping and misshaping society. Some of these forces include consumerism, autonomous individualism, entrenched economic and racial inequality, and the latent anthropocentrism that has brought about our climate crisis. In my experience, many “missional” churches fail to engage or even acknowledge these forces, as if we could continue gathering as the church and proclaiming the gospel in spite of the ways that these forces distort our world. Admittedly, the magnitude and complexity of these forces can be overwhelming, and so we might ignore them because of our seeming incapacity to address them, choosing to focus on our personal “survival” or “growth” instead. Moreover, even when we do attempt to address these forces, our impact on culture can feel negligible.

Of course, many people who are not part of a church feel overwhelmed by these forces as well. Broad swaths of society are sounding the alarm about issues such as human-induced climate change and the loss of biodiversity, along with trenchant income inequality. In *The Future of Ethics*, a perceptive analysis of climate change and

¹⁶ Robert Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012); Cardus, *The Halo Project* (Toronto: 2015–2020), Retrieved at <https://www.haloproject.ca/calculator/about/>

inequality, Willis Jenkins elucidates why it is that these problems are so befuddling and difficult to address—not only for society at large, but for the church in particular.¹⁷ Jenkins identifies how the evil in these forces is woven into our basic ways of living, making change difficult to address. Many people in our Grandview neighborhood and church community are actively trying to respond to these intractable problems, and yet I often hear cries of despair about our inability to make significant progress toward resolving them. Moreover, the ethical frameworks that the church has developed for other issues of injustice seem insufficient to be able to address an issue like the climate crisis effectively. In this light, humility is both a virtue that we need to adopt in our churches to engage these systemic forces, and it is also a necessary posture in our engagement with the broader culture, for if we are arrogant or over-overconfident in the church's ability to address these issues, we will look utterly foolish.

We also need to tell our stories with humility as the church because so many of us (including me) are writing about these forces from a place of general security, wealth, and privilege. In a world where 1.4 billion people live on less than \$1.75 per day,¹⁸ I have access to many resources simply because of my geographical and class location. I own the land I live upon in an expensive part of Vancouver, and as a white male, I have had many opportunities and privileges educationally and vocationally than most other sub-groups.¹⁹ All of these privileges have enabled me to move beyond

¹⁷ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice and Religious Creativity* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ See *Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century*, Human Development Report, United Nations. Retrieved at <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>. While income inequality has been decreasing slightly in some countries for the last twenty years, this decreasing gap between the rich and poor has not significantly impacted the poorest regions of the world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa. See Jenkins, *Future of Ethics*, 235.

¹⁹ This is not to affirm all aspects of critical race theory, however, as some forms of critical race theory seem to suggest that racism can never really be addressed. I am also not claiming that the experience of all white males is one of privilege. For one example, see J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), a well-told story that reveals this trend of white male marginalization and alienation.

survival and given me the time to reflect upon these realities. We live in a very uneven world, and most of the social forces I describe above exacerbate our divisions and impact the poor disproportionately. I am troubled by this reality and so willingly acknowledge my location of wealth and power within the church's ambiguous history in relationship to the poor.

In the face of these perplexing powers and inequitably distributed privilege, it seems even more vital for us to tell our stories and participate in the mission of God with humility. While a few rapidly growing churches can prop up the notion that the church is flourishing, most church leaders that I know feel as if the rug has been pulled out from under their ecclesiastical feet. Moreover, because belief has become optional and religion has been sidelined in the public sphere, the voice of the church has been effectively muted, making a life that is devoted to God seem irrelevant if not ludicrous. Like the dark, dense, suffocating cloud cover that often hangs over Vancouver's Pacific coastline in the winter, the secularism Taylor describes can cast gloom and doubt over long-standing followers of Christ.²⁰

In the quotation cited at the beginning of this preface, St. Francis reminds the monks in his order that the humble will see God. Later, Giovanni Bonaventure (c. 1221–1274), an early Franciscan theologian, proposed that humility is integral to God's love, a truth that became most apparent when God humbly took on flesh in the form of a servant and laid down his life for the world.²¹ Theologian Katherine Sonderegger, who has recovered and helpfully reframed notions about God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, continually returns to the theme of God's humility in her systematic theology. She writes, "The act of creation itself, in a quiet and indirect manner, testifies to the humility of this omnipotent Creator: we do not see God directly in the things He has made. He

²⁰ As I write this, I am very aware of my location in Western culture and recognize that my experience does not reflect the majority of people in the global south. See Philip Jenkins, *Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²¹ See Ilia Delio, *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger, 2005), 14–19.

is hidden and invisible in His own creation.”²² Her words highlight one of the key reasons we need to tell our stories with humility. If God is continually humbling himself through ongoing acts of creation and restoration, then living and telling our stories with humility is a subversive and authentic way we can bear witness to the humility and love of the creator God in our secular, suspicious, and power-abused age.

Hope versus Optimism

In the context of the collapse of Christendom, one could paint a pointless and pessimistic picture about the church’s future, but that is not my intention in this book. Instead, I want to ask *if God might be birthing something new out of this secularized world*. As theologian Jenn Richards puts it: *What if the collapse of Christendom is a birth rather than a death?*²³ In this sense, I am seeking to engender hope instead of optimism. Terry Eagleton writes insightfully about the difference between optimism and hope, noting that optimism is not a “disposition one attains through deep reflection or disciplined study ... [but] simply a quirk of temperament ... Authentic hope, by contrast, needs to be underpinned by reasons.... It must be able to pick out the features of a situation that render it credible. Otherwise, it is just a gut feeling.”²⁴

For Christians, our unexpected hope rests on the crushing death of a Jewish rabbi in the shadow of a totalitarian empire and his surprising resurrection. The hope that God will do for all of creation what God has already done for Jesus empowers us to trust that God will restore all things in Christ, even when we are not

²² Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2015), 307–308. In her systematic theology, Sonderegger gives more attention to the oneness of God without diluting the doctrine of the Trinity, offering what she views as a corrective to certain elements in the Trinitarianism offered by theologians such as Zizioulous and Moltmann.

²³ This phrasing of the question caught my attention in a paper I heard presented by Jenn Richards at the “Christian Witness in Post-Christian Soil!” conference at St. Andrew’s Hall in Vancouver B.C., on May 11, 2019. The paper can be found in Jenn Richards, “From Soldiers to Midwives,” in *Christian Witness in Cascadian Soil: Coworkers with God in the Land of Hiking, Hipsters, and Hand-Crafted Lattes*, Ross Lockhart, ed. (Eugene: Cascade, 2021).

²⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 2.

optimistic about our particular moment in history or our particular church or city.²⁵ Indeed, during the year following my crash and the exposition of my alcohol abuse, other problems, such as a collective burnout, were revealed in our church's life—and these were problems to which I had contributed. There were innumerable points during that year when optimism was in short supply, and yet hope still thrust up through the ground nonetheless.

Hope in the indwelling action of God runs counter to the spirit of our secular age, and in my pastoral experience, it runs counter to our daily experience. This hope is not based upon the belief that if we are healthy as individuals or communities, all will “go well,” but rather the conviction that God is at work in and through a repentant church, which will always be a mixture of health and un-health, the tragic and the comical.

In telling stories of joy and sorrow, success and failure, repentance and restoration that Grandview Church and other communities have stumbled through as we have sought to live into the mission of God through this secular age, I trust that you will become more alert to the features and signs of God's action within your own lives, communities and cities. By sharing the twists and turns of my own recovery journey, I hope to encourage others who have also struggled with burnout or alcohol abuse. Ironically, I have learned that sharing vulnerabilities and weaknesses can be just as nourishing as sharing our “successes.” As you hear about our innovation as well as our failures, our persistent questions as well as our surprising discoveries, may you be reinvigorated to take up your calling as the body of Christ for the flourishing of the particular place that you inhabit.

Reading books together is one pathway that opens vistas we may not otherwise encounter. I encourage you to find a few other companions to read this book alongside and then explore the discussion questions at the end of each chapter together. As Peter Block writes in his instructive book *Community*, asking good questions and exploring them together is inherent to developing a fuller

²⁵ See 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul outlines this argument as follows: “as for Jesus, so for all creation.”

expression of communal life and vision.²⁶ If you are reading this book alone, I invite you to reflect on these questions personally and to use them to engage in dialogue with housemates, church leaders, or community members. As you reflect on these questions, may you be drawn deeper into the divine love and mission of the creator and re-creator of all things.

²⁶ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, (San Francisco, Baret-Koehler Publishers, 2008), p. 102.

INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF THE JOURNEY AHEAD

As we begin this journey, I first invite you into a very condensed summary of Charles Taylor’s detailed historical narrative about how we came to be living in our secular age. Taylor’s analysis both counters the “subtraction” theory of secularism and identifies the shifts towards unbelief that were initiated within the church itself. In order to navigate these theological shifts in a way that bears life and hope into the world, we first need to understand them.

Second, within this shifting cultural landscape of secularism, I will invite you into a theological and ecclesial re-imagining of new stories about how communities can live as the church for the world. These stories are not about reviving the church as it was during Christendom, but rather “re-founding” the church in light of its pre-modern history.²⁷ Techno-rational approaches to growing churches tend to imply that our problems are with our methods or that the “right” method will always lead to the same right result. Yet living out the mission of the church in a particular time will always require innovation—and this is even more true today in our fragmented society. This does not suggest that we can ignore history. Our imaginations can be informed and stirred about how to be the church for the world in our secular age by learning from previous generation’s innovations in implementing the healing victory of God in Jesus through the Spirit by reigning over the powers of evil and oppression. I will draw upon such innovations in Grandview’s mission as well as other responses in the history of the church, particularly monasticism.

²⁷ See Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of the Church* (Lakewood, Col.: Church Press, 2018).

Third, I will invite you to look closely at Grandview church, which has been around for over a century, and has been deliberately seeking the kingdom of God in our small plot of God's earth over the past three decades. While this pathway has hardly been a straight line forward, we have been traveling in the same general direction towards a deeper common life and wider engagement with our city. Our sustained theological and missional direction has enabled us to move into new territory and to make discoveries that other communities may not encounter in their early years of renewal.

This learning includes uncovering some danger areas. For example, over the years we have found ourselves careening to the edges of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, only to be pulled back towards the center over time. This dialectical movement between the center and periphery has felt jagged and disruptive at times, but it has also enabled us to hold together disparate or polarized elements of the mission of God in one local church, such as engaging in diverse prayer practices alongside passionate work for justice. I trust that our own learning might be of help and give hope to other communities who are experiencing some of the confounding impacts of these rapid shifts in culture. While Grandview has sent plenty of people to other parts of the world, many have made commitments of stability to this particular neighborhood. I believe that we need more people who will inhabit places for the long haul, working towards the full panorama of colors found in God's picture of a restored world. Indeed, a recovery of a theology and love of place lies at the heart of Grandview's vision.

Mapping the Journey Ahead

The book follows a call and response pattern as I intersperse chapters on theological and social analysis with chapters offering a description of practices that illustrate responses to this analysis. Nonetheless, the first half of the book is weighted more towards analysis and the second half is weighted more towards practice. In the first half of the book, I describe our secular age and offer systemic social analysis. In chapter 1, I briefly summarize Taylor's

argument and describe what it is like to be the church in this secular, post-Christian context. In describing our context in the Pacific Northwest of North America, I will elucidate how many people are living within an “immanent frame,” where God, the purposes of God, and divine agency drift into the background or disappear altogether. For those who are not connected to a faith community, this immanent frame often leads to a “malaise” that draws them towards transcendence. At the same time, this immanent frame tempts Christ-followers towards self-sufficiency and a sort of functional atheism. James K. A. Smith has already offered an excellent summary of Taylor’s work,²⁸ so my intention is not to duplicate that summary, but to reflect on how Taylor’s ideas are expressed in our daily lives. In chapter 2, I offer my own pastoral experience of the phenomena described by Taylor (and Smith) as an extended meditation on the conditions of secularism in my neighborhood and city. In chapter 3, I augment Taylor’s analysis by exploring some of the powers and forces that are at work in the world today; these powers and forces form our “social imaginary,” which is a way of being in the world that is generally (and often naively) accepted as “the way things are.”²⁹ I identify these powers and forces as autonomy, consumerism, globalization, racism, inequality, anthropocentrism, and secularism. My hope is that the composite picture of these powers will awaken us to the colossal barrier they present to living into God’s vision for our world. In chapter 4, I explore three broad responses to these powers.

In the second half of the book, I will discuss how we might respond to the powers of our secular age by forming Christian communities that are pursuing a more holistic vision of what Jesus describes as the “kingdom of God.” This vision takes the patient, long view of God’s restorative aims and actions in our world in order to reconcile all things in Christ.³⁰ In chapter 5, I offer a theology and

²⁸ James K.A. Smith, *How Not to be Secular* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

²⁹ Taylor defines the social imaginary as “. . . the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, and legends.” (172).

³⁰ In this regard, the patient posture I am arguing for is in line with the practice of the

praxis of a thicker, richer, and more porous shared life for Christian communities while chapter 6 grounds this theology in the experiences of Grandview Church. In chapter 7, I propose a theology of deeper engagement with the particular places where we live as a way of pursuing God's justice and shalom. Chapter 8 fleshes out this theology in Grandview's journey over the past decade. Together, the chapters cast a vision for the church to pursue both a thicker and richer community life as well as a deeper and more persistent engagement with our neighbors, the trouble spots of our culture, and the complex systems or powers that are shaping in our world. In my experience, I have observed communities or churches that either develop a thicker community life or engage systemic problems within society, but few that integrate both these aspects of the church's mission.

I argue in chapter 9 that it essential to hold these two features of Christian community together if we hope to live out a "hermeneutic of the gospel."³¹ If our aim is to initiate and form people for the renewed world that Jesus inaugurated through his death and resurrection, then I believe we will need more communities that are seeking to follow this sort of path. This chapter also engages the work of discipleship and evangelism, exploring alternative ways that we might conceive of these efforts more communally. Finally, in chapter 10, I turn towards (new) monasticism as a promising resource for our formation if we are going to persist in forming these kinds of Christian communities. Monasticism holds a clue to the future shape of the church in that it brings common practice and intentional formation alongside long-term stability and a theological vision for transformation of places. My hope is that this book will nudge people who are committed to forming and leading Christian communities towards humility and long-term hope, which are core values of many (new) monastic communities.

early church. See Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2016). See also Chris Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

³¹ Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 222–233.

I believe that God is birthing creative responses and new forms of being the church out of the collapse of Christendom and the particular problems we face in the world today. As I have reflected on the shifts we have made over the past few hundred years towards the “optionality” of belief that Taylor describes, I have wondered how God will use this shift to awaken the church to its original identity and missional role in the world. Throughout Scripture, the paradigmatic way of God is to bring new life out of places of loss and death: from the Exodus, to the exile, to the persecution of the church, to Jesus’ death and resurrection. As Jeremiah wrote to the exiles, the challenge is to see that God is already ahead of us—in Babylon, of all places, a foreign world, where we are to build homes, plant gardens, give our children in marriage and seek the peace of the city.³² In the alien worlds of our age, we are called to form Christian communities for the healing and restoration of the world.

As you embark on this reading journey, I invite you to consider how your household, community or church can grapple with what it means to live faithfully in this secular age. I also invite you to ponder what God might be birthing for your group in this time and context—something that is both unexpected and life-giving to others. May you intentionally enter this imaginative space with humility and hope as you anticipate how the Spirit will actively reshape you, your community, or church to participate in God’s mission anew. As you humble yourself in hope before the Triune God, may you and your community be plunged anew into the way of Jesus—the kingdom of God—for this secular age.

Questions for Further Reflection

Consider reading this book with a small group so you can discuss it together. Reading together is one way we can resist the overwhelming power of autonomy that misshapes our culture.

³² Jeremiah 29.7. Numerous voices over the last forty years have reminded us that the disorientation brought on by the end of Christendom can be the beginning of a re-orientation to the mission of God. The first person I heard frame the situation in this way was Al Roxburgh nearly four decades ago. See also Alan Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

11. What experiences have humbled you personally?
12. What experiences have humbled you as a church?
13. Where is hope wearing thin for you?
14. What gives you hope?