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Book Review: The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating The Missional Church

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The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating The Missional Church

Reviewed By Darren Cronshaw

Hirsch, Alan. The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating The Missional Church. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006

The Forgotten Ways explores what Alan Hirsch maintains are the basic elements of what makes a missional movement. He starts with an analysis of the early church and the church in China—groups without legality, buildings, professional leadership, seeker-sensitive services or much in the way of Scripture—and asks how did they foster their phenomenal growth? The answer, he says, lies not in anything that can be packaged as a new program. Rather it stems from what he terms ‘Apostolic Genius’¹ which is latent within the people of God and made up of six inter-relating elements of ‘Missional-DNA’ (mDNA):

1. Jesus is Lord—The early church and believers in China distilled the message down to this simple confession (or sneezable virus) that recognized the claims of the one God over all of life. To counter the sacred/secular dichotomy, Hirsch contends: ‘Following the impulses of biblical monotheism rather than setting up some sacred spaces, our task is to make all aspects and dimensions of life sacred—family, work, play, conflict, etc.—and not to limit the presence of God to spooky religious zones’ (p.95).
2. Disciple Making—Contrary to consumeristic patterns of faith, Hirsch reminds us that the lifelong task of a disciple is becoming like Jesus and embodying his message (like little Jesus¹ in our communities). Rather than expecting to ‘think our way into new ways of acting’¹ as if we only need to know the right things, Hirsch calls believers to action and obedience, quoting, among others,

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TS Eliot: “The greatest proof of Christianity for others is not how far a man can logically analyze his reasons for believing, but how far in practice he will stake his life on his belief” (p.101).

3. Missional-Incarnational Impulse—Rather than relying on an “Evangelistic-attractional” mode to bring people into church, the “Emissional-incarnational impulse” seeks to seed and embed the gospel in the midst of cultures. This takes discipline to practice what he explores as presence, proximity, powerlessness and proclamation. Grassroots groups such as Upstream Communities in Perth and Third Place Communities in Hobart are test cases of communities of Jesus followers seeking to live life and “do church” in ways consistent with the rhythms and needs of their local communities.
4. Apostolic Environment—Hirsch describes apostolic leaders as custodians of the “DNA”. They are the servant-inspirers who cultivate an environment for other leaders and ministries to emerge. An important part of this is APEPT leadership drawing on Ephesians 4:7-13—including those gifted in Apostolic, Prophetic and Evangelistic ministry (who are sometimes sidelined in the church) as well as Pastoral and Teaching ministries (which a lot of training and expectations are about in the church today).
5. Organic Systems—Rather than an institutional approach to organization where CEO-styled leaders direct with a command and control CEO-approach to leadership, missional movements spread more organically. When groups network as organic systems they can unleash their members to flexibly interact with one another and their environment. Rather than retreating from the chaos of change, they can embrace it and flow with the rhythms of life: “Planting a new church, or re-missionalizing an existing one, in this approach isn’t primarily about buildings, worship services, size of congregations, and pastoral care, but rather about gearing the whole community around natural discipling friendships, worship as lifestyle, and mission in the context of everyday life. As a living network “in Christ” it can meet anywhere, anytime and still be a viable expression of church. This is a much more organic way to plant a church or to revitalize it” (p.185). This is a theme, in fact, of the whole book and is explored further in an addendum.

6. *Communitas*, not community—Rather than seeking *Community*¹ as an end in itself, Hirsch explores the ideal of having our imagination captured by seemingly impossible mission challenges, out of which *communitas* evolves. He draws on Victor Turner's anthropological analysis of *communitas* (how a group forms together around a dangerous journey or mission) and liminality (a transition process accompanying a fundamental change). In one sense, the context of post-Christendom which has marginalized the place of church in society and the way we face rapid discontinuous changes in the twenty-first century forces us into liminality, but in another sense liminality is where we belong anyway as the pilgrim people of God.

Each of these elements is important in themselves but when they operate together they create the synergy of Apostolic Genius and can foster phenomenal growth. Strengthening any one area can help a local church grow and be more healthy, but fostering all of these elements is how this kind of material in *The Forgotten Ways* can foster missional movements. Other books treat individual elements in themselves, but this book significantly explores them together, not to bolster up the church as institution but to cultivate a movement of organic growth.

Hirsch has led a local church and a denomination through processes to reflect on their missional fitness, planted churches among subcultures, started (and closed down) an innovative missional café project, started Forge Mission Training Network in Australia and consulted with missional groups around the world. He draws on these experiences, and on his reading of history and Scripture, to point towards new imaginative ways of doing mission and church. These *Ways*¹ that he suggests, though often forgotten, echo movements like the early church and China. While we do not face the same persecution as those two groups, we do face the *adaptive challenge*¹ of dealing with *rapid discontinuous change*¹ and the thirst for spirituality and community in Western societies. His reflections are worth reading, reading again and most importantly acting upon.

The Forgotten Ways is a welcome and significant addition to the literature on mission to the West written by a leading missiological strategist. It will prove to be a useful tool to help shape new forms of missional church—for church planters, those leading change in existing churches and all mission-hearted followers of Jesus. It is not an academic tome but a handbook for practitioners. I am using it to evaluate missional churches I am visiting and learning from, and as a compass to guide a missional

experiment in our neighborhood. A blog and further resources (including a missional fitness tool and APEPT analysis) is accessible at www.theforgottenways.org <<http://www.theforgottenways.org>>.

Reviewer

Writer

Cronshaw, Darren. Address: 7 Coolaroo Court, Mooroolbark VIC 3138 Australia. Title: Director of Theological Studies. Rev Dr Cronshaw earned a B.A. and M.Litt from Australian National University (1992 and 1994), a Graduate Diploma of Education from University of New England (1994), a Bachelor of Theology (honors) from Bible College of Victoria (1997), a Master of Theology from Whitley College (1999), and a Doctor of Ministry from Bible College of Victoria (Australian College of Theology) (2006). His book *Credible Witness* (UNOH 2006), based on his DMin thesis, explores models of mission drawing on Australian history and culture. This paper introduces the four emerging churches Darren is researching as case studies of mission and innovation and some of the questions he is starting to explore towards a Doctor of Theology at Whitley College (Melbourne College of Divinity). Darren has had rich and varied experience in pastoral ministry, Christian camping and cross-cultural contexts. He has also taught as adjunct faculty at Bible College of Victoria, Whitley College, and Tabor College (Melbourne), and serves with Forge Mission Training Network (www.forge.org.au). Husband to Jenni, Dad to three children, lover of good books and movies, and newcomer to the emerging conversation, Darren welcomes feedback to shapingnow@optusnet.com.au