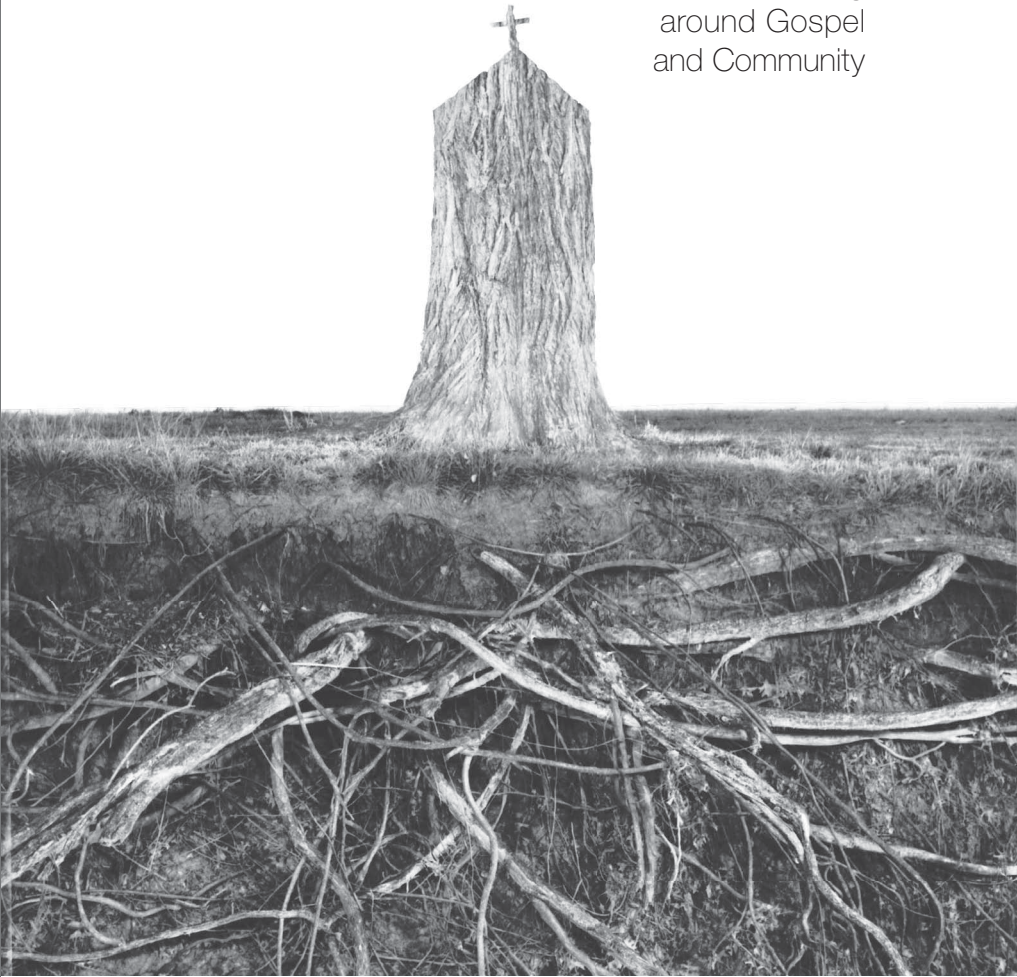


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RE:LIT

total CHURCH

A Radical Reshaping
around Gospel
and Community



Tim Chester and Steve Timmis

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Total Church

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DISCIPLESHIP AND TRAINING

JESUS' FIRST ACT AT THE beginning of his ministry was to declare the imminent arrival of God's kingdom (Mark 1:14–15). His second act was to call people to follow him (Mark 1:16–20). The first act concerned the arrival of a whole new order rather than a modification of present arrangements. The second act demonstrated the reality of this. By inviting four fishermen to follow him, Jesus was actively inaugurating this new age as he formed a new community. Discipleship was common among rabbis of the day. But whereas pupils tended to attach themselves to rabbis, Jesus took the initiative by issuing a command. This was Jesus the King summoning followers. Every Christian is a disciple of Jesus because in the kingdom of God it is only Jesus who has disciples. It is legitimate to talk about Christians discipling one another as long as we recognize that we are describing the process by which disciples of King Jesus help one another to be better disciples of King Jesus.

In the chapter on evangelism we argued that both the gospel word and the gospel community are central to the evangelistic process. It is the same for discipleship. The means by which sinners are evangelized, the gospel word and the gospel community, are the means by which sinners are disciplined. We continue to “evangelize”

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one another as Christians because it continues to be the gospel message with which we exhort and encourage one another. The good news that gives life is the good news that transforms, while the community that incarnates gospel truth for the sinner is the community that incarnates gospel truth for the saint.

Indeed Jesus defines mission as a process of discipleship. In the Great Commission he establishes the necessity and means of universal discipleship: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18–20). The means by which the nations are discipled are baptism and teaching.

BAPTIZING PEOPLE INTO THE GOSPEL COMMUNITY

Baptism is an act of initiation, a way in. It is a dramatic act that tells a story. It speaks about dying to an old way of life, an old set of values, an old community, and a former identity. It also speaks about rising to a new way of life, a new set of values, a dynamic new community, and a revolutionary identity. Baptism is a communal act, not a solitary affair. It is how we experience the corporate, shared life of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We become disciples by becoming part of the people of God. Baptism marks our birth into the family of God. This is the context where I am *made* a disciple. The implications of the Great Commission become apparent when we see how the first disciples worked out that Commission in the book of Acts. What we discover is that it meant church planting. As the disciples went in response to the command to be witnesses to Jesus, they planted churches in Antioch (11:26), Derbe, Lystra, Iconium (14:1–26), Philippi (16:11–40), Thessalonica (17:1–9), Corinth (18:1–11), and Ephesus (19:1–10).

It is in the family of God that I am able to care and be cared for, love and be loved, forgive and be forgiven, rebuke and be rebuked, encourage and be encouraged—all of which are essential

to the task of being a disciple of the risen Lord Jesus. Too often, however, churches are not contexts for making disciples so much as occasions for acknowledging relative strangers. Experience teaches that there is also an inverse ratio at work: the larger the group, the more inevitable is the superficiality of our relationships. Instead of churches growing beyond the point of being able to sustain meaningful life-on-life family relationships, an alternative (and maybe essential) strategy would be to begin new congregations through church planting.

G. K. Chesterton said, “The man who lives in a small community lives in a much larger world. . . . The reason is obvious. In a large community we can choose our companions. In a small community our companions are chosen for us.”¹ Community has been insightfully defined as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives!² Responding to this, Philip Yancey says, “We often surround ourselves with the people we most want to live with, thus forming a club or clique, not a community. Anyone can form a club; it takes grace, shared vision, and hard work to form a community.”³ We might also add that it takes a miracle that only God himself can perform. But it is in such a community that disciples are made. To be a community of light from which the light of Christ will emanate we need to be intentional in our relationships—to love the unlovely, forgive the unforgivable, embrace the repulsive, include the awkward, accept the weird. It is in contexts such as these that sinners are transformed into disciples who obey everything King Jesus has commanded.

TEACHING PEOPLE THE GOSPEL WORD

Babies are not just born into families and then left there. In functioning families, they are nurtured and prepared for adulthood. For all the talk of peer pressure and the influence of the media, the primary influence on a child is the family. This is the context in which children learn values. But not much of that teaching occurs in formal “sit down and listen to Mother or Father for forty-five minutes” con-

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texts! Most of it is done in life settings as situations crop up. Most of it happens in conversations as you are out walking the dog or washing the car. Much of it is in response to events in which someone has messed up, misbehaved, or made an error of judgment—all actions that in some way reveal what is going on in our hearts.

All too often people equate being word-centered with being sermon-centered. People argue for sermons by arguing for the centrality of God's word, assuming that the word and the sermon are synonymous in Christian practice. It assumes God's word can only be taught through sermons. Or people assume that the alternative to sermons is anarchy or relativism with no place for the Spirit-gifted teacher of God's word, as if Spirit-gifted teachers can only exercise their gift through forty-five-minute monologues.

But our concern is not to reject the sermon. Monologue continues to have its place as one of the ways in which the Bible can and should be taught. It stands alongside other complementary methods such as dialogue and discussion. Being word-centered is not less than being sermon-centered. Our contention is that being word-centered is so much more than being sermon-centered.

The reality is that there is little New Testament evidence for the sermon as we understand it today. Jesus taught primarily through dialogue, sayings, and stories. He occasionally taught in synagogues, but more often he taught in homes, along the road, and in the open air. The so-called "Sermon on the Mount" is probably a summary of a whole day of teaching, giving us little clue about the nature of interaction that went on. The sermons in Acts are for the most part unprepared defense speeches. They are not delivered from a pulpit on a Sunday morning but before a court or before a mob. When Paul does address Christians on a Sunday (and Eutychus falls asleep!), the word used to describe his teaching is the Greek word from which we get our English word *dialogue* (Acts 20:7). The word commonly translated "preach" means to proclaim the gospel to unbelievers. It covers any verbal communication including discussion, dialogue, or debate. It actually conveys what we mean

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when we speak today of evangelism rather than simply a forty-five-minute monologue delivered from a pulpit. Historically the sermon as monologue arose after the “conversion” of Constantine, and imperial backing for Christianity brought large numbers of nominal Christians into the church. As a result, it was no longer possible for a group of genuine followers of Christ to discuss God’s word with a Bible teacher.

It should be no surprise that Jesus taught through dialogue and questions. Studies by IBM and the UK Post Office show that people who learn by hearing alone retain just 10 percent of what they have learned after three months. People who learn by hearing, being shown, and experience retain 65 percent. This means the only person experiencing good learning in a sermon is the preacher!

Adults have experience and can help each other learn. Encourage the sharing of that experience and your sessions will become more effective . . . so adults need to relate learning to their experience. . . . Adults learn best in an atmosphere of active involvement and participation . . . so adults need the opportunity to participate. . . . Adults learn best when it is clear that the context of the training is close to their own task or jobs. Adults are best taught with a real-world approach . . . so learning needs to be related to real issues.⁴

Word ministry takes place in a variety of ways, not simply for forty-five minutes on a Sunday morning. It takes place through group Bible studies. It takes place when two people meet to read the Bible. It takes place as people are mentored through the word. In our experience, most character formation and discipleship takes place through informal and ad hoc conversations. This kind of word ministry requires relationships, time, and gospel intentionality.

But being word-centered is more than how you teach and disciple people. It means governing church life by God’s word. It means every decision, formal and informal, is explored through explicit reference to God’s word. We ask, and re-ask, what God’s word teaches about the issues and problems we face.

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James says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). We must not only listen to the word—we must put it into practice. Churches are full of people who love listening to sermons. But sermons count for nothing in God’s sight. We rate churches by whether they have good teaching or not. But James says great teaching counts for nothing. What counts is the *practice* of the word. What counts is teaching that leads to changed lives. We must never make good teaching an end in itself. Our aim must be good learning and good practice. And that is a radically different way of evaluating how word-centered we are.

Being word-centered means God’s word has priority over tradition and precedent. Many churches that claim to be word-centered are in practice tradition-centered. From time to time I ask people how they have changed their views over the past few years. It is telling when people cannot think of an answer. Unless someone long ago came to a complete and perfect understanding of the Bible, it suggests people are no longer living under God’s word so that it challenges their thinking and practice.

TEACHING “ALONG THE ROAD”

This life context and word content for discipleship reflects the setting of the great summary of Israelite faith: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). Israel’s identity as a people was tied up with the “word” spoken to them by the Lord. It was God’s word that constituted them as his people at Sinai (Deuteronomy 5:4; Hebrews 12:19). Peter Adam says, “The basic structure of the theology of Deuteronomy is that God has spoken. . . . The command ‘Hear O Israel’ is characteristic of Deuteronomy . . . followed by instructions to remember, teach, discuss, meditate on . . . and practise the words of God.”⁵ This creates a “verbal spirituality” in which the only appropriate response is to “love the Lord your God with total commitment, with your total self, to total excess!”⁶ What is significant

for the practice of discipleship is the way the book of Deuteronomy then brings both this lofty theology and all-encompassing commitment down to earth: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6–7). This truth and its response are for everyone, and the way to teach them is in the routine of life. Chris Wright says, “The law was to be the topic of ordinary conversation in ordinary homes in ordinary life, from breakfast to bedtime.”⁷

This is not to denigrate the importance of formal teaching times at church but rather to emphasize the need also to bring teaching out of the pulpit and embed it in life. Just as the Law defined Israel’s identity and shaped her life, so the word of God is to define what we are as the church. And that process of definition occurs in the mundane setting of everyday life and relationships. The gospel word should be central to a formal meeting, but it also has to be the heart of all we do as the people of God and how we relate to the world.

The teaching along the road in Deuteronomy 6 is seen in the ministry of Jesus. He taught as he met the sick, as he answered questions, as he ate with people, as he walked along the road. Chapters 9–10 of Mark’s Gospel are an extended explanation of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And all this teaching takes place along the road. And it is not any old road. It is the road to Jerusalem. It is the way to the cross. And that mirrors the teaching. To be a disciple, as Jesus keeps reminding the twelve, is to follow the way of the cross.

We should be teaching one another the Bible as we are out walking, driving in the car, or washing the dishes. People should learn the truth of justification not only in an exposition of Romans 5 but as they see us resting on Christ’s finished work instead of anxiously trying to justify ourselves. They should understand the nature of Christian hope not only as they listen to a talk on Romans 8 but as

they see us groaning in response to suffering as we wait for glory. They should understand the sovereignty of God not only from a sermon series on Isaiah but as they see us respond to trials with “pure joy” (James 1:2). We have found in our context that most learning and training takes place not through programmed teaching or training courses but in unplanned conversations—talking about life, talking about ministry, talking about problems.

Let us make a bold statement: truth cannot be taught effectively outside of close relationships. The reason is that truth is not primarily formal; it is dynamic. The truth of the gospel becomes compelling as we see it transforming lives in the rub of daily, messy relationships. Jay Adams says, “A whole person will affect whole persons on all levels; that is the goal of discipleship training. . . . It all involves commitment to God. Therefore, truth incarnated in life is the goal. For reaching this goal, only one method is possible—the biblical one—discipleship. Whole persons must teach whole persons; the Word must be made flesh.”⁸

You could start simply by telling someone today about your relationship with God or your struggles with sin. Tell him or her about how God has encouraged you, answered your prayer, spoken to you through the Bible, and given you opportunities to share the gospel or serve other Christians. And then ask that person about his or her walk with God. Make it a habit to talk about these things together “along the road.”

TRAINING “ALONG THE ROAD”

The same principles apply to training people for leadership roles. Alongside teaching “along the road,” we need training “along the road.” We are not against theological colleges, but we need a big switch of focus from the isolation of residential theological colleges to apprenticeships in the context of ministry. This is how Jesus trained people. This is how Paul trained people. In residential colleges the academy sets the agenda. With on-the-job training, ministry and mission set the agenda.

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Name: Ruth

Occupation: Full-time mother

Church: The Crowded House, Loughborough

In Ruth's eyes a sign that The Crowded House is taking root in Loughborough is that four couples within the congregation now own houses in the area. Not that they're chasing the "ultimate" dream of home ownership, but as Ruth observes, things are finally taking on a permanent feel. And in a town where many of the Bengali and Muslim population are unreached with the gospel and for one reason or another planning to put down roots in the area, long-term gospel ministry is vital.

Working alongside her congregational leader husband Jonny, Ruth, a mother of two preschool children, has her hands full, but she wouldn't have it any other way. "When Jonny and I moved to Loughborough, it was to help with the Student Christian Union on the local campus," she says. "Pretty soon it became clear that the level of support students needed wasn't being met by the surrounding churches." It was this that Ruth believes propelled her and Jonny to start thinking about church differently.

Ruth set out running small-group Bible studies with some of the young female students. Soon their house resembled a campus cafe with students turning up to be with the family. "We're trying to get young students to see what our lives look like, to model Christian living to them," she says. "A lot of what we do now is quite informal, but intentional."

Ruth and the wife of another leader have even formalized a small crafts business that, apart from providing income, helps them get to know students and provide them with practical skills such as cooking. And what about the strain of putting a couple of young children into the mix? "Having children hasn't really changed things that much," she concludes. "Besides, in building the kind of community we have here, we've had so much support."

For Ruth the local community is a long-term project, and her next move will be to solidify some of the local relationships with their Bengali neighbors. "Most people would look at our house and think it's a starter home," she laughs. "It's not considered a desirable place to stay, but we're here forever as far as I am concerned!"

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Colleges also suit a certain type of person, and this then shapes a view of what it means to be a church leader. Most church leaders today are middle-class graduates who were trained in a college and whose qualification for ministry is a degree. The first apostles were from very mixed social backgrounds, most with no education. They trained by accompanying Jesus, and their qualification for ministry was that they knew Jesus. When the Jewish leaders “saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). One of the reasons we have middle-class churches that are failing to reach working-class people is that we have middle-class leaders. And we have middle-class leaders because our expectations of what constitutes leadership and our training methods are middle-class. Indeed working-class people only really get into leadership by effectively becoming middle-class.

Paul had the highest education possible (Acts 22:3). It is not bad to be highly educated. But the qualities he outlines for Christian leaders are not skills-based but character-based. The focus in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is on the character of leaders—their godliness, their maturity, their example. The only skill needed is the ability to teach—and that does not necessarily mean giving forty-five-minute sermons. It is the ability to apply God’s word to the life of the church and the lives of its members.

Having caught a glimpse of the benefits of mentoring when I was much younger, I made the decision early in my ministry to provide a number of young people with the opportunity to work alongside me. The aim was to see lives changed by the gospel and people equipped for gospel ministry. Integral to the process has always been relationship. These young people not only worked for me, they worked alongside me. They witnessed firsthand both how I conducted myself in public and how I related to my family. It was a life-to-life thing—close, intimate, and demanding. But how can anyone really learn what it means to be a disciple unless he or she sees someone living out his or her discipleship? How can some-

one learn the need of grace without witnessing the power of grace using a flawed individual? I have to confess to being skeptical of any approach to leadership training that stops short of this level of exposure and this depth of relationship. Certainly much information can be imparted, techniques can be learned, skills acquired, but without the relational dimension, it will always fall short of true discipleship.

FROM CHURCH DISCIPLINE TO CHURCH DISCIPLESHIP

The local church is the context in which we can faithfully obey the King's commands and so demonstrate the potency of his gracious rule. In a sense, church is Eden. This is God's garden in which we find all we need for life and godliness. This is where the kingdom of God is given flesh, anticipated, and demonstrated. This is where the effects of the Fall are reversed as by grace we become lovers once more of both God and others. This is God's intended arena for our discipleship and growth.

But we all know that it does not always work that way! Our lives, individually and corporately, are all too often indistinguishable from those who are strangers to the grace of God. Jesus commanded his disciples to go and disciple the nations by teaching them to obey all that he had commanded. The reason we fail to respond to that exhortation is not that the commands of Jesus are hard to comprehend. The most significant obstacle in the interpretative process is sin! This is precisely why discipleship is essential. In becoming a Christian I am a disciple, but that is an identity, not an event. I never stop being a disciple, and I never reach the point where I no longer require daily discipleship by the gospel word in the gospel community.

I have been involved in a handful of situations where the church has deemed it necessary to discipline a church member with excommunication because of persistent refusal to turn from open sin. On each occasion the issue was blatant immorality with no repentance. Everyone agreed that the behavior was wrong. Care was taken to

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follow the procedure of Matthew 18, not only at the level of the letter, but also trying to be true to the spirit of the instruction. All those involved were clear that it was done with a view to the restoration of the individuals concerned. However, I have never known that process to succeed in achieving that aim. Why not? After all, church discipline is biblical, and so it is legitimate to expect it to work.

I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I suspect a significant factor was that the discipline foreseen by Jesus in Matthew 18 and by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 was meant to be the end point of a process. Our real failure was in the process leading up to it. The culture created by the leadership was not a culture of mutual discipline and care. Anyone who has a family will know that there is more likelihood of success in dealing with acute disciplinary issues with children if as parents you have shown commitment to creating an environment of care and discipline. Church discipline needs to become a daily reality in which rebuke and exhortation are normal. Without this, any form of confrontation will itself create a sense of crisis.

We need a culture of daily and mutual discipleship. Structures and programs cannot create it. It requires the sharing of lives and gospel intentionality. We need to accept that God's lordship extends over every area of our lives. This means there is no act so mundane that it lies outside the scope of the gospel. We cannot be content with a morality of negatives (do not get drunk, do not swear). We need to take responsibility for each other's godliness—not only at the level of behavior but of attitudes and underlying idolatries. Paul encourages the Christians in Ephesus to “speak the truth in love” to one another (Ephesians 4:15.). This means recognizing that apparently insignificant moments are actually full of significance.

Grumbling, for example, is almost a national pastime and a feature of many conversations. We grumble about anything and everything. But Christians are called to stand out by not complaining (Philippians 2:14–15). So when I grumble, I need God's people gently to rebuke me and remind me of God's grace in Christ. I need

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them to encourage me to live a life of thankfulness so that I might “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). We do this lovingly and gently, recognizing that we are all sinners saved by grace and recognizing that transformation is God’s work that he will complete by that same grace.

SHEPHERDS WHO ARE SHEEP

It is important that leaders see themselves and are seen by others as part of the church. Professionalism is always the enemy of authentic gospel leadership. Leaders are not a special class set apart on their own, having to face burdensome responsibilities and forced to endure a lonely existence. Leaders cannot be detached. They must be visible believers who live their lives openly in the midst of the believing community. Jesus put it into perspective when he contrasted the leadership style of the religious leaders of his day with that of the leaders in his kingdom:

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:8–12)

It is both reassuring and challenging to discover that the shepherds of God’s flock are first and foremost sheep! In Romans 12 leadership is a vital gift of God for the church, but one that nestles discreetly among the other gifts (v. 8).

One of the great benefits of this practice is that it abolishes, so to speak, the laity. The only demarcation among the people of God is that of function, not position. If my role is that of a leader in the local church, then I am a gospel minister using my gift to serve God’s people. But whatever my role, I am still a gospel minister using my gift to serve God’s people. A leader is not a “special” case: he is a

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servant of the gospel among gospel servants, a brother among his brothers and sisters.

This model also abolishes, so to speak, the clergy! Many of my “minister” friends speak of church as something from which they must seek solace. They protect their day off and guard the privacy of their home. They feel the loneliness of ministry, looking outside the local church for people who will pastor them and events that will refresh them. For us church is where we find solace. The Christian community pastors and refreshes me through the word of God. Someone put it to us like this: “If I were to say I needed a weekly day off from my wife and children, people would say I had a dysfunctional marriage. So why, if I say I need a day off from church, do people not ask whether I have a dysfunctional church family?”

Someone was bemoaning to me the number of congregations in their church association without “ministers.” “Where are the young people coming into leadership?” they asked. As I reflected on this heartfelt question, I thought of the great young people we have working with us, sacrificially committed to gospel ministry and far more mature than I was at their age. The young people are there, but they do not want to be “the minister,” expected to be omniscient, leading on their own.

One of the questions we get asked that makes us laugh is how many staff members we have at The Crowded House. The answer is none. But each congregation has a team of people committed to gospel ministry and church planting. Most work full-time in secular jobs. Some have chosen to work a three- or four-day week to create time for gospel relationships outside the workplace. Only two or three have funding to free them for specific ministries. In a sense all of them are staff, though none receives a salary. When we meet, the financial arrangements of people make no difference to their authority or status. It is irrelevant whether they are “full-time,” “part-time,” or in secular employment. Indeed, secular involvement actually enriches people’s ministries, giving them a day-to-day experience of life in the world, as well as opportunities in the work-

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place. Dave devoted a whole year to a congregation. Initially he was disappointed when asked to get a part-time job. He did not think it would be as good as being “full-time” in ministry. But looking back he acknowledges its benefits—experience in the secular workplace, contact with unbelievers, and self-discipline. Sometimes people feel the pressure of time, but when there is a team, ministry does not fall on one or two. We also try to maintain a culture in which people are not expected to do more than is possible. We pour ourselves into Christian service but also remind one another that it is Jesus who builds his church and justifies his people.

We do not always get it right, but this is the philosophy of ministry to which we aspire. If we are going to reach the nations through planting churches, then we will need to be much more flexible and creative about the financial support of gospel work.