

Prologue

Abundant Life

I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor; every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. Our proper functioning is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.

Jack London

I want our churches to be fully alive. In John's gospel, Jesus is reported to have said that he had come to bring abundant life. You can measure the health of a congregation using this criterion. Where are the signs of life? Almost 25 years ago, an itinerate evangelist persuaded me that Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life. So I took the plunge and asked Christ to break open my timid heart. My life has never been the same. I've since shed the beliefs associated with my evangelist friend, but not the heart-breaking, heart-healing love that turned my life upside down. I wanted to give my life back to the one who had offered me my own, and so I decided to serve the church as an ordained minister.

I have now spent over 20 years in that role. What I look for in congregations are companions who wake me up, who challenge me by their very presence to put my nets out into deeper waters, and who have traded in respectability for a divine love. I want to be that kind of presence for others as well. Can we be the radiant presence of the Christ

for each other and for the world? A poem by the 14th-century Sufi mystic Hafiz captures my yearning for the church.

A One-Story House

I am glad that my Master lived
In a one-story
House

When I began to traverse
The early stages of
Love.

For when he would speak
Of the wonders and the beauty of creation,

When he began to reveal
The magnificent realities of God

I could not control my happiness
And would commence
An ecstatic dance

That almost always resulted in a
Tremendous encore –

A dive, head first,
Out of his
Window.

Hafiz,
The Friend was very kind to you
During those early years

And you only broke your big nose
Seventeen times!¹

We don't have to be diving out of our stained glass windows or doing back flips down the centre aisles to show that we're alive. There are quieter forms of witness that are

lively expressions of the Spirit. But let's remember that, right from the start, the public accused our spiritual ancestors of drunken behaviour – at nine o'clock in the morning! The church was born in the ecstasy of abundant life. What a confession that we reserve one Sunday a year for Pentecost! Jesus' followers were ecstatic and they couldn't keep it in.

I want to help our congregations to be alive – to be centres of authenticity, vitality, and creativity. I want to be with others who drink deeply from the well of living waters and then make a Christ-shaped offering of all the nourishment they've received. In other words, I want to be with those who want to make a difference in the world. There is so much untapped potential in our congregations.

Jesus unfurled the scroll of Isaiah one day in the synagogue and read from a section in which Isaiah makes the bold claim that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him – to change the world: to make it so that the poor heard good news; to see to it that everybody had a piece of land to call their own so that they could feed their family; he imagined the lame doing a jig, and the blind opening their eyes to the magnificence of life. To cap it all off, Jesus said that this was happening *through* him (Luke 4:18–19)! And, if you intended to follow him, it would happen through you as well. In my books, that constitutes a life worth living and a vision for the church.

Many congregations are struggling to find the abundant life that Christ offers. Over the years, we have formed some bad habits that now get in the way of divine abundance. We have become overly bureaucratic – too many meetings and not enough ministry happening. We have substituted busyness for the real business of the church – helping people to come alive in Christ. Clergy have exhausted themselves being personal

chaplains for far too many families, rather than being exemplars of abundant life. In the mainline church, we have lost the practice of prayer and have replaced it with programs that aren't necessarily related to a clear mission and vision. We have made being warm and friendly with newcomers our primary purpose, when in fact they are looking for the Holy Spirit. We have associated the Christian life with "being good" forgetting that it is about being in God. We have developed cultures of superficiality. We have learned to be civil and courteous with the person sitting beside us in church, but we don't take the opportunity to hold them in their brokenness and dance with them in their joy. Somewhere along the line, we have forgotten our own sacred story found in scripture and so have become susceptible to the dominant cultural narratives competing for our allegiance.

The good news is that bad habits are possible to break! As liberator, Christ can set us free!

Jesus tells a parable about a dishonest steward who gets wind that he's about to be fired (Luke 16:1–13). Immediately the steward gets down to business taking care of his own, but in preparation for the axe to fall. He is shrewd to the point of dishonesty. Shockingly, Jesus doesn't condemn the man's behaviour in the parable. This doesn't mean, however, that Jesus is recommending that "the children of light" replicate this man's methods. Rather, Jesus is challenging his followers to act as decisively and resolutely in the face of a crisis as this shady character did.

In my corner of the world, the public has metaphorically fired the mainline church. They've sent a message saying that they will no longer be needing our services, thank you very much – at least not as we've been delivering them. For many reasons,

mainstream culture has decided that we've squandered the sacred treasure and are no longer fit to be stewards of the Holy One's affairs. Those interested in spirituality are fleeing to the mountains and forests, to Buddhist temples, or to the sanctuary of a yoga studio. These are, unquestionably, sacred venues where the all-pervasive Spirit moves. But we need to sort out – *now* – exactly what *our* business is, and then get to work with a holy shrewdness.

The steward in Jesus' parable had a window of opportunity. He took a realistic look at his capacities and realized that he was too old to dig ditches and too proud to beg for a living. He had to think on his feet and come up with a strategy. The master ultimately praised his ingenuity, even though it came at the master's own expense. Again, Jesus is not condoning the dishonest man's methods. He's challenging his followers to be as bold and ingenious as those whose motivations are not grounded in Spirit. There's still time for us to rediscover new life in Christ. As stewards of the Holy One's treasure, we need to make an honest assessment of where we're at, and then be bold about reclaiming the abundant life Christ offers.

Almost 20 years ago, I listened to theologian and priest Matthew Fox speak of the shift from a redemption-centred paradigm, focused on original sin, to a creation-centred paradigm, focused on original blessing. The former focused on what God accomplished on our behalf through Jesus Christ, while the latter focuses on what God *is accomplishing* through us – the new thing God is doing.

This struck a chord deep within me. Rooted in Christ, this model challenges us to ask: What is the future that needs us in order to emerge? Disciples in the emerging church

are centres of Spirit-animated creativity. Furthermore, this model grounds us in our deep connection with the planet and with all creation.

Then, a decade ago, physicist Brian Swimme and cultural historian and Roman Catholic priest Thomas Berry helped me to view the evolutionary story of the universe as a sacred narrative that connects all creation, all people, and all cultures. The faith systems of the world, including the Christian tradition, are a part of this evolving story. In my book *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Evolutionary Christianity*, I set the sacred story of our faith in dialogue with the sacred story of creation.

The church itself is part of this ongoing evolutionary story. We are meant to evolve, in a Christ-informed way, along with the rest of the universe, and according to the fundamental principles of nature. This evolutionary paradigm invites us to be in conversation with scientific culture and to look at the evolving life of our congregations through both a biblical and a scientific lens. In this book, I use scientific as well as theological language to describe the process by which congregations evolve. At the same time, I have tried to make this language accessible to people like myself, a non-scientist. One of the scientific principles that is central to this work is called *creative emergence*, which I describe in Chapter 1. An emerging congregation evolves within a creation-centred, evolutionary paradigm.

For some, this language may seem overly abstract. Yet my intent is not abstraction. On the contrary, I intend this book to work as a very practical model for congregational culture shifting. I offer a map of some of the principles and practices that have helped to open the gates of life and love in Christ, in the congregations I have served. Please remember, though, that the map itself is an evolving reality. Some of the

practices I advocate are just that: practise! In an emergent paradigm, congregations enjoy the freedom to fail – to try new things out, to assess their viability, and then to try again. You are free to try these ideas, tweak them, or toss them. The fundamental characteristic of this Spirit-infused, evolutionary universe is creativity. This is what we need to light up our congregations – permission to be centres of creative discipleship.

I wrote this book for church leaders, both lay and clergy, who are ready to act as guides on this journey of congregational renewal. Sometimes I slip into addressing clergy more directly. When this happens, I hope that the lay reader will enjoy overhearing the conversation. Everything I share with clergy applies also to lay congregational leaders.

I should also say that I wrote from the context of having served primarily in urban settings, although my first congregation was a tiny church around which the city grew up. By the standards of most mainline congregations in my country, the congregation I currently serve is relatively affluent. Our challenges and opportunities therefore reflect this culture. If you are in a rural setting, or part of a congregation that is struggling simply to pay your minister's salary, translating some of my observations and strategies into your context may be challenging at times. Nevertheless, the spiritual principles upon which this model of congregational transformation is constructed are universal. While I don't address it in the book, this model requires neither paid clergy nor a building in which to worship. The abundant life of Christ breaks out whether two or three, or two or three hundred, or two or three thousand souls open their hearts.

I believe in the power of these Christ-centred souls to make a difference in a hurting world. If we are to survive as a species, God needs us to help the human race grow into the humility of the Christ. We're crowding out other life forms on the planet,

and degrading our bio-systems as we multiply our species at unsustainable rates. We've just come out of the most violent century in the history of humanity, and we don't appear to be off to a better start in the 21st century. In the aftermath of 9-11, the lines have been drawn between "us" and "them." The Middle East is a tinderbox. The gap between the obscenely wealthy and the desperately poor is widening. Economic globalism, the imperialism of the 21st century, demands our allegiance, and assures us that perpetual economic growth defines the purpose of human existence and will save us if we just trust it. In the Western world, narratives of consumerism and the cult of celebrity are draining souls of all meaning and purpose. Now more than ever God is calling us to come alive to our deep purpose.

I pray that this book helps your congregation live up to its high and holy calling to be the living presence of the Christ in the world. If it helps to spark your holy shrewdness and radiant creativity, I will be gratified.

¹ Hafiz, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz*, Daniel Ladinsky, trans. (New York: Penguin Press, 1999), 176.