

Redemptive family

***How church as a family,
rooted in a place, lies at the
heart of God's mission***

HOWARD WEBB

Foreword

The most valuable books are written by people with a rich diversity of experience in their particular field. Howard Webb is one of those people. He is no mere missional theorist. Rather, along with his critical mind and avid hunger to read and grow, he brings to this work years of missional experience from university ministries, church ministry, and more recently, church planting. Moreover, Howard has excellent literary skills that make this book engaging and interesting from start to finish.

In an age where the western church struggles to find its missional edge, Howard is not afraid to challenge the status quo. Yet he does so in a winsome manner that is faithful to the Scriptures. This makes his book a must-read for those of us in western contexts grappling with the same old same old of church life, insipid discipleship, and a lack of missional zeal and effectiveness. His ideas are biblical and remarkably simple, showing how the model of church as family lies at the centre of God's vision of a new humanity. His approach declericalises church planting, church life, and sharing the faith in a way that gives hope to those jaded by religion. His writing reflects his warmth and zeal for making disciples who make disciples.

It has been a privilege to walk with Howard on this journey as a book coach, often finding myself the student rediscovering the simple wonder of God's missional agenda. I do hope this book gets into the hands of as many missionaries and church leaders as possible. I encourage you to read it and pass it on, as we should the gospel. I believe God will use it to see new churches planted, to renew existing ones, and raise a generation of faithful disciples who God will use to rekindle the faith in New Zealand and beyond.

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Introduction

We all know the model for 'Sunday church' well. Throughout the week a few people have worked hard to produce the event that is about to unfold. The preacher, worship team, and kids church leaders have all come prepared for their role in the programme. The goal is to create a worshipful atmosphere through singing and corporate prayer in order to prepare hearts for the lesson or word of exhortation from Scripture that follows. We will then probably sing again, close in prayer, and head out to the foyer for a cup of tea and fellowship.

Most of the congregation will come with nothing much to contribute, but with a pleasant expectation of a familiar ritual. Sundays are a bit like dinner—what will be on the menu today? We like a bit of variety on the plate, but we also know we can count on getting meat and three veg. With Sunday church consumed, we feel the afterglow. We will come back next Sunday ready to do it all over again.

There is much about 'regular' church that is good and valuable, yet there remains something unsatisfactory about this picture. Church leaders sense it, and so do those who sit in the pew. It's an experience that soothes, rather than transforms. It's more about comfort than challenge. It's slippers, not work boots.

Here is the dilemma we face in the church in New Zealand and throughout the West. Do we keep tweaking what we have, hoping for better results? Or do we try something new?

A 2019 cartoon strip by 'Dilbert' creator, Scott Adams, captures the moment perfectly. In it, Alice is talking to the pointy-haired boss.

'One option,' she says, 'is to use the method that has never once worked, but we think we know how to make it work next time. The other option is to try

something new that we can't be sure will work. It's almost as if leadership is nothing but guessing.'

Alice's boss, who has been standing with his coffee mug halfway to his mouth, replies, 'let's change the subject.'

The evidence tells us that our current model of church is not very good at producing what we would most like to see—radically transformed lives. Yet there are plenty of reasons why we may choose to change the subject and press on with our unsatisfactory model rather than ask hard questions of the model itself.

For most of us, this way of doing church is all we have ever experienced. Years (perhaps generations) of investment in buildings and programmes have been made with the current model in mind. Embedded also is our funding model; if we change how we do church, how will we pay for it all? We would have to reshape the expectations of our congregation, and no one likes change. And what about our faithful church staff? The value and meaning of their life work are bound up in this time-honoured way of doing church. Changing the model would require a new narrative around purpose and what we will call success.

In short, doing things differently would take a lot of courage and would likely make a lot of people unhappy.

However, we have been giving people what they want instead of what they need for long enough. Our people may think they want an engaging experience of church without demands or accountability because they are such busy people. Many churches have tacitly agreed to play by these rules. They polish the Sunday service to attract attenders, and delegate all the work to staff teams or small groups of volunteers so as not to burden the regulars. The result is that the regulars grow spiritually weak. They are not exercising faith or seeing God move. By trying to do all we can to keep people in church, we paradoxically create an environment that risks having them drift away from church and from God.

What our people really need is the exact opposite, and deep down we know it. If they are to become disciples who walk in the power of the Spirit,

demonstrate the transformational power of the gospel in their lives, and are willing to pay any price to follow Jesus, they need a model of church that supports and encourages them to become part of God's redemptive story. They need a church that meets their deep need for community, while providing opportunity to find their own purpose within the bigger purpose of the church family. Most importantly, they need a church that models discipleship and expects them to participate and grow spiritually.

It turns out that this alternative model of church already has an impressive track record. It is the picture of church that we find throughout the New Testament—a church that is not primarily a ritual-keeping institution, but a family on a mission together.

I have experienced first-hand the joy of being part of exactly that sort of faith community. It was deeply transformative of my life and of many others besides. It was this experience that prompted my wife Lynette and I to devote our lives full-time to faith-based ministry twenty-five years ago. And it is an experience I would dearly love to share with church leaders who are wrestling with the reality of a church that has grown pale and wan and is in need of change.

The bad news is that church as family can't simply be grafted onto our regular model of 'Sunday church.' Choosing to be a family on a mission requires rethinking how we do church from the ground up. For instance, a significant part of our time together will need to be spent in deepening relationships, a family non-negotiable.

Regular 'Sunday church' promises relationship and mutuality, but in reality offers only crumbs. Time on Sunday is given to listening to preachers and worship leaders, while most of the congregation sit passively, unable to meaningfully communicate with the person beside them without being rude. Precious few get the chance to have a deep conversation before or after the church service about the things that matter most, and even fewer get to exercise their spiritual gifts when church is gathered.

By contrast, growing relationships is at the heart of both family and mission, therefore a church family on a mission together will make time for relationships. It is only through taking time that we get to know, trust, and

love each other. This is what makes us authentic. This is where giftings have a chance to shine through. And this is what will stand out to our seeking friends when we invite them to join us at the family table.

The good news is that reshaping our church to be a family on a mission together does us and our people so much good. It simplifies church and makes it more real. It is highly participatory and gets leaders off the treadmill of having to provide yet another slick programme on Sunday. The gathering itself becomes part of our mission, rather than 'time out' from ordinary life. If you are a leader who has grown tired of 'playing the game,' this vision of church will reignite your passion for ministry.

Perhaps you are thinking of branching out and starting something new. That is fantastic. Multiplying church families is central to God's plan for reaching the world. Planting churches with this simple DNA can be done by anybody in any context, as we will discover together.

At some point, however, we all have to face the quandary posed by Alice. Will we stick with the old model, determined to make it work, or will we risk doing something new even though we cannot be certain of the outcome? I hope to persuade you that the risk is worth it.