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BOOK REVIEW

John Bowen, ed. *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground: Growing a Future for the Church in Canada*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013. 283 pp. Pbk. ISBN 1610978625.

There are certainly many reasons to be discouraged by the current state of the church in North America. Decline, decay, and disinterest are not inaccurate words to use when considering the realities faced by many churches in Canada, the USA, and much of Europe. *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground* speaks explicitly to this situation as it roots itself (no pun intended) in the Canadian context and seeks to explore what is happening in the church here. Specifically it is a book about the church and its mission and how mission is occurring in Canada today.

The title of the book is based upon the idea that many of Jesus' agrarian parables depict the kingdom of God as something that grows and emerges slowly but does in fact emerge and take hold in a profound way. With this as a foundation, one of the features of the book is the hopeful vision that it presents of the church in the Canadian context, although it certainly also applies to the broader North American context.

Like Canada itself, the book is diverse in terms of its contributors. These include authors from seven denominations, a number of different doctrinal positions, almost every region of Canada, and several ethnicities. The authors also represent a variety of vocations and ministry positions.

In his introduction the book's editor, John Bowen, professor of evangelism at Wycliffe College (University of Toronto), is clear that the book is not about church growth or a methodology for doing mission, although there are many practical ideas about mission in the book. Ultimately it is a book that seeks to identify where God is at work and how the church can participate in what

God is doing in the changing cultural landscape of Canada in particular and the Western world in general.

The book is divided into three sections: the first lays the foundation by exploring the need for mission and surveying the overall context of Canadian society; the second looks at new developments in the church's mission in Canada; and the third offers ideas as to how these new ventures can be sustained and multiplied into the future. Specifically the chapters explore issues of missional theology, social context, urban ministry, church planting, immigration, the challenge of reaching and keeping young people, creation care as ministry, leadership, spirituality, contextualization, and resources for the journey.

Beyond the content of each chapter, ten real-life scenarios are presented that depict some of the creative missional ventures that are actually happening all across Canada. The brief stories of new churches and missional communities add color to the book and offer a concrete depiction of what can happen when people take the reality of the Canadian context seriously and choose to be proactive and join in what God is doing as opposed to being overcome with despair in light of the many negative challenges that mark Christian experience in Canada today.

The chapters in the book effectively capture the reality of the church in Canada today and address many of the issues that it faces. The book is also uniquely structured, as case-stories of various missions and church plantings are provided between some of the chapters. Interestingly Reginald Stackhouse's chapter entitled "Church Planting in the 1950s" takes readers back to a time when high percentages of people were attending church and church planting took place simply by showing up in the community and beginning to offer services. With some hard work and a few entrepreneurial ideas, a pastor could usually see a church established and growing. Stackhouse's description of planting a church in the suburbs of Toronto in the 1950s demonstrates the difference between a culture where Christianity largely held sway as the religion and ideology of the day and the post-Christian culture of today. This is further illustrated by the untraditional methods described in the story called "Standing Stones," a ministry for aboriginal people in Edmonton, or a similar story,

“Neighbourhood Life Ministry,” also in Edmonton. Both of these ministries employ approaches to mission that would have been viewed as far outside the norm sixty years ago (and may still be viewed that way by some today). However, as is the case throughout the book, these stories demonstrate the kind of variety and creativity that is needed to plant a church in Canada today.

Another story entitled “Emerge,” which tells of an Anglican church plant in Montreal, captures the realities of doing mission in Canada. Emerge began as an alternative worship service for young, religiously disaffected, urban Montrealers. After early growth the church began to struggle and eventually disbanded. However, the pastor of the church, Nick Brotherwood, learned a valuable lesson, one that all church planters (and church leaders in any congregation) need to learn, that “by focusing on worship first, rather than on serving the needs of the community, the Emerge team had put the cart before the horse” (165). While focusing on worship was the way to plant a church in the 1950s, it certainly is not the way to do it today as *Green Shoots* makes clear.

Leah and Markku Kostamo’s chapter, “Creation Care as Mission,” reminds readers that mission in Canada today must be multi-faceted. Mission is more than preaching the gospel in verbal form or even serving the poor in a soup kitchen. It may involve participating in activities that improve the neighborhood or contribute to preserving the environment. As the Kostamos write about their ministry with *A Rocha*, an environmental group committed to caring for God’s creation, “every weed pulled, every truckload of gravel poured, and every species preserved, has been a missional act, for each weed pulled and each stretch of river restored is a participation in God’s redemptive work” (176). This is mission in a form that has not always been understood as mission but needs to be considered as such both theologically and practically in a post-Christian context.

Several chapters on cultural analysis provide good insight into the realities of the Canadian context and the genuine realities of things like declining church attendance and the exodus of young people. Erika Anderson’s analysis of what drives young

people away from church and what helps them to stay is particularly helpful, and she offers a profound analysis both by way of statistics and insightful reflection. The chapter offers not just some resourceful sociological data but also some insightful cultural analysis and theological reflection. Ultimately, Anderson offers the hopeful vision of a young population that may be more open to Christian faith and church membership than we think, as long as their voice is listened to and their needs are taken seriously. In a similar vein, Glenn Smith provides a helpful chapter called "Reading Your Community." Smith provides practical tools for contextual analysis that will be helpful to any Christian leader who wants to help a church (or faith community) understand their particular ministry context.

Leadership is always a crucial component of mission and *Green Shoots* provides several chapters that relate to that important topic. Alan Roxburgh's chapter, "What Kind of Leaders Do We Need?" emphasizes the need for leadership in the emerging post-Christian context and he places the burden of helping the church to take the risk of experimentation squarely on the shoulders of its leaders. He notes that leadership in a missional context requires a set of skills that are different from what was needed in the Canadian (and Western) context in previous generations. Primary among these skills is the ability to lead congregations in experimentation. Without a willingness to provide this kind of leadership, churches will struggle to avoid obsolescence in their communities. Another key leadership aptitude is the ability to cast vision for mission and lead in missional initiatives. Jane Alexander, an Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of Edmonton, provides reflection on her attempts to transition Anglican churches in her diocese from insular, traditional Anglican congregations to missional ones. To do this involved "what some would call a relentless focus on mission" (257). In this way Alexander's chapter, along with Roxburgh's, reminds us that the transition from traditional church ministry to new expressions of missional ministry will not occur in any widespread or transformational way without clear-minded and determined leadership.

While the book does include a number of different denominations among its authors, there is a distinctly Anglican feel to the

book. Bowen acknowledges this and expresses his hope that the book does not puzzle non-Anglican readers (xvi). However, the book works because it is true to the Canadian context, and it provides genuinely helpful guidance to church leaders trying to think through the challenges of ministry in any post-Christian culture. It is interesting that while many may be writing the Anglican Church off as a relic of Christendom, in many ways, in Canada (and also the UK), the Anglican Church is leading the missional revival that is taking place.

This volume is a helpful road map for churches seeking to understand the way forward in contexts where overall the church is in decline. It is a hopeful voice and a practical guide to missional ministry in challenging contexts. While it is good for Canadians to have a book that speaks directly to their context, the book's value is not limited to Canada. Ultimately it is a book about mission and, thus, is useful to anyone interested in pursuing a missional agenda.

The book embodies a hopeful but realistic tone. It acknowledges the realities of the church's decline but never fails to sound a hopeful note about the possibilities for the present and future ministry of the church in post-Christian contexts. Bowen puts it this way in his introduction, "When I say there is hope for the church, however, do not misunderstand me. I do not mean that there is hope that the church as we presently know it will 'survive'—as though the main goal of the church is to survive" (18). Instead the book offers a vision of renewal that is rooted in the embrace of the mission of God and all of the creative expressions that such a move entails. *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground* offers readers an inspiring and grounded (again no pun intended) hope for the future of the church in Western culture. It deserves honest engagement from ministry practitioners and theological students of all denominational stripes wherever the church is facing its demise.

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