

THE JOURNEY AHEAD FOR 21ST CENTURY CHURCH & ITS LEADERSHIP

by Stephen Hinks (Australia: Carillon Graphic Communications, 2006)

a book review by Jack De Vries



CRCA MINISTRY FORMATION

"A Church Reforming To Reach the Lost for Christ"

www.ministryformation.com.au

About the author:

Stephen Hinks was born and raised in Sydney, educated at University of NSW and Moore Theological College. In 2001 he became the founding Executive Director of Leadership Network Australia. Stephen is currently the Principal of the Australian College of Ministries (ACOM), a ministry training and leadership development network.

“A time of adventure, a time of excitement, a time of significant challenge.”

From the book jacket:

The whole of western society is in a period of transition. Faced with large scale and rapid change in their social context, western churches are in a period of turmoil. How do local churches navigate such a changing context? What is the journey ahead for 21st century churches? What must not change? What must change? Change to what? How?

There are many tensions leadership teams and congregations need to live with. Churches need to be able to constantly adapt. In the 21st century, churches will need to live with ongoing change. As an organic community they rightly desire stability; as a social organisation they must intentionally de-stabilize in order to reproduce and grow. Why? How?

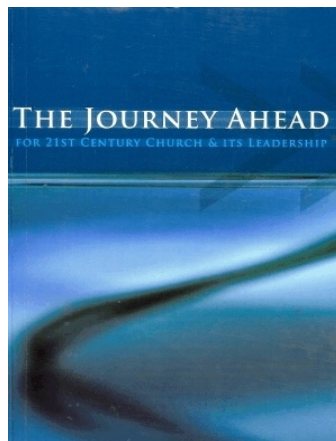
What quality of leadership can lead such a journey?

These questions are aptly answered by Stephen Hinks in this book as he outlines

the journey ahead for the church in the 21st century. He begins the first chapter by describing the challenge facing Christian churches: how effective we are not being in taking the gospel to all Australians. Paging through the initial pages sparked my interest. This is a challenge we also face in the Christian Reformed Church. We have not been that effective in reaching the lost for Christ. What can we learn as we journey ahead with our vision to be a church reforming to reach the lost for Christ?

In the chapters which follow Hinks goes to describe the changing environment we as Christians find ourselves and how we need to respond in order to make an impact for the gospel. He summarizes his argument in this way:

- Right now is a season for exploration; creative and diverse ways of being the influential people of God need to find expression, if we are to be effective in our constantly changing society.
- Each church must adapt more and adopt less; initiate more and imitate less; move beyond imitation to innovation.
- Many churches have already made one adaptation from print to broadcast mode; we need now to move into digital-era church.
- Living permanently with ongoing change is the dominant strength of digital-era church.
- A church is a spiritually organic community, but it is also a social organisation; in an organic



community, the desire is for stability whereas social organisations need to intentionally de-stabilise. (61)

Hinks goes on to underscore that churches need to manage adaptive change. He defines adaptive change as “the capacity to promote adaptability, where church members are given freedom to make innovative changes to the church to adjust to its constantly changing external environment.” (62) This is of particular interest in the CRCA as we consider what alignment might mean for us as a denomination. When we talk about the need “to reform continually the life of the denomination” this is all about change. And change does not come easy! How can we as a denomination live with the tension that innovation might bring? This is where Hinks’ book is particularly helpful. He points out how we must manage at the core but lead at the edge. There are core beliefs and practices that as a church are non-negotiable. They are essential to what it means to be a church rooted in Scripture. But there are other things which are non-essential. These are things which we can and must negotiate. This is our leading edge as we impact our communities and culture with the claims of Christ.

The challenge of adaptive change is something we will face as Christians in our ever changing environment in Australia. What will guide the church and its leaders through this mirage of change? Hinks suggest three paradigm shifts, mindsets, church leaders will adopt in order to impact our world with the gospel. This will true of these church and church leaders:

1. “They have a kingdom focus ahead of parochial interests and exegete culture well, to find connecting points for gospel impact.” (87ff)
2. “They inspire and equip the people of God to live as disciples and be creative in mission and they encourage incarnational ministry down the street and across the world.”(92ff)
3. “They value the workplace as a mission field by encouraging and equipping Christians as missionaries in a foreign culture and open network opportunities for themselves as civic leaders to set up entrepreneurial ventures for the kingdom.”(94ff)

As church leaders, these paradigm shifts are good things to talk about and explore. What might that mean for our local churches, our classes, and even our denomination as we implement the fourfold task adopted by Synod 2006? As Hinks points out: “The goal is to equip the members as disciples to intentionally spread themselves and increase their network with a view to loving and serving people, having spiritual conversations, sharing their story and the gospel when given opportunity.” (97)

This book is not necessarily an easy read – but it is a must read for Christian leaders in Australia. The reader might not agree with all of Hinks’ conclusions, but will be given much to ponder over. Not only is it written from a distinctly Australian perspective, it is full of insights that can guide our journey ahead.