

YOU SEE BONES I SEE AN ARMY

Changing the Way We Do Church

by Floyd McClung (England: David C Cook, 2007)

a book review by Jack De Vries



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About the author:

Floyd McClung is the author of several books, including the best-selling *The Father Heart of God*. He and his wife Sally live in Cape Town, South Africa, where they lead an outreach and training community working among the poor. They are also the founders of All Nations.

All Nations is a multi-cultural movement of communities, church planters and ministries committed to disciple-making and leadership-training among the most neglected peoples in the global family. It is now active on five continents.

To learn more about All Nations visit www.FloydandSally.org or www.all-nations.info

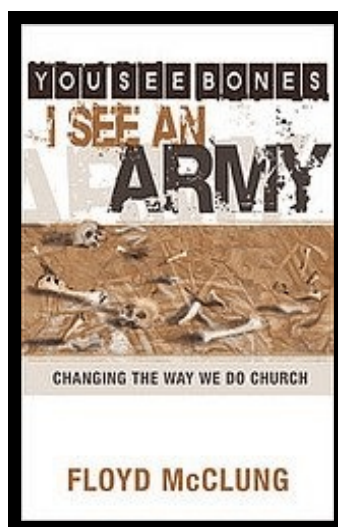
The title of the book sparked my attention. I recalled numerous sermons on the vision the prophet Ezekiel had of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). The preacher would use this passage as his text on Pentecost Sunday, making the application how the Spirit of God would breathe new life into the church. So I thought this book would be a good read.

As I began to read this book, it was not the title of the book that held my attention. I recalled a conversation I had with a missionary couple in Namibia. They shared how in the late 60's they were on a journey far away from God. Like the "lost" son they found themselves in a distant land – Afghanistan. But while they were there a couple took them into their home and provided hospitality, not only to them, but a growing number of

sons and daughters far away from God. But it was there, in this home, they not only heard the gospel stories, but experienced the reality of a Christian community. And it was there that they turned away from sin and godlessness and turned to a lifetime of following Jesus. This journey has led them to work among the poor and disadvantaged in Namibia.

Why am I telling you their story? Well their story is a living testimony of what

Floyd McClung refers to as the "simple church." He tells the story of their good experience of church in Afghanistan. He writes: "I didn't go there to find church, but you could say it found me. We rented a big house in Kabul and open our home to anyone in need or just curious about what a bunch of 'Jesus-freaks' were doing in Afghanistan. We were there to help dropped-out



Western backpackers, people who got sick, who lost their passports, or worse got strung out on drugs.... We shared our meals together, played football and developed a routine of prayer and Bible study....When people came to live with us, we didn't insist they believe what we believed, but we did ask them to follow our routines of prayer, work and common meals....People were fascinated with our life together. Many of them became followers of Jesus simply by observing our lifestyle of community and care for each other. I realized one day that what we were doing was church... a simple church." (22-3)

The subtitle of the book does not betray the content of what McClung writes about in this book. This is a book about “changing the way we do church.” The book is divided into five parts which correspond to McClung’s contention that all followers of Jesus interpret his teachings around an inner set of core beliefs: simple church, courageous leadership, focused obedience, apostolic passion, and making disciples.

There are various models of the way we do church; McClung believes in a simple church model which is low maintenance and easily reproduced. He admits that this model “is not the answer for everyone” (40). But yet, regardless of whatever model of the church we use, we need to answer the questions: what is church? What is the purpose of church? How do we do church? As McClung writes: “The Spirit of God calls each generation to re-imagine church for their own context and culture, and to a fresh encounter with God to live the gospel. Every generation needs to struggle to discover answers and approaches for themselves about church, answers that bring them into fresh partnership with God and fresh contact with their culture and world”(41).

What might this mean for the church in Australia? What about the Christian Reformed Church? In many ways we have complicated our understanding of what is church and how to do church. Boil it all down, and it really is simple: “The goal of church is to help followers of Jesus to become obedient disciples of Jesus” (47). How we do church needs to advance this all important goal. This resonates very well with the fourfold task adopted by the

CRC in 2006 – the fundamental aim of the church is to reach the lost for Christ.

McClung is not the only author who argues for the “simple church.” Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, in their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, refer to the “simple church” as one of the pillars of Christ’s kingdom. McClung borrows heavily from this book. By “simple church” McClung is thinking of a small group of people gathering together for the “primary purpose of church to reach and disciple and multiply followers of Jesus in such a way as to be a transforming presence. Simple church does not depend on paid pastors to lead the people, religious buildings to gather in, and well-run programmes to entertain

Apostolic people take the church to the world, they don’t wait for the world to come to the church.

and care for the people....Simple church seeks to empower people by avoiding bureaucracy, dependence upon buildings, hierarchy, and ‘come to us’ models of mission. Simple church spontaneously and deliberately gets everyone involved – where they live, play, and work” (62).

Church planting, according to this model, is also quite simple. You begin with **prayer**, and then you go out and **meet** people and meet their needs. As you meet people you discern who is spiritually open, and then **disciple** them in the faith. Then you start to **gather** these disciples together. You start small and simple. Then you **multiply**. Multiplication is part of the DNA you pass on to those you disciple. And before you know it, the

process repeats itself over and over again. (See Appendix A, pages 271-3)

The question this book raises for me is whether or not our situation in Australia would be better suited to a simple church model. Would this be more effective in terms of reaching the lost for Christ that what we are currently doing? It is a question worth asking because the way we have being church in the past has not been effective in reaching people outside the church.

McClung also addresses the issue of church leadership. He writes: "If we are to change the way we do church, there must be a vision of something greater happening through our churches than what is going on at present. Our present forms of church government are perfectly suited to produce the results we are now seeing – that is the problem!" (91)

Courage does not come arbitrarily to the brave; it is taken hold of by the obedient.

These are challenging words. We have to admit that in many ways McClung is right. We have adopted a Western model of church management, a model which is focused on maintenance and control. What would happen if we put function before structure? Church structures would only be created where they meet a need. What if our churches were to organize themselves in this way? Churches would put those structures in place which will advance the fundamental aim of reaching the lost for Christ. And what if that was our only concern?

Sound outrageous? McClung admits that it takes guts to change the way you do church. He writes: "We need people who will challenge the way things have always been done. Unless a few men or women step forward with the guts to change the way we do church, we won't have what might be. That means experimenting, being innovative, going on a journey with Jesus and a few friends into the unknown. It means experimenting and taking risks with how we do church" (132).

In general I found McClung's book thought provoking and challenging. Not everything that he suggests can easily or readily be adapted into a local church and particularly into the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia. And we don't change the way we do church just for the sake of change itself. If we change the way we do church, we must be motivated by the conviction that Jesus has commissioned us to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations. Admittedly we have done this poorly in the past. Perhaps if we change the way to do things in the future we will have different results. These changes are not for the faint in heart. It will take guts. It will take courage.

What might this look like for the church in Australia? Who knows? Much is unknown. But let us move ahead into the unknown with the words of the apostle Paul as our standard: "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be people of courage; be strong. Do everything in love." (1 Corinthians 16:13) Perhaps if we do that the dry bones will rise to become an army – and God's sons and daughters who are far off will be welcomed home. For me, that's worth it!