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on the verge

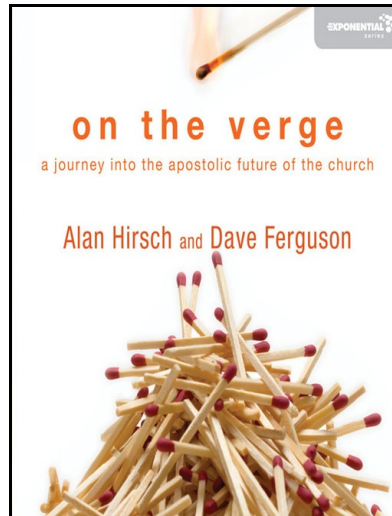
a journey into the apostolic future of the church

by Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson

A Book Review by Jack De Vries

These are exciting times to be part of the Christian church. If you have your doubts, then read Alan Hirsch's latest book, *On the Verge*. Co-authored by Dave Ferguson, this book makes a good argument that as Christians "we are standing at a pivot point of history. We are on the verge." (22) Hence the title of the book! On the verge of what? On the verge of an apostolic movement.

Now this might already put your head into a tailspin. You are thinking, "What do you mean, an apostolic movement? All this talk about apostles seems more fitting for the 1st century of the church, not the 21st century!" But keep an open mind! Find a copy of *On the Verge* and dive into it. It is not a real easy read, but in the words of Craig Groeschel, "this is a must-read if you want to transition your church into the future." You might have to read and reread several of the chapters, but it will be well worth it, if you begin to grasp what an apostolic movement is all about. There will be parts you might disagree with, but there is much, much more that will inspire you to respond, innovate, adapt, and learn. Perhaps if nothing else, you will agree with a statement the authors make more than once:



"What got us *here* is unlikely to lead us *there*." We are on the verge of a new thing, or perhaps better stated, on the verge of discovering anew something of old: the apostolic genius.

The authors begin by identifying two major problems with the church in the West. The first one is a *strategic* problem. "Most of our churches believe and act as if modeling on (and perfecting) the successful contemporary church approach will resolve their problems of mission. ...most of our current practices are simply variations of the same model." (28) They argue that the contemporary church is

not sufficient to the increasingly missional challenge now set before us. Later on in this book the authors make the argument for the need in churches for innovation. More on that later.

The other problem is a very serious *missionary* problem.

The authors borrow the vivid metaphor of red and blue oceans used by leading strategists Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne to describe the current situation in the church. The red oceans concept is used to describe the known market space – a market space everyone else is also competing for. "Hence the term red ocean – the sharks battle it out with each other for survival." (29) The blue oceans represent "the unknown market space, untainted by competition." (29);

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

~ Albert Einstein

see chart) This is the issue in the contemporary church: “We are all competing in the red waters of the 40 percent while the 60 percent remains largely untouched. It’s time for value innovation. Christian churches with a strong sense of missionary calling – while maintaining the best practices in what they do – will also venture out to innovate new forms of church in the vast uncharted territories of the unchurched populations of our day. To do less is to fail in our missionary calling.” (30)



In my formative years, long before I entered the ministry, I remember sustained debates on the issue of church as *organism* versus church as *institution*. That discussion has risen even more strongly in recent books on the missional church. This was brought home when I read Hirsch’s comments on what he terms: “dethroning Constantine.” He writes: “Adopting a Verge church paradigm requires learning what it means to become more fluid, adaptive, reproducible, viral people-movement.... more of a movement than a religious institution.” (32) This central paradigm of the church being primarily institutional “must be dislodged if we are going to become a viral gospel movement in our day.... the Constantinian captivity of the church ... is keeping us from becoming genuinely missional as well as exponential.” (38)

Verge church thinking is therefore first and foremost an exercise in a distinctively apostolic imagination – we have to (re)imagine the church in light of its apostolic design and imperative.

Now it is not that Hirsch is advocating a total disregard for the church as institution. I appreciate his balanced approach to the missional discussion. “We are not even saying that a certain level of institution is not actually necessary to maintain longevity; it is. What we are saying is that we can all do it a whole lot better, and with more theological integrity, by activating an apostolic

imagination and by developing movemental forms of the church.” (40) Quoting Jim Collins, a truly visionary organization “embraces continuity and change, conservatism *and* progressiveness, stability *and* revolution, predictability *and* chaos, heritage *and* renewal, fundamentals *and* craziness. *And, and, and.*” (41)

The model for apostolic movement that the authors propose includes four parts: [1] Imagine (see it), [2] Shift (get it), [3] Innovate (do it), and [4] Move (movementum). This process is actually an ongoing cycle of renewal: “to see (imagine) what Jesus wants you to see; to fully get (shift) and understand what he wants you to understand; and to obey (innovate) and do what he wants you to do(move). This is a constant process every church and every believer will go through over and over again with a relentless desire to see an apostolic movement and the mission of Jesus accomplished.” (47)

The first part of apostolic movement model is *imagination*. This is a recurring theme throughout *On the Verge*. Hirsch writes: “... we must reactivate our underutilized imaginations. Verge church thinking is therefore first and foremost an exercise in a distinctively apostolic imagination

– we have to (re)imagine the church in light of its apostolic design and imperative. If we fail to reframe the issues on this fundamental level, we won't activate apostolic movements." (61) *"The fundamental job of apostolic imagination is to produce out of the church we now experience a vision of the church Jesus wants us to experience."* (68)

Hirsch identifies four areas that need to be focal points around which we are to reimagine the church for our time: Christology, Missiology, Organization, and Discipleship. One might wonder why these four areas, and not other ones? Why four areas and not five? Yet one cannot argue with the central focus on Christology: "Christology lies at the heart of church renewal in any time and place we find ourselves. This is perhaps the most radical thing we can do, because it takes us back to the root (*radix*) of the church God's dream for the world; in the Scriptures, that dream is called the kingdom of God." (69)

The key for maximising imaginative possibility is leadership. Ferguson writes: "If you are a leader, the best way to turn missional imagination from a blurry phrase found in a book to something your people see with 20/20 vision is for you to live it out. When leaders are *being* the change they want to see, they spark the missional imagination of all who follow.... If the fires of an apostolic movement are going to burn bright, they will be sparked by leaders who lead from the front and live it out." (80) And in case church leaders do not know how to lead from the front, each chapter in *On the Verge* ends with a series of discussion questions which will assist leaders to gain momentum.

Speaking about leaders, and what follows might challenge one's understanding of church polity and practice, but the authors of

On the Verge make some strong statements about the place of women in church leadership. They write, "Let's be honest: women tend to be better at this than men, and in order to be genuinely movemental, we need a whole lot more women in leadership. It's time to balance up this equation.... It's high time to balance out the male dominance in church ministry and leadership. If we do not, we can expect more of the same (somewhat one-brained) results we're currently achieving." (94-95)

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Now you might have certain strong interpretations of the Pauline texts about the roles of women, but as the authors point out, "it's clear in the New Testament and from history that women bear together with men the image of God, are integrally part of the body of Christ, are fully empowered agents of the King, and are commissioned in their conversion to Jesus' ministry and kingdom." (95) And I quite agree. I am not pushing for the ordination of women in some of the "official" roles of leadership in the church, but if the missional movement is really going to survive or thrive, we need the input and gifts of women around our leadership tables. We need more right-brain thinking!

I found Hirsch's discussion of Abraham Maslow's scale of learning useful as we talk about momentum and change management. I applied this to the context in which I minister, the Christian Reformed denomination in Australia. When it comes to embracing the ideas, actions, and paradigms of a missional or apostolic movement, at what stage are we at:

1. Unconscious Incompetence
2. Conscious Incompetence
3. Conscious Competence
4. Unconscious Competence

Some years ago we adopted a missional vision for our denomination, *to be a church reforming to reach the lost for Christ*. This

vision is not lived out instinctually (stage 4) and we might see a few churches move toward stage 3; these churches understand the basic dynamics of the new paradigm but they still need to concentrate in order to operate well. The vast majority of our churches would fall in the second stage – there is a growing awareness that some things are not just right, and churches are giving the implementation of the missional vision a go. There is a lot of work yet to do.

Besides the requirement of “imagination”, the authors go on in the rest of the book to detail the other requirements to shift, innovate, and move. The very heart of the book is the “Shift” section. This section is worth reading several times over. Change for many people (and churches) might be difficult, but it is necessary if Christians in the West are going to realise some missional momentum. But again, I appreciate the balance of thought the authors bring to the missional discussion. For example, they write: “... we are not suggesting that you import some alien system of ideas into your church; rather we suggest that we must remember what we have forgotten.” (117) The Verge church process seeks to “activate the latent potentials that are already present but are largely inactive within most churches.” (117)

In this pivotal section of their book, Hirsch summarises what he explained more fully in his book *The Forgotten Ways*, the six elements of that need to be activated in the new and yet ancient way of being the church – the idea of an apostolic movement. These six elements are:

- Jesus is Lord
- Disciple-making
- Missional-Incarnational Impulse
- Apostolic Environment
- Organic Systems

- *Communitas*

Without going into detail on each of these six elements (read the book), I found Hirsch’s summary of what he calls the “apostolic genius” very helpful as we think about the mindset in our churches in the West. These are really paradigm shifts for many of our churches – the missional DNA of the church. The “Apostolic Genius is a mind-set, an approach, a phenomenon, a way of thinking and doing church.” (139) If you are interested to discover if the apostolic genius mind-set is active in your church, your small group, and/or your organisation then visit www.theforgottenways.org/mpulse . There you will find a diagnostic tool that will assist you to develop a strategy to change the missional DNA of your church, small group, and/or organisation.

A positive focus of this entire book is on the missional character of the church. Perhaps you have often heard churches or church leaders advocate being an Acts 2 church. Ferguson shares a story described by Michael Stewart, who oversees the missional communities of the Austin Stone Church. He explains: “We told people, ‘If you

aim for Acts 2 community, you will experience real community,’ but what we discovered was that the Acts 2 community came only as a result of Acts 1 mission. It was this unexpected success that set this church in a whole new missional direction.” (213) Earlier in the book Hirsch writes: “When your groups are organized around ministry to other Christians, they will seldom, if ever, get to mission. If you organize the group around mission, you have to do ministry, because ministry is the means to do mission.” (164)

There is also an emphasis throughout this book on church multiplication, church planting. “It’s only as we began to take church planting seriously that we begin to see a change in growth patterns.... new churches

He who rejects
change is the
architect of decay.
The only human
institution which
rejects progress is the
cemetery.

-Harold Wilson

have three to four times as many conversions as do established churches.... in the first ten years, new churches grow twenty-three times faster than churches over ten years old.” (252-253) These statistics cannot be ignored. If we truly desire to reach the lost for Christ, we need to be about planting new churches.

One more comment: Hirsch gave me some pause as I reflect on my own theological neighbourhood. He asks a couple of questions: “If Anabaptists, who have so lovingly centered on the life and teaching of Jesus, have troubles integrating him, then how much more the Reformed tradition (for instance), with its deeply ingrained historical tendency to short-circuit around Jesus and focus on Paul? To what degree do Reformed churches need a thorough reJesusing, a recalibration of theology and practice around the life and teachings of Jesus?”(275) You might dismiss Hirsch by concluding that he is stereotyping Anabaptists and Reformers. But don’t dismiss him entirely. His questions are worth further reflection.

An excellent feature of *On the Verge*, like a growing number of current books in my library, are the discussion questions at the end of each chapter. Like the Serendipity Bible, the discussion questions begin with some “Open” questions, then “Explore”, and ends with some “Move” questions. I would suggest giving a copy of this book to each of your church leaders and/or staff, and then use the questions to dig into the content. The “Open” questions will break the ice. The “Explore” questions will make you dig deep. And the “Move” questions will get you moving – and isn’t that exactly what is needed – momentum! Apostolic momentum! Who knows, you and your church might be right on the verge into the exciting future of the church.

About the Authors:



Alan Hirsch is an award-winning author on various aspects of missional Christianity and founder of the innovative Forge Mission Training Network.



Dave Ferguson is the pioneering leader of the NewThing Network, senior leader of Community Christian Church, and author of bestselling books on church planting and leadership.