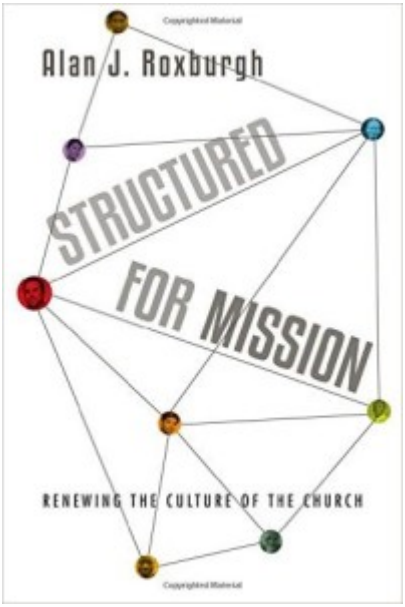
A DIFFERENT IMAGINATION FOR THE CHURCH. REVIEW OF 'STRUCTURED FOR MISSION' BY ALAN ROXBURGH

Review of Alan Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015). Originally published in Englewood Review of Books, Vol 05, No. 03, Summer, 2015. It is reproduced here with permission. EnglewoodReview.org



Several years ago I had the privilege of interviewing Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and especially about the relevance of new monasticism to more institutional forms of church. He told me, 'The challenge of the institution is that you can only experiment so much. … You don't have time to experiment, you don't have the freedom to experiment.'

The institution at its best—and by that I mean the congregation or the denomination—listens carefully to those who are on the margins and who are experimenting with faithfulness in a way that might result in new practices for faithful living."

Alan Roxburgh is a senior consultant for The Missional Network, an organization that 'work[s] with church systems, local leaders and congregations wrestling with how they engage the challenges and opportunities of being God's people on mission in their local contexts.' Roxburgh's latest offering, *Structured For Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church*, echoes Wilson-Hargrove's call for institutions to pay attention to the periphery and its particular places. In a reality in which denominations and churches are hemorrhaging money and members, and in which church influence in society is increasingly marginal, the anxiety and hand-wringing escalate as quickly as the numbers dwindle. What are denominations for anymore? What does an institution have to say to a society that increasingly seeks to de-institutionalize itself, particularly where religious preference is concerned? What kind of future exists for long- established churches whose members no longer live in the neighborhood but drive in from the suburbs? And what is to be done about the morass of distrust, siloing and infighting in which so many churches and denominations are embroiled? As these questions suggest, the book's primary audience is established denominations, primarily those with European roots and thus a significant hegemony hangover.

A common assumption, Roxburgh asserts, is that the problems denominations face, such as those listed above, are largely due to inadequate organizational structures. Thus, if a struggling denomination is likened to a building in disrepair, the questions often center around whether to remodel, renovate or condemn. The problem with this approach is that structures are not merely external window dressing. 'Structures embody our deeply held stories,' he writes. They are manifestations of what he calls *legitimating narratives*: 'overarching stor[ies that] provide a group (a small unit or a whole society) with a way to express its underlying values, beliefs and commitments about who they are and how life is to be lived' (32). Without attention to these legitimating narratives, remodeling, renovation or condemnation of the building will not really address the problem. Rather, the narratives themselves

need to be named and revisited. In times of massive, rapid change like ours, it is naïve and possibly reckless to assume too quickly that one knows what alternate structures need to be in place of the existing ones. Real soul-searching and discernment is needed, and the first half of the book is dedicated to exploring these concepts, drawing on the work of historian Niall Ferguson, sociologist-philosopher Pierre Bourdieu and theologian Graham Ward. The second half explores ways to 'reframe our imagination' and consider how denominations and churches can begin to restructure in ways that are attentive and adaptive to their liminal space.

Roxburgh pushes back against those who pit the Holy Spirit against existing structures, as if the two are naturally and totally antagonistic toward each other. This, he argues, perpetuates the displacement people are already feeling. Acknowledging *semper reformanda* and its inherent tensions, Roxburgh argues for caution and discernment. It's not that churches don't know that something is wrong, it's that their attempts to address the wrongs are far too often about rearranging the chairs or buying new ones. In a state of such displacement, Roxburgh calls for churches and denominations to carve out 'time and ways in which they can learn to name and test new habits and practices in the new space' (51) they find themselves in.

In his engagement with the book of Acts as well as with the Exodus narrative, Roxburgh reminds us of so many biblical stories where God is the main agent, calling people out of their old worlds and filling them with new vision and imagination. Whether it is the Spirit pushing the church to the ends of the earth, or YHWH calling Moses and freeing the Hebrews from slavery, God is the primary actor. As a result, these salvific moments are disruptive to the status quo and ways of living in it. 'Concretized in the resurrection is the fact that God is the primary agent in the midst of massively disruptive events that cannot be fit into our existing categories of meaning or expected actions' (103). Jews in Babylonian captivity simply could not survive with revitalization projects or vision casting sessions. The great disruption of the exile was an unsolvable problem in the old paradigm. What they needed was 'a different imagination'—and that is what Roxburgh is calling denominations to.

For example, Roxburgh looks in detail at the 'hub and spoke' institutional structure, a corporate organizing model for most of the 20th century, which most denominations adopted and applied to their contexts. The central hub—say, denominational headquarters in Chicago—houses the vision, expertise and resources, dispensing them to local churches around the country for implementation. The hub decides what's needed and resources churches accordingly. Underlying this structure are values of hierarchy, efficiency and central control. This model endures to this day in many denominations, more or less. Roxburgh pulls no punches here: 'Despite best of intentions on the part of national staffs and their boards, [these efforts]…will not connect with the actual on-the-ground challenges being faced by the churches' (119).

Nevertheless, he believes that denominations, rather than going the way of the dodo, will continue to have an important role to play in the work of the church. 'Rather than being the places of expertise and centered-set priorities, they become conduits for generating environments for local engagements to flourish and interconnect with other localities in learning communities' (136). Such facilitating is

needed in this ‘distributive age:’ ‘a time that calls for cooperation in which ideas are generated at the local level and experimentation cultivates an alternative future’ (126). To illustrate how this distributive world works, Roxburgh examines the fascinating process taken by Germany in addressing the demands for cheap energy. For brevity’s sake: what emerged was that the solutions primarily came not from the hub-spoke imagination of the experts (who wanted to build more power plants), but instead from local communities and networks (working within the hub- spoke structure) in a series of small experiments. The experts and the central power plants still play a significant role, but the imagination and the expertise is becoming decentralized and more localized. For denominations and their leaders, now is the time to let go of hub-spoke thinking and to begin to ‘create environments and spaces for these experiments and distributive networks of learning to emerge’ (150).

As a pastor who has been involved in several ‘revitalization processes’ and has the disillusioned scars to prove it, I found much to be hopeful for in Roxburgh’s work. He moves with ease in-between biblical and cultural interpretation, and draws from a variety of scholars and texts. And he strikes a fine balance between urging change and gaining discernment. In the end, this book could be a boon to many pastors and denominational leaders—once they get past the critique of some of their best efforts.

Review by Gavin Dluehosh, originally published in the Englewood Review of Books.
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