



## BOOK REVIEW: THE COMMUNAL IMAGINATION: FINDING A WAY TO SHARE LIFE TOGETHER, BY MARK VOTAVA

When it comes to church life, the most profound innovation is not necessarily to create something new, but to revisit the essence of what it is to be church and dream about how to express that for a new day. Mark Votava's book *The Communal Imagination* reminded me of this. Subtitled *Finding a way to share life together*, he calls us back to focusing on relationships rather than individual achievement, and to being grounded in local places rather than being disconnected and drawn in too many different directions.

Votava prompts me to ask myself a number of challenging questions. These are the ones I have noted to think carefully about this year:

- How can I be less fragmented and more locally placed with my work, friendships and recreation, as well as my church involvement?
- How do I help us as a church listen deeply to our neighbourhood, including our neighbouring university and schools?
- How do we read the Bible as a guiding text for us as a community?
- How can we not go fast alone, but far together (echoing Shane Claiborne)?
- Do I see people I meet as beautifully made in the image of God, including the people who are unlike

me, the people I find challenging in their difference.

- Am I open to learning from people of different gender, age, culture and belief? What group of people am I most closed to?
- In which ways can I foster simplicity, vulnerability, humility and everyday forgiveness in relationships and leadership?
- How much am I preoccupied with the upward mobility of affluence and greatness, to the detriment of nurturing relationships and place?
- Where can I simplify life and declutter from “things” to free myself up for relationships?
- How do we *be* church, not just *go* to church?

Votava is helpful in prompting these challenging questions, but also pointing to practices or components of a communal imagination that help us with the “how to?” For example, he encourages practicing “proximity” and “faithful presence” in the neighbourhood where God has placed us. It’s easy to live in one place, and shop, exercise and work in others. I am challenged myself, and want to encourage others in my church, to ground ourselves deeply in our neighbourhoods. For those God calls to church with us but who live in different suburbs, I encourage to bless the neighbourhood where they live, but also do what they can to share life beyond Sunday in our parish block. I’ve been encouraging people, if you are going to shop somewhere other than your own local neighbourhood, do it near church. If you want to play cricket, join the Cricket club down the road. If you want to join a gym, come with me locally. If you want to study, enrol at the nearby University. When it’s time for coffee, pick a local café and enjoy it regularly. Christians ought to be the first to go and grow local.

Mark Votava has lived this in his own workplace choices (choosing “menial” but local jobs), and in sharing life and witness with Downtown Neighbourhood Fellowship – navigating relationship misunderstandings and community dilemmas that are not always easy. Reading his narrative and lessons learned offers both encouragement and usable practices to share life with God, church and neighbours wherever God places us.

***The Communal Imagination: Finding a way to Share Life Together*, by Mark Votava (Portland, Oregon: Urban Loft, 2014)**



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