

# Book Reviews

## The Freedom Trap

Jeganathan, Priyan Max. *The Freedom Trap*. Acorn Press 2025, 107 pages.

We live in a world, a culture, where freedom is king. Where ‘should’, ‘statutory’ and ‘submission’ are more offensive than four letter words. A time of historically unprecedented choices, yet happiness remains elusive and mental health issues are increasingly prevalent – are we trapped?

*The Freedom Trap* (TFT) by Priyan Max Jeganathan is part of the CPX (Centre for Public Christianity) ‘Re: Considering’ suite, published by Acorn Press. Books in this suite are short, written in an easy reading style and engage with a diversity of cultural and scholarly perspectives. I have now read four of the six currently available and strongly recommend the series, as they provide depth and rigor in a brief, easily digestible format. My only concern with the suite is that their balanced cognitive emphasis means they are perhaps lacking in passion and emotion.

While TFT has 20 chapters and sub-chapters it can be divided into three sections: ‘Introduction and History of Freedom’, ‘The Trap’/‘Escaping the Freedom Trap’ and ‘Reclaiming Freedom’. Each section has at least three chapters or subchapters.

TFT has four key strengths. Firstly, TFT is highly accessible, costing only \$9, 107 pages, with short chapters and very easy reading. TFT’s second strength is its wonderful use of language, as demonstrated by the pithy, powerful summary statements, which are eminently quotable; many would make great text for a poster or T-shirt. Examples include: ‘Freedom offers choices: Choices have consequences: Consequences constrain’ (p. 29). ‘The only time we find freedom in the singular form is in the dictionary. Everywhere else, it’s about balancing differing and often competing freedoms’ (p. 31). ‘Freedom never travels alone or in the abstract’ (p. 91). Thirdly I really enjoyed the nuggets of history which enriched TFT, for example: ‘No country with a truly free media has ever experienced famine since the industrial revolution’ (p.4). ‘Our global net worth has tripled since 2000’ (p. 19). Recounting Tolstoy’s parable - ‘How much land does a man need’ (p. 21). TFT’s fourth strength was the engagement with diverse sources, from ancient civilisations, philosophers modern and ancient, to popular culture reference. These added depth, flavor and nuance.

TFT has three limitations. Firstly, while Max is clearly a Christian, TFT is a gently Christian resource rather than an overtly Christian book. As such, while it refers to Scripture it also references other resources and is closer to philosophy with a Christian edge than theology. Secondly, at times TFT was a bit ‘Australian’, for example referring to the ‘Tim Tam slam. This is explained in a footnote. Australian audiences will enjoy these references, but I am not sure how they would go globally. The final, and perhaps the greatest weakness was the introduction. This was a bit slow, and the conclusion was not as tight as the body. Perhaps this reflects the strength of the body of TFT, rather than a weakness per se?

Overall, I strongly recommend buying a copy of TFT, or even a few copies to share, particularly given the low-cost point. It will be valued by thinkers and people who want to wrestle with the presuppositions of our culture for missional purposes. It is that rare resource which brings profound depth and easy digestion together.

**Ben Boland, Seniors Living Chaplain (Churches of Christ in QLD)**

## Wise Church Planting: Twelve Pitfalls to Avoid in Starting New Churches

**Steel, Dan. *Wise Church Planting: Twelve Pitfalls to Avoid in Starting New Churches*. Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 2024, 176 pages.**

Dan Steel has a background in market research but currently is serving as a pastor based in Oxford, England. Dan has been involved in church planting for the past twenty-five years. He is currently the United Kingdom minister program director for The Lanier Trust, where he engages in equipping planters and pastors for ministry (back cover). As the subtitle of the book describes, he authors this book to help church plants avoid the common mistakes that sabotage their long-term success (12).

In the introduction, the author gives his impetus for this manuscript as he recounts research that says one-third of new church plants fail within four years (13). With this as motivation, he identifies twelve major pitfalls new church plants experience if not equipped to avoid them. These twelve pitfalls are divided into two major categories: internal and external.

The internal pitfalls have to do with character more than giftedness and ability. Through personal experience, Steel guides church leaders through the qualifications of a pastor in 1 Tim. 3:1-7. He points out that only one qualification has to do with ability. All the other qualifications have to do with the heart (28).

A major pitfall is allowing pride to slip in and take over which is demonstrated by trying to go alone without building a team of others around for support. This action then leads to feelings of isolation. Saying 'yes' to everything and trying to do too much can lead a pastor to burnout (35-37). The lack of humility can lead to other pitfalls. A pastor must take an honest self-evaluation and know their own giftedness and weaknesses. The body of Christ is not one member doing everything. It is many members doing what they are equipped and called to do (Rom. 12:3-8, 1 Cor. 12:12-27). Other internal pitfalls include marriage and family strain (about 25 percent of church planters) and misplaced priorities (69).

The external pitfalls begin with the culture of unrealistic expectations. Church planters can be overachievers and church senders often expect more than can be delivered which leads to frustration and discouragement. The lack of strategy and intentionality or trying to duplicate what another church plant is doing leads to other misplaced feelings (103). External pitfalls can exist in the relationship between the planting church and the parent church if the expectations are not clearly identified and communicated. Church planters are urged to be patient, humble and ready to listen to the wisdom provided by the parent church (118-119). As the book concludes, the author reminds the reader that there will always be opposition. This can come from within and certainly from the enemy. The need for a personal and healthy relationship with Christ cannot be overstated.

This book is a great tool for church planters to prayerfully consider and apply these principles before and during the church planting process. Ministry pitfalls can be like walking through a labyrinth of landmines, but Steel has provided a map to help avoid these pitfalls and navigate to areas of success. Intertwined with relevant examples and personal stories, this book is easy to read and gives basic considerations that any church ministry can apply.

**James Mashburn, Professor, Liberty University**

## Faithful futures: Sacred tools for engaging younger generations

Packard, J. *Faithful futures: Sacred tools for engaging younger generations*.

Baker Academic, 2024, 208 pages.

As a writer and a researcher in the field of youth and youth ministry, and a sociologist, I have to be honest. It is not often that I find a book on youth ministry that resonates with me. I find so many that make big claims without support from research – which is problematic because it means such authors claim their own opinion or experiences are universal. Or, youth ministry books do not account for much in the way of the bigger issues and contexts that young people face. They do not account for sociology.

Hence, I was so refreshed to read *Faithful Futures*. In fact, from the moment I finished the introduction, I knew I was going to like this book. Packard is also a sociologist, a researcher, and passionate about the faith formation of young people. But this is not the only reason why I recommend the book. Early on, Packard says “Most of us go back to our own teenage years to try and understand today’s teenagers. ... The experiences of Gen Z and Alpha are so different from our own that our mental models and maps are essentially useless.” (P. 3). Packard highlights the challenge that I found in some of my own research: relying on our own experiences to design youth ministry is flawed – because we are not the young people we serve.

The book discusses the unique challenges that “Gen Z” and “Gen Alpha” face, and their unique contexts that have shaped the ways these groups of young people might express and experience faith and faith communities. Chapter two argues for faith as a dialogical conversation, rather than a one-way ‘banking’. Those who are familiar with Paulo Friere will instantly relate with what Packard is saying. Chapter three describes how cultures are changing as people disaffiliate because of decreasing trust in institutions generally – not just the church. Chapter four discusses how belonging must occur before belief, a fact which has been deeply impacted by a world impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and online pseudo-communities with minimal in-person communities. Packard handles all of these big issues beautifully, describing the impact of the issue without demonising young people or the things they love.

*Faithful Futures* is written from an American context. It makes sense then, that some of the statistics and research presented only focuses on American contexts. At times this might make readers feel like it is not relevant to a non-American context, however, the changes that Packard describes appear to be happening in many places – just with slightly different numbers. I recommend that readers not let this discourage them from reading or continuing with the book, because at the end of every chapter, Packard offers simple, but also innovative and incredibly practical tools that can be immediately implemented in any youth ministry.

To anyone involved in youth ministry – or anyone who knows someone involved in youth ministry – I would enthusiastically recommend this book to them.

**Timothy A. Mullen, Lecturer (Acknowledge Education) and Editor (Journal of Contemporary Ministry)**

**Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus; Become like him; Do as he did**

**Comer, John Mark. *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus; Become like him; Do as he did.*  
WaterBrook, 2024, 255 pages.**

When I saw the book title, I thought that it would be an answer to the “How to” question that has lingered over my walk with Jesus for most of the fifty years that I have followed Him. And I can gratefully acknowledge that the book has given me great guidance to that end, without actually laying out a prescribed course to follow. For this I am thankful, as it allows me to find a purpose and strength in my particular walk that a more definitive answer would clutter, leaving me flat and exhausted at the tedium that could result.

The starting point for Comer is the proposition of Jesus to the first disciples to “come, follow me...” He goes on to explicate this through the Way of being with Jesus, becoming like Him, and doing as He did. An interesting stepping stone of the book is to place Jesus in the context of first century Hebrew Rabbis and how the phrase “come follow me” fitted into the cultural milieu of the time. We are also shown how the word “disciple” has a modern affinity with the notion of an apprentice and how apprenticeship with Jesus leads to a more fulfilled life, both emotionally and spiritually.

The pivotal point of the book is to determine the “how to?” question I alluded to earlier. However, the answer is more nuanced than that, and the practices of the ancients are explained via both biblical text and the example of Jesus leading His disciples. Comer suggests ways to incorporate these practices into the reader’s life without being prescriptive about how they must be done. He is rigorous in allowing the reader to apprentice to Jesus and for this I give him great credit. By both anecdote and example, Comer takes the reader into the means by which the practices can be given a new and creative life in the modern believer’s walk with Jesus.

The practices of the ancients that are central to the book are: Sabbath keeping, solitude, prayer, community, Scripture, fasting, generosity, service and witness. The author acknowledges that each apprentice/disciple will be drawn to particular practices and find some hard, so he is not dogmatic in how they are to fit into a person’s lifestyle. I found this approach encouraging as it has allowed me freedom to design a suitable personal life practice.

I believe the book is transformational. Comer shows that the apprentice/disciple must be intentional in all aspects of their lives to be more like Jesus rather than conforming to the world around them. The journey to be an apprentice of Jesus is lifelong and full of ups and downs. To this end, the greatest strength of the book is that it is best applied in community. I am engaging with the book through an online club of nine, one of whom is also studying the book with his church fellowship. It is a great help to have friends and colleagues looking on, to remove the inertia that often strikes when seeking to develop new thought and habit patterns which the book inherently encourages.

One of the special peculiarities of the book is the author’s acknowledgement that The Way is not for everyone, and indeed he refers to biblical examples of some who did not take up Jesus’ offer to follow him. As Comer says (p. 204) the point of following a master/rabbi is that they will disrupt the lives of their followers and that involves surrender to their agenda. We all follow something, and Jesus offers a better way as shown in the book.

I have also read Bonhoeffer’s “The Cost of Discipleship”, Yancey’s “What’s so Amazing about Grace”, and Brother Lawrence’s “The Practice of the Presence of God” over the past eighteen

months. I believe that “Practicing the Way” is as insightful to the life of a follower of Jesus as those others. I am thankful for Comer’s endeavour to write a story of the love of Jesus for a modern apprentice/disciple who often messes up but seeks a better and more fruitful life.

The author has taken quite a wide view of the literature on building a life of following Jesus without being theologically dense. I believe the book is worth the effort to read and will assist the reader to follow the path of apprenticing to Jesus. It would be suitable for most people who are keen on living a better life for Jesus, both individually and as a church body. Additional resources are available at [practicingtheway.org](http://practicingtheway.org) free of charge. I found these particularly helpful for group study.

Practicing the Way would be useful for any church or ministry that wanted a resource to help groups of people grow as disciples of Jesus.

**Lloyd Hunt C.A., B. Min, Malyon College QLD**

## Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling: Leadership in a Changing World

Roxburgh, Alan J and Roy Searle, *Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling: Leadership in a Changing World*. Cascade Books, 2025, 310 pages.

### *Has the church in the West been humiliated? What shouldn't we do about it?*

This confronting book is a must-read for those who care deeply about the current state of Christian churches in the West. This includes denominational leaders who may be tempted to devise new strategies, deploy resources, or manage their way out of the “Great Unravelling” that characterises our contemporary moment.

Roxburgh and Searle argue that the Western church has undergone a profound humiliation over the past 75 years. Once a visible centre of community life, the church has been displaced by the rise of radical individualism, consumerism, and the subtle but decisive shift of trust from institutions to personal preference. The result is a kind of Babylonian Exile in our own neighbourhoods. Even well-trained clergy find themselves unable to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.” Local churches have not experienced such disorientation in living memory. What now?

The authors take up this question not as detached commentators but as leaders formed by decades of ministry on the ground and supporting a new generation of Christian leaders. Their central conviction is clear: the usual responses—new strategies, growth techniques, managerial leadership models—are not only inadequate but often counterproductive. Attempts to attract more like-minded consumers or tightly manage congregational life risk deepening the very anxieties they aim to cure. These models can set ministers and congregations up for disappointment, burnout, and a harmful sense of failure.

### *Three Postures for a Different Kind of Leadership*

Roxburgh and Searle believe that Jeremiah 29, Luke 10, the early Celtic Church, and the Benedictines, can inform and inspire a different approach for us today. Instead of strategic management, they commend three interwoven postures: **Dwell**, **Discern**, and **Discover**.

**Dwell** invites leaders to slow down, to embed themselves within the actual life of their neighbourhoods and congregations, and to resist the compulsions of urgency and control. Dwelling cultivates presence—attentive, patient, relational presence—which the authors see as the only soil in which genuine communal imagination can regrow.

**Discern** shifts leadership from problem-solving to prayerful attentiveness. Rather than diagnosing decline and prescribing solutions, leaders learn to listen: to Scripture, to the tradition, to the cries and hopes of their communities, and to what the Spirit might be saying through the disruptions of the age. Discernment reframes decline as a moment of invitation rather than catastrophe.

**Discover** names the surprising emergence of small, often fragile experiments of hope that arise when communities learn to dwell and discern together. These are rarely dramatic or programmatic. Instead, they are relational sparks: shared meals, neighbourhood partnerships, new spaces of belonging, and the quiet formation of a people learning to live faithfully in dislocated times.

***A Call to Let Go... and to Begin Again***

This book does not offer simple church growth style solutions, but a confronting summons. It calls readers to relinquish illusions of control, to grieve the loss of cultural privilege, and to rediscover the church not as an organisation to be managed but as a community formed by God's living presence in a changing world. It invites us to trust God's agency and to join in with what God is already doing.

Roxburgh and Searle write with pastoral compassion, but also a prophetic intensity. Their analysis of humiliation is not despairing but hopeful; it exposes the futility of managerial responses while opening the possibility of a renewed, humbler, more relational imagination for ministry.

In many ways, this book resonates with the work of Western missiologists such as Michael Frost and Lesslie Newbigin, as well as sociologist Robert Putnam—particularly in *The Upswing*. Like these writers, Roxburgh and Searle combine rigorous analysis of our cultural moment with a hopeful, if costly, vision for renewal. Written in the post-Covid context, the book recognises how many earlier missiological and sociological intuitions about the church's declining role in community life have been dramatically accelerated. Roxburgh and Searle take up this challenge with clarity and depth.

For those seeking quick strategies, this book will frustrate. For those willing to be re-formed, it may prove liberating. At a time when many leaders feel overwhelmed by expectations and anxious about decline, *Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling* offers a deeply needed invitation: to slow down, to listen, and to rediscover the God who is already at work in the neighbourhoods we too often overlook.

This is an important and timely contribution to contemporary ministry. I commend it to anyone who loves the church enough to let it be transformed.

**Ash Barker, International Director of 'Seedbeds' and Minister at Lodge Road Community Church UK**

## Priceless People: Loving Older People & People Living with Dementia

**Boland, Ben. *Priceless People: Loving Older People & People Living with Dementia*. Christian Focus Publications, 2025, 119 pages.**

I'm convinced that youth ministry is the most strategic investment that our churches can make. However, in *Priceless People: Loving Older People & People Living with Dementia*, Ben Boland makes an argument for ministry to focus on people who are much older. The case is certainly strong: in the western world, the proportion of small churches populated by older people is growing strongly. Given that people are living much longer, it is crucial that appropriate care and attention is shown to those older. If we abandon these beloved people made in the image of God, we miss a massive mission field and opportunity to share God's love. If we do not engage them in God's mission too, we might lose an entire generation of potential missionaries perfectly positioned for their older context. Although Boland's downplaying of ministering to children in Scripture is not convincing, his related point about the comparative lack of investment in ministry to elderly people is well made.

Boland's focus in *Priceless People* is not just on those older, but on those suffering with dementia. He notes that although there is much overlap, not all those with dementia are old, nor do all those who are aged have dementia. However, there is much common ground between the two groups, and Boland deals with them both well. He is a passionate advocate for these groups, and his love for them comes through page after page. Overall, his approach is one of prayer, presence and pastoral care.

Although Boland writes with a warm and inviting tone, gently encouraging readers to expand their ministry to those older, much of the book is quite provocative. At times it takes on a prophetic edge, challenging our assumptions and practices. He pushes back on the lament often heard after the loss of a dementia-sufferer: "I lost mum twice: Once to dementia, once to death." Boland's correction here is that while this is understandable from the experience of the relatives, it implicitly denies the humanity and value of those still alive with dementia.

Throughout many of the chapters are two interwoven themes. Firstly is the need for ministry to older folk and those with dementia. Boland does a masterful job of addressing misconceptions as to why this is needed. In chapter four, for example, he addresses the myth of people with dementia not being able to become Christians. I enjoyed how he pushed back against the common Christian habit of seeing our relationship with God as being information about God, rather than relationship with God. Even people with dementia, he shows, are still able to have a form of trusting relationship with God.

Secondly, *Priceless People* is packed with nuggets of practical wisdom for caring. He explains that many of the elderly are desperate for visits and conversation, but these do not need to be long, and brief is often much better. He talks about real issues of safety, suicide, mental health, elder abuse, and dress codes. The suggestions for preaching to people with limited attention spans may well have usefulness far beyond the book's key target.

The book is quite short, only 119 pages of quite large font. It is easy to read and packed with thoughtful insights. The obvious target audience is chaplains, ministers and family members who engage with older people and those with dementia. However, there would be few in ministry, or few with a heart and access to older people, who would not benefit from the practical encouragement here.

**Stephen Parker, Associate Academic Dean (Coursework),  
Australian College of Ministries**

## **The Child in God's Church: Faith-formative relationships that grow disciples who know, love and obey King Jesus**

**Beilharz. Tim. *The Child in God's Church: Faith-formative relationships that grow disciples who know, love and obey King Jesus*. Youthworks Media, 2025, 138 pages.**

Children's ministry is an almost ubiquitous feature of the modern church, and there are a plethora of books about the how of children's ministry. So, is *The Child in God's Church: Faith-formative relationships that grow disciples who know, love and obey King Jesus* (TCiGC) worth reading, let alone purchasing? YES. Because it is primarily focused on the why - the theology of Children's ministry. For me at least, the why underpins the how, so TCiGC is essential reading.

Additionally, Beilharz is an Australian, has served in children's ministry for twenty-five years in the church and twelve years at Youthworks college. TCiGC clearly brings this experience and expertise to bear in building a theology of children's ministry. In a nutshell, Beilharz believes Children are a critical part of the church and that discipling them and allowing them to serve is critical for the church. This position is built through engagement with Scripture, church history and psychology. Even if Children's ministry is not your focus, I strongly recommend reading TCiGC, to facilitate thinking deeply but simply about the church, children and ministry.

Theologically, Beilharz is a Reformed Evangelical, of the Sydney Anglican tradition, however his gracious tone makes it applicable across the church. He provides clear and strong evidence for his positions, so even if at times you disagree with him, as I did, it is easy to examine the evidence and thus have one's thinking sharpened. This is one of the real strengths of TCiGC, not simply the conclusions, but the opportunity to wrestle. Such engagement is helped by the easy reading style, relatively short length and price.

Structurally, the book has two parts 'The Foundations of Children's Ministry: Theological and Theoretical Principles for Discipling Children' and 'The Structure of Children's Ministry: Spheres of Discipleship for Child Faith Formation'. Both are an accurate description of their contents with part one being more theological while part two is more application-focused. While I got more from part one, that is probably a reflection of my interest.

Specifically, I was sharpened by the theology of the church, Christian faith and faith formation (chapters two to four in part one). Beilharz's engagement with Christianity as both individual/corporate endeavour and cognitive/affective faith was profound.

In terms of weaknesses, TCiGC's engagement with psychology may shorten its lifespan as psychology evolves. Theologically, there were times where Beilharz referenced rather than wrestled with Sydney Anglican doctrine, however critiquing everything would have reduced readability in terms of additional depth and length.

If you are involved in children's ministry I would suggest TCiGC is essential reading and deserves a key place in your library. If you are leading a church, or are in ministry more generally, I strongly recommend reading it. I would also recommend it to Christians more generally as an easy way to wrestle with some key Christian doctrines.

**Ben Boland, Seniors Living Chaplain (Churches of Christ in QLD)**

## **Learning to Love: Utilizing the Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care for Mission**

**Holdsworth, Sue M. *Learning to Love: Utilizing the Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care for Mission*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024, 176 pages.**

Sue M. Holdsworth's *Learning to Love: Utilizing the Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care for Mission* offers a timely and theologically rich exploration of how the contemporary church might faithfully and lovingly respond to migrant communities. Writing against the backdrop of heightened racial tensions in Australia and around the globe, Holdsworth reframes mission not as institutional expansion or evangelistic strategy, but as discerning where the Spirit of God is already at work and humbly joining in (p. 14). This Spirit-led posture forms the central thesis of the book: pastoral care is not separate to mission but is itself an authentic and indispensable expression of mission (p. 81).

Drawing from her PhD research, Holdsworth presents longitudinal case studies of four churches engaged in intercultural initiatives among migrant communities in the city of Melbourne, Australia. In her study, Holdsworth intentionally explores the disciplines of pastoral care, mission, spiritual formation, and ministry supervision to ascertain the most effective evidence-informed practices. English conversation classes, a sewing club and childcare services are all offered. Three initiatives were run by volunteers, and the other, employees. Each initiative had different practices concerning the role of prayer, planning and purpose. All these aspects influenced outcomes.

Holdsworth asserts that genuine Christian mission and true welcome must be rooted in love, hospitality, and relational presence rather than performance-driven evangelism. Holdsworth states, "loving others well, through practices of pastoral care, results in emotionally nonviolent mission in which care is offered on others' terms" (p. 7). Leadership also significantly shaped outcomes. Where leaders embodied humility and intercultural openness, volunteers tended to demonstrate greater empathy and adaptability. Migrant responses likewise varied, but the research indicates that authenticity and care without hidden agendas fostered deeper trust and receptivity.

*Learning to Love* is well written and structured clearly. It provides helpful markers to navigate the study, resulting themes, and practical suggestions for best practice. The reflection and discussion questions included throughout the book are a notable strength. Part One delivers the mechanics of the research, describing the case study design and Holdsworth's careful engagement with qualitative methods, which includes interviews, participant observation and document searches. It provides a theologically rich undergirding of the research through the stories of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), The Woman at the Well (John 4:4-42) and Jesus Washing the Disciples' Feet (John 13:1-17), each exploring the link to the major emerging themes.

Part Two offers a deeper explanation of the findings. Chapter six explores the functions of pastoral care, highlighting its roles in support, advocacy, relationship-building, and spiritual accompaniment. Chapter seven further strengthens the book's contribution by applying Lartey's intercultural pastoral care framework to real case studies. Holdsworth skilfully analyses how volunteers engaged with migrants, revealing practical ways they grew in empathy, hospitality, and cultural awareness. These case studies offer concrete examples of how theory translates into lived ministry. Chapters eight to ten consider motivations for and delivery of service, along with necessary skills for intercultural relating, concluding with practical recommendations for effective practice.

One of the book's major strengths is its thoughtful engagement with intercultural connection. Through careful coding of qualitative data, Holdsworth develops an intercultural pastoral care framework that provides both theological depth and practical guidance (p. 77). *Learning to Love* sensitively challenges readers to reflect on what truly motivates Christian service, encouraging more welcoming, empathetic, and culturally aware approaches that honour dignity and mutuality.

Importantly, the book also offers a critical challenge to colonial models of evangelism, questioning their relevance and effectiveness in today's multicultural context (p. 75). The research does not idealise church efforts; instead, it critically evaluates varying attitudes toward mission, differing understandings of evangelism, and the measurable impact of these approaches within contemporary society.

Holdsworth's approach is deeply Christ-centred and grounded in the heart of the Gospel. The emphasis is not on the church fulfilling its own goals, but on genuinely loving migrants through creating safe spaces, offering authentic welcome, and providing service without an agenda of evangelism. This position reflects a theology of mission rooted in love, presence, and care rather than performance or conversion outcomes. The book carefully explores what it means to love as Christ calls His people to love, particularly in intercultural contexts where past experiences of evangelism may have caused harm or mistrust.

Overall, *Learning to Love* is a valuable resource for pastors, ministry leaders, and church communities seeking to engage migrants with wisdom, sensitivity, and faithfulness. The research offers theologically grounded and practically applicable insights to develop effective intercultural initiatives, cultivate healthy congregational attitudes towards migrants, and engage in contextually sensitive and impactful evangelism for contemporary society. In a cultural moment where fear and division often dominate public discourse, Holdsworth offers a compelling vision of mission shaped by love, presence, and the Spirit's leading.

**Sarah Oliva MTS**

## Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as if Spiritual Formation Mattered

**Noland, Rory. *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as if Spiritual Formation Mattered*. InterVarsity Press, 2021, 205 pages.**

Noland returns to us as a trusted voice in his fifth book on Christian worship. He does not disappoint. With a doctorate in worship studies and years of church ministry experience, the founder and director of *Heart of the Artist Ministries* writes with academic rigour and pastoral insight. Ruth Hayley Barton's opening endorsement whets our appetite for what to expect from Noland, as he "casts a vision for transforming worship as a vital spiritual discipline that can move us beyond nominal Christianity" (p. 5). And suddenly, as readers, we find ourselves facing a potentially controversial question: Is corporate worship meant to be transformative?

To answer this, Noland appeals to the modern church to retrieve its biblical framework for "gathered worship as a formative spiritual practice" (13), which, from the outset, seems a difficult goal to measure. Yet, as he demonstrates how the church throughout history has fostered spiritual formation, he justifies his petition and leaves us challenged, effectively planting seeds of practical ideas that can begin to sprout at the local church level. In this way, *Transforming Worship* is a user-friendly handbook for pastors and practical theologians, and, as Noland recommends, a "GPS for those who plan and lead worship services" (9). Be aware, though, Noland writes persuasively, and as he invites us into his enthusiasm on the subject, his book lands well with his intended audience: there is work to be done in the church. Don't be surprised if you catch his vision.

Personally, in my own research, speaking, and teaching, I have already found Noland's text a valuable resource that challenges me to think more deeply about how corporate worship shapes God's people into the image of Christ. For example, his suggestion to "cultivate a *lectio* community" has motivated me to ask my listeners in the next message to focus on a specific word or phrase from the spoken Scripture, and to "receive it as a personal message from the Lord" (124). In this way, his book is theologically rich and well-grounded in Christian traditions. Among similar contemporary worship resources (Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 2008; Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 2010; Hicks, *The Worship Pastor*, 2016), Noland's book uniquely links worship (not just singing) with spiritual formation and church service planning, offering both historical insight and practical application in one volume.

Noland divides his book into two main sections (Foundations and Elements of Transforming Worship) and includes four appendices and endnotes for further reading, including the Checklist for Transforming Worship Services, which would be helpful during service-planning meetings. He swiftly builds trust with his readers in the introduction by stating that he is "not advancing a new, trend-setting philosophy of worship" (13), and substantiates this in chapter one by tracing the origins of spiritually formative Christian worship practices back to Sinai (Ex. 20-24). Chapters two to five then advocate for the recovery of ancient worship patterns, drawing on the Emmaus encounter (Gathering, Word, Table, Sending, 32) and early church models for believers and unbelievers, reclaiming Sunday morning as the church's primary formative event and restoring a sense of the sacred in modern worship.

In part two, chapters six to ten provide a historical and theological overview of five routines and rituals (elements) of the church: prayer, Scripture reading, confession, the Lord's Supper, and

baptism. Drawing on ancient manuscripts (*The Didache*, *The Apostolic Tradition*) and the writings of early church apologists and patristic authors, Noland amplifies their voices with insights from contemporary scholars to argue for the retrieval of these practices for spiritual formation today. His argument is compelling, and the message is hard to ignore. As Noland laments, “In recent decades, the church has failed to make spiritual formation a priority, and the results have been devastating” (13), we are left to ponder how this book might be a gift of grace to our own churches and congregations.

Still, not everyone may share Noland’s enthusiasm when he exclaims, “I can’t believe we get to do this!” (175). As he reflects on planning worship services within a team, the book may leave those without opportunities to collaborate feeling frustrated. Strategies for fostering creativity in places resistant to change could be helpful in this regard. The limited presence of female scholarship in the book is concerning and underscores the need for more gender-balanced, inclusive perspectives. More illustrations and in-text citations would also facilitate easier referencing, though these improvements could easily be addressed in future editions.

At its core, *Transforming Worship* is an insightful and worthwhile compendium for planning worship services with a focus on spiritual formation. Therefore, Noland’s lament does not leave us stranded without hope. With realistic strategies and practical applications, from prayer to baptism and everything in between, the ancient practices of the church, from their roots, can still bear spiritually formative fruit – making this book well worth the read.

**Cindy van der Ree, PhD Student/Adjunct Lecturer in Christian Worship, Melbourne School of Theology**

