

DEEP CHURCH

A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional



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FOREWORD

Richard J. Mouw

Deep Church is an answer to my prayers. Let me explain why.

A young “emergent” pastor told me recently that seminaries have become irrelevant. While he conceded that my own seminary is not quite as bad as the rest, the truth is that all of our theological schools are, to use his term, “dinosaurs.” When I asked him what led him to this assessment, he responded that everything that we do in theological education—curricula, programs, strategic planning—“it’s all a product of modernity.” Since my own seminary has recently been revising our strategic plan, I decided to push him for clarification on that particular subject. “Strategic planning is all about rationality,” he said. “My generation is more interested in envisioning.”

The conversation did not last much longer, and I came away with a bit of irritation about what I saw as his rhetorical overkill and his posing of false choices. Why, for example, can’t strategic planning itself be informed by a healthy dose of “envisioning”?

A few days later, however, my irritation was directed in a very different direction when I read yet another attack by an evangelical theologian on the “heresies” and “apostasy” of that young pastor’s brand of “emergent church” thinking. Here too I worried about rhetorical overkill. I know about too many emergent congregations where people are coming to a genuine faith in Christ and being encouraged to study the Scriptures and

to seek new paths of obedient discipleship. And this at a time when many traditional denominations are once again reporting significant membership losses.



I came away from those two encounters—the conversation and the written critique—with a prayerful desire for a “time out” in the rhetorical shouting match, so that we can relax a bit and really listen to each other.

This fine book by Jim Belcher is an answer to my prayer. He has given us an articulate guide to the territory, paying careful attention to the people who are having such a difficult time listening to each other. And he does this as an honest seeker, a “participant observer” who reports candidly about his creative efforts at ministry—including some of the false starts he has made along the way.

Jim’s call for the formation of a deep church speaks profoundly to those of us who stand with him as insider-outsider types in the current debates. His orthodox theological credentials are beyond challenge, yet he also knows that we desperately need to find new ways of being church. Jim Belcher does not pretend to have all the answers. But he demonstrates in these pages that he is a marvelously reliable guide—indeed I know of none better—for our much-needed efforts to go deeper as churches by mining the depths of the gospel for creative and faithful ministry in the strange and exciting new world of the twenty-first century.

Richard J. Mouw