



Improvising Church

Scripture as the Source of Harmony, Rhythm, and Soul

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Mark R. Glanville (PhD, Bristol University) is associate professor of pastoral theology at Regent College, Vancouver, and an Old Testament scholar. He is the author of *Refuge Reimagined*, *Adopting the Stranger as Kindred in Deuteronomy*, and *Freed to Be God's Family*.

New from the Co-Author of *Refuge Reimagined*

What led to your interest in writing about jazz as a metaphor for the church?

Mark R. Glanville: The most hopeful sign of the Kingdom of God in the West today, in my experience, is Christ's work birthing and renewing worshiping communities that are striving to be a foretaste of the Kingdom of God by their shared life of worship and kinship. They are busy loving their neighborhoods, living as a sign to Christ's restoring reign in a particular place. These communities are not seeking political power, wealth, or numbers—they are often smaller in size and less sensational on the surface. But they are seeking to live faithfully for the sake of the world, embracing the humble way of Christ. They uphold one another in the challenge of living out of the Biblical story amidst opposing cultural stories. We might call these "incarnational communities." By their slow work of faithfulness, hospitality, and prayer they display the beauty of Christ, up close and personal. These churches often don't have slick marketing campaigns, so it's hard to know they exist unless you're within proximity of the community itself!

Sadly, many churches are headed in the opposite direction. I was dialoguing with a friend of mine, using the metaphor of jazz to illustrate Christian community. She reflected that churches are often playing in the wrong time signature. It is all too easy for us to be enthralled by success and slick marketing strategies. And we may be tempted to try to recover a glorious "Christian" past. And yet this is like trying to improvise a beautiful solo with a time signature of 26/59—it's set up to fail! So long as we are pursuing these goals our rhythm will be frenetic, and we will be unable to respond to or even to hear God's invitation in Scripture toward compassion and kinship.

Happily, many Christian leaders sense the need for something fresh. My predecessor at Regent College, Darrell Johnson, mentors no less than seventy vocational pastors. Darrell tells me that many if not most of these pastors are asking two searching questions: "What is the church supposed to be?" and "What is the church supposed to do?" These are good questions; in fact they are the very questions that this book sets out to address.

What is your main thesis in *Improvising Church*?

Mark: Jazz, by its nature, as a traditioned, improvised, nuanced, intelligent, conversational art form, is an evocative metaphor for the church in post-Christendom. The post-Christendom turn demands that we reexamine our practices as the church. We can't simply assume that all we do as churches is demanded by Scripture, for so much of what we do is cultural. We must read the Bible freshly, with a renewed imagination for communities of witness. This book does just that. In this book, we seek to read the Bible with fresh eyes in order to discern key characteristics for the witnessing church in post-Christian neighborhoods. We refer to such churches as "incarnational communities." These are churches that receive and extend the healing of Christ in a local neighborhood.

In our journey we become familiar with twelve "notes" for improvising community, devoting a chapter to each. These twelve notes represent key characteristics of incarnational communities, and together they become a no-prescriptive pathway for nourishing communities of tenderness and witness. And we group these twelve characteristics into three parts: Part I, Harmony; Part II, Rhythm; Part III, Soul.



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Who did you have in mind as you were writing this book?

Mark: *Improvising Church* is for people who are seeking a fresh vision for Christian community and who are ready to turn to Scripture for fresh resources and a new imagination. Its readers will be pastoral students (first), pastors (second), and passionate lay leaders (third). What these people have in common is passion for the local church, readiness to lead creatively, an aching for something more for the church, and a compassionate heart.

Thousands of pastors today, young and old, are asking two urgent questions: "What is the church?" and, "What is the church supposed to do?" *Improvising Church* is written for them. And yet this book also shows that flourishing incarnational communities need to be leader-full. So, the book is designed for passionate lay leaders too. The book can be read in the classroom, and it is suitable for the first year of graduate study and the third year of undergraduate study. In fact, much of this material has been tried and tested in my Missional Church course at Regent College, Vancouver. When many of the students commented to me that it was the most significant course that they took in their studies at Regent, I realized that I needed to prioritize writing this book.

What do you hope your book contributes to the study of ecclesiology?

Mark: First, the task of re-narrating the church for post-Christian societies is extremely difficult. This book offers twelve (nonprescriptive) characteristics of incarnational communities—communities that receive and extend the healing of God in a particular neighborhood. Twelve "notes" for incarnational communities form the creative imagination in this book, as in the twelve notes that make an octave on a piano. These notes are each represented by a chapter.

Second, this book holds together deep immersion in the biblical tradition along with profound creativity as we reimagine church. Both the church and the jazz club are rooted in rich tradition, and both can also be profoundly creative. Jazz musicians immerse themselves in the jazz tradition, listening to the music for thousands of hours, tapping its rhythms, and humming its melodies. The jazz tradition, which runs deep within every good jazz performance, works similarly to the biblical tradition, which runs deep within every Christian community and gives them their identity.

Third, this book acknowledges the breadth and complexity of the task of reimagining the church in post-Christian societies. It doesn't offer a foolproof strategy for reimagining church, or ten easy steps. Nor does the book zero in on one theme, as if the malaise of the church can be solved by paying attention to just one thing. Rather, it calls readers to improvise church with the Bible in our hands, doing so by exploring twelve interrelated themes. These twelve characteristics of incarnational communities are offered as practical and biblical themes for the readers own improvisation.

Fourth, this book combines three approaches: missiology, biblical studies, and pastoral leadership—these are played like a triad. A triad is a simple chord consisting of three tones. When a triad is played, the three tones blend and resonate in our ears, producing something new and beautiful. The first note in the triad is the missional church conversation, especially as it has been articulated by Lesslie Newbigin and Michael W. Goheen. The second note in the triad is my work as an Old Testament scholar. I have done this scholarly work within the warmth, the hearth, the adventure, and the pain of incarnational communities, which is the third note in the triad. Yet the book is also practical. As we explore twelve "notes" for improvising community, we will engage in biblical exegesis alongside imagination, strategy, skills, and lived stories with the goal that you can nurture these "notes" in your communities.



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