Fruitful Church: A Manifesto for Sending - Andrew Turner

By Andrew Turner
Reviewed by Stephen Baxter

Andrew Turner is well known to FRAC through his regular and helpful contributions over many years. His new book draws on his experience of planting a church in Adelaide (which in turn planted several other churches), and also from his position as the Church Development Facilitator with the Baptist Churches of South Australia.

‘Fruitful Church’ is written for church leaders who desire ‘to bring their church into missional vitality quickly’ but who know ‘there is no easy fix’. It is a short, brisk read, more like a long article than a book. But what it might lack in length is more than made up for by Turner’s incisive and pithy critiques and his practical and helpful insights.

The book is not a ‘how to’ manual but an exploration of one ‘unlikely, counter-intuitive’ factor Turner believes is critical for churches to make the transition to being missional. This key factor, he proposes, is ‘sending’ which Turner explores using the themes of fruitfulness, discipleship and family.

‘Fruitfulness’, he suggests, is the biblical way of measuring success as opposed to our normal obsessions with size and health, and the basis for the title of the book. Fruitfulness is all about reproduction so fruitful churches reproduce themselves. They train disciples who are sent out to make and train disciples who are in turn sent out to make and train more disciples, and so on.

‘No longer can we consider non-reproductive churches as successful’, writes Turner. ‘Not that there is anything intrinsically wrong with size and health it is just that they are not the ultimate goal. A church obsessed with size and health is not necessarily fruitful.

In other words, “We should measure success not by the number of people that come to our church, but by the number and calibre of believers who are sent out from it.” Its this lack of sending, suggests Turner, which is “a significant bottleneck in the productivity of the Western church”.

Having established his proposal that ‘sending’ is the key to churches becoming more missional, Turner focuses on what can be done to unblock what he calls the ‘retentive church’. This predication, he implies, is the norm for most of our churches. Retentive churches are like parents who never allow their children to grow up and leave home. ‘As a parent, it’s not my job to keep and control my kids forever,’ says Turner, ‘but to prepare them, release them, and continue to encourage them.’ And so it should be with the church. Seeing the church as an “extended family rather than mere nuclear family makes a massive difference. Retentive churches expect people to passively attend and appreciate; fruitful churches train people to actively go and do.”

Turner willingly admits that transitioning from a retentive to a sending church is not easy. A “retentive church seeking to become a fruitful church has much unlearning and relearning to do”. There is much that will seem “counter-intuitive and downright awkward” that will “reframe people’s deep assumptions about what they’re here for, and indeed who they are”.

In his final four chapters Turner rounds out his book by exploring what affects a sending and fruitful church will have in the areas of worship, mission, fellowship and wisdom. I read the book one Sunday afternoon after having preached at our retentive church. It left me challenged and critically my own leadership wondering what I could break to help our church and our movement continue the journey towards becoming more missional.

Could ‘sending’ be the linchpin I’ve been looking for? Will it unravel our ‘retentiveness’ and usher in an exciting new missional future? The thought is enticing but Turner’s ‘manifesto’ denies that. He willingly admits churches are complex organisms and transition is difficult. But he does offer a practical exploration of what could have been done to do the hard yards and refocus our churches around fruitfulness and sending. After all Jesus did say, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

As one leading a church, and indeed a whole union of churches, towards being more missional, I found this book challenging, stimulating and ultimately motivating. Having recently revisited Crossover’s resource “Missional Conversations” with my leadership team, I look forward to keeping the conversation going by working through “Fruitful Church” with them.

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