Church Transfusion: Changing Your Church Organically from the Inside Out

by Neil Cole & Phil Helfer

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

Neil Cole and Phil Helfer are founders of Church Multiplication Associates, an organic church planting movement that has planted thousands of churches in more than forty countries and trained 50,000 people in church planting principles. They are well known for their championing of reproducing healthy disciples, leaders, churches, and movements. But their interest is not just in newly planted “simple churches.” Cole was a pastor of an inherited church for eight years, and Helfer has pastored the same medium-sized traditional-looking church for the last two decades described as “a church with a traditional skin and an organic soul.” Their heart is to cultivate organic principles in all sorts of churches. Their agenda is not to turn existing churches into house churches, but to help any and all models of church become simpler, more organic, and focused simply on disciple-making.

Contemporary missional literature has helped leaders be aware of the disconnect between church and culture and the need for change and new models. Many leaders and churches accept the need for change. But they are often unsure how to process a transformational journey in existing churches without undue bloodletting. “It’s too easy to give birth than to raise the dead” say church planting advocates, but God is a God of Resurrection and as such. The Western model needs many new church plants to reach all sorts of sub-cultural groups, but we also need help with revitalizing existing churches that are sitting on their earning.

Cole and Helfer frame revitalization not as a set of organizational steps and transitions, but about a transformation of new life and missional purpose into a church’s DNA. It’s not about helping a church become more attractive, but empowering members to let their faith spill out into the streets. The goal is not getting people in but sending people out. It starts not with a grand vision statement but acknowledging weaknesses and dependence on God. It’s not about a quick-fix seven step plan to identify strengths and weaknesses from a consultant’s indicators, but prioritizing disciple-making and healthy rhythms of leadership and church life. It is not about control and structure but trusting God’s Spirit to speak to every believer and un-tangling them to follow Jesus’ call. It is not about destroying old structures, but cultivating new vine and new wineskins alongside the old. It is not about self-preservation, but being prepared to turn off a church’s artificial support and die, anticipating what new life may be born.

Part 1 starts the book with four chapters about how change and organic principles are possible in existing churches, with case studies of where it has worked. Part 2 has nine chapters that develop principles for how to foster change from the inside out. I most appreciated the practical advice on how to foster revitalization, especially in acknowledging who is in control, in empowering innovators to dream outside the box, and to measure success in terms of influence rather than institutional numbers.

Cole and Helfer invite pastors to hand over the keys of the church to Jesus and report on taking control themselves. This can be an actual event in a church gathering. The pastor might confess how they feel important when church members need love, but want to leave co-dependence and focus on helping members hear them tell God themselves how to foster the Kingdom of God in their world. The pastor and church might then invite God to be in charge, and make time in meetings for listening to God’s agenda. It’s a refreshing reminder that revitalization is not about the pastor’s agenda but releasing the whole people of God to follow Jesus. Cole and Helfer suggest we should also attend to the presence of Christ in the church and world and tend to and control things rather than asking what Jesus is doing and waiting to do.

My favorite chapter was “Water the Green Spot” which encourages pastors to pour their energy where there is life and to foster creative options with “stick workers.” Like engineers and business groups creating new technology, church transmutation can be fostered by a carefully selected group of innovators who explore out-of-the-box solutions and ask “why not?” Cole and Helfer suggest giving them permission. If you have to set boundaries make them few, start new ministries beyond the walls of the church building, mentor leaders, ensure good communication, and block criticism. As new life emerges celebrate their stories to the broader church, invite early adopters to join, block criticism, and don’t expect everyone to fully support experiments. Ultimately, the important thing is to trust Jesus to guide the church into new life and mission and not by control or over manage.

Another helpful point was to measure success as influence rather than institutional numbers. True fruitfulness of church transmutation is not how many people come, but who does. It’s not about reaching capacity but sending capacity, not how many people attend church but how much they transform the world. Success is not by lofty numbers but doing what Jesus says and measuring to what extent the gospel spreads as influence. The aim of a transformed church is to make disciples and equip them for their ministry in the world, not just to help the pastor “run a church.” The most important reference point is not the Sunday meeting but the weekly marketplace where God’s people are sent. This is why the most important focus of a transformed church is to make disciples.

This is a constructive resource book about how organic principles can help existing churches to revitalize. If I could put one book into the hands of every pastor and leader seeking to cooperate with God in revitalizing their local church, my top pick would be Church Transmutation.

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