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EVERYWHERE

YOU

LOOK

DISCOVERING

THE CHURCH RIGHT

WHERE YOU ARE



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MOVEMENT OR THE MELTDOWN



Claudette Colvin doesn't have any museums or holidays named after her, but she should. You've undoubtedly heard of Rosa Parks, the young woman who was ruthlessly dragged off a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give her seat to a white person. What many people don't know is that nine months earlier the same thing happened to Claudette. On March 15, 1955, on her way home from high school, fifteen-year-old Claudette took a seat on a bus in Montgomery. When the bus driver told her to give her seat to a white person, she refused. Within minutes her books were flying in the air; two police officers put her in handcuffs and started to drag her off the bus. Without fighting back or cussing, she kept telling everyone who would listen that sitting on the bus was her constitutional right, but that didn't keep her from ending up in the adult jail at the police

station. While in lockup, she prayed the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 over and over, all the while hoping her family and neighbors would somehow discover she was there. She hadn't been given the opportunity to call anyone. Thankfully, her schoolmates who were also on the bus spread the word around the neighborhood.

Mary Ann Colvin, Claudette's mom, was a maid who took care of three other children in their neighborhood. Once word spread of what had happened to Claudette, a few nearby girls scurried over to watch the kids while Mary Ann frantically thought about how to get to the police station. She hastily called Claudette's pastor, the Reverend H. H. Johnson, who had a car, and together they raced to the police station. Rev. Johnson was able to bail out Claudette and told her, "Claudette, I'm so proud of you. Everyone prays for freedom. We've all been praying and praying. But you're different—you want your answer the next morning. And I think you just brought the revolution to Montgomery."¹

Most people don't know Claudette's name, but that doesn't change the fact that her grit and resolve cultivated the soil for moments like the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. King's legendary speeches, and the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1963. She is an icon to me because her courage was on display at the moment before the movement. She knew she had the support of her family and neighborhood, but she couldn't have known at the time that her courageous action would multiply throughout the country into an unstoppable movement. It took tremendous grit not to give up her seat. With all of the stares and contempt on that bus, she must have *felt* completely alone—but she *knew* she was not alone.

History has a way of remembering the icons, the ones who seemingly spark a movement from thin air, but of course this is never the case. There is no isolated genius. We should keep celebrating the major breakthroughs of history: Rosa Parks' arrest, the "I Have a Dream" speech of Dr. King, the passing of landmark legislation. It's pretty standard to remember major historical movements by marking the day or celebrating the person who embodies that final climactic moment of victory. But increasingly I find myself even more inspired by what happened before the breakthrough. What are the common themes of these crucial moments before the movement? Might there be clues for us to discern whether something much larger is happening around us today?

I'm not a historian, but it seems to me that before any major movement, before any history-making transition, a few common traits emerge. Right before most movements, the following almost always occur:

- ◆ People are afraid to ask out loud big, important questions.
- ◆ Polarization and a sense of nostalgia escalate.
- ◆ Disconnected grassroots experiments take place on the margins.

Before the movement there are sustained moments when all feels lost, when something feels impossibly broken, when confusion and fragmentation seem to be the norm. A hazy cloud of anxiety seems to pervade the lives of more and more everyday people. We want to know if we're the only ones asking these questions, having these doubts, longing for reasons to hope.

Does this sound familiar? Are we closer to a breakthrough movement or have we just begun the meltdown? In most of

the headlines about the church right now, it feels a lot more like we are approaching a meltdown.

Beneath the surface of our perplexing cultural moment, Christians from all sorts of backgrounds are wondering what is going on. A creeping suspicion has been growing for years that maybe things are getting worse. Polarization is exploding, isolation is pervasive, and this is all happening as the new millennial generation, with a historically poor attitude toward institutions, is coming of age. There is well-documented and understandable suspicion of large corporations, exhaustion from our polarized national government, and lack of participation in associations. It can feel like we are in the midst of a great unraveling or, as writer George Packer calls it, “the unwinding.”² In this era of confusion many of our institutions are tempted by former glories of the past rather than risking a bold new future. This is true of many of our churches as well.

As more and more everyday people struggle to hope, those of us following Jesus must ask, How do we embody news that is so good it draws the attention and longing of our neighbors? At the moment when so many of our neighbors seem to be most in need of a local church, do we have the imagination and clarity of vision to answer the ancient call to be the people of God who are blessed to be a blessing (see Genesis 12:2-3)?

The truth is that at the very moment when the strong social fabric of love and care is so desperately needed, we most often hear that the church is dying. It seems like every month a new celebrity pastor flames out. We read about congregations that appear more aligned with a particular political party than the redemptive story of God. We drive by dozens of church buildings that are empty or have been ignored for decades.

No wonder a growing industry of books and conferences on post-Christian America fearfully predicts the death of the church as we know it. I believe many of these forecasts to be true, but I increasingly find myself captivated by a simple idea. What if our inherited imagination of what the church should be is dying while the Spirit is stirring up something new?

We are either in the moment before the meltdown or a new movement. This book is a guide to see what's possible and to build momentum toward a movement I believe is already underway. I'm convinced that God is asking us to embrace this season as an unprecedented opportunity. At a time when everything seems to be getting more confusing, clarity is emerging for how we can be the church in our everyday lives together.

We won't yet read about these growing experiments from the headlines. We can't get there from the normal pathways. But if we join together in planting our feet on the ground, I think we just might see a history-making opportunity to join God in transforming how everyday people experience the church. *More than changing what we do, we first need to change how we see.* I have personally witnessed ordinary heroes like Claudette Colvin in just about every neighborhood I've had the honor of exploring. Thousands of courageous Christians are trying new things, taking new risks, and answering the ancient call to be God's people on behalf of others. But if we are going to have the eyes to see them, we must question our default settings in how we pay attention to God at work in our everyday lives and how we have been conditioned to view the church as a timebound and static event.

The Secret on the Street

Along with some incredible colleagues, I've been privileged to spend the past ten years in hundreds of neighborhoods listening to stories of hope. I've sat in dark pubs late at night and in bright kitchens at the crack of dawn. Over the years I've slept on more couches than I care to count. My travels have taken me to gritty urban neighborhoods, cozy suburban towns, and tranquil rural villages. I've talked to trust-fund hipsters, Black Lives Matter activists, self-described rednecks, accomplished scholars in their eighties, and idealistic teenagers. Hopeful stories of transformation are popping up everywhere as ordinary people discern what it could mean to be the church in everyday life. A groundswell of momentum is gaining traction just in time to counter our cultural moment of fragmentation and confusion.

If you doubt me, I can't blame you. After all, religious journalists won't cover most of these stories because they don't know where to look. Most pastors won't see it because they're focused on their own congregations. To witness what's actually happening, we need to walk a few streets, ask plenty of questions, and be on the lookout for what God is doing in our everyday lives. If we look at the headlines, all we see is meltdown; when we get on the street it feels more like a movement.

We are at a tipping point for the church, at least for the church in North America. In all sorts of environments, when I have asked people about what the church or its purpose is, I've gotten such diverse answers that I wonder if the practical imagination of the church is essentially up for grabs. On the one hand, millions of mostly young people are giving up on the

church. It just doesn't make sense to them, and as a result they are placing their attention, hope, and time where they believe more change can happen. On the other hand is a movement that sounds an awful lot like "Make the Church Great Again." But, both of these impulses make a profound mistake in *asking questions about the church before asking questions about what God is doing*. Ironically, the more obsessively we focus on the church, the harder it is to focus on God, who is making all things new and is active in our everyday lives.

When I say the experience of church is up for grabs, I'm not talking about how we feel when we attend a Sunday gathering. I'm talking about how everyday people imagine what the church is all about. From conservative evangelical churches in small Midwestern towns to mainline churches in bustling San Francisco, from two hundred-year-old establishments in New York to two-month-old church plants in New Mexico, a crucial question is rising: Rather than occasionally attend a service, how do we become the visible body of Christ in our everyday lives? I'm convinced God is prompting us to ask this question as well.

We are being shaken up to follow God into a bold new future where our faith guides our entire lives. It shapes our neighborhoods, cultivates an entirely new imagination for how we live, and draws us together when everything else seems to be tearing us apart.

How Movements Happen

Those who don't believe this transformation is possible might be in the majority. But let's consider how movements usually happen. First, the movements that matter almost always feel

impossible until they aren't. Here's what I mean: the reason we don't believe change can happen is not that we don't want it and usually not because we fear something new, but because we believe that we are alone. We feel like we are the slightly crazy ones. We can see a path forward, but we don't think it's going to be possible to get there on our own. So we continue on as best we can. We know there must be something more but can't quite name it. Maybe we try some new experiments and learn from them. Often, we feel like we are on to something but wonder if we can keep going. Most of the time it feels like our families, our institutions, or even our circle of friends don't quite get it. But we carry on until one of two options presents itself. The first is to simply give up. The experiments stop; we conclude we had some great ideas and strong convictions, but we just can't keep going. It's time to fold. The cards were not in our favor. This is incredibly sad and always carries with it a sense of resignation, a tinge of bitterness, and constant second-guessing. We tell ourselves we tried, which is all we can do. It's the end, and we need to face reality. Maybe the cynics were right.

But sometimes when we are pushing toward something new we receive the gift of a new connection, and it changes everything.

It can feel like winning the lottery. It's a little disorienting because of how common and ordinary it actually is, but immediately we feel the possibility of transformation. We meet someone who has a common conviction and has courageously stepped into an experiment of their own. When we meet them, it feels like magic. Maybe we aren't so crazy after all. Maybe there is something to this! Maybe we are on the front end of a long line of innovators. As it relates to our dreams for the

church, maybe God is actually doing something. Maybe seeds of discontent and desire have been planted throughout the world, and we are now starting to see the seedlings emerge from the broken soil. All of this leads to a key principle at the heart of this book: *movements happen when people who thought they were alone discover they are not.*

This principle is true in nearly every major revolution, every major transition, perhaps every significant moment that changes history. We think it's impossible because we think we are alone, but everything changes when we realize that's not true. That same desire within us to follow Jesus with our whole life, to love our actual neighbors, and to belong to a team of people in our everyday lives guided by the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbors is shared by millions. This longing might be completely unique in a particular context but is actually shared by a mostly invisible movement that hasn't been connected. What if this desire is being nurtured and cultivated by the living Spirit of God, but we all think we are alone? What if we are surrounded by ordinary saints whose deepest desire for their lives is to answer the prayer "your kingdom come, in my neighborhood as it is in heaven," but we all feel like Claudette Colvin—alone on a bus?

The Good News of Church Decline

We just might be in the early days of a reformation that will one day be written about in history books. And even if this doesn't transpire, at least we should know we are not alone. Please keep in mind that if the same driving desire within us—the fraying thread of hope that feels like it's splitting and

popping with every passing day—is connected with others, it has the potential to be a strong, rich, colorful fabric of love and care in our neighborhoods. The strength of what is possible hinges on our capacity to connect.

What’s at stake is not simply a *spiritual* opportunity. Our neighborhoods and cities are at stake too. At stake is the kind of businesses and economies we are going to create. What sorts of places will we design and build? How will we re-create our collective care for our kids? How will we reshape education? How will we confront the most horrific injustices of racism, sexual exploitation, and environmental abuse?

The future is at stake.

To become the church in everyday life is not a nice idea for religious people. It’s a call for holistic revolution. Our gatherings, our liturgies, and our sermons will remain vital, but not if they are not oriented toward forming us to be the body of Christ in the everyday life of our neighborhoods. We must go on a journey together to recover how to be the church in our actual lives because if we don’t, another story will ultimately win the day.

We believe following Jesus is the best way to live because we believe he embodies the best story. This story is not just good news for us but for our neighbors, our families, and our enemies. We are called to live out this good-news story not as isolated, well-meaning individuals but as a team that is publicly encountered in the ordinary context of particular places. If the only place our neighbors can experience the body of Christ is during our worship services, we have failed. The only viable way we can invite people to experience the good news of the gospel is by displaying a real community of

people in a real place—this is the ancient practice God is calling forth in our new day. It's not a new vision, but it will require a new imagination because we live in a new moment. The only viable and enduring form of Christian witness is a community living in a particular place, and this means we need each other.

You Can't Give Up Just Yet

If you are about to give up on the church, I beg you to consider that your frustration and confusion can become the fuel of a light that could shine all over the world. God might want to use this frustration in ways we simply cannot yet imagine. In ten years—or twenty or fifty—much could be written about this exact moment, and your frustration with the church is a crucial part of the story.

God is up to something. We are blessed to live in profoundly interesting and tumultuous times. Let's figure out how to go on this journey together. Let's have the courage to imagine what sort of church we will pass on to our kids and grandkids and great-grandkids. In this cultural moment when it feels as if it takes all of our energy to get through the day, when we are constantly reacting to this or that Tweet or headline, let's focus on what is possible in a year or two or ten.

The instinct in tumultuous times like these is to double down on the demonstrable. We are tempted to capitulate to the old, false measure of buildings and budgets. The pressure that comes from most leadership teams and denominational structures is to fix the problem of attendance as soon as possible. The instinct to quickly grow attendance makes perfect

emotional sense, but it could not be a worse idea. We are being called to a different challenge—a different game. We are being asked by the living God to collectively embody good news in our everyday lives. Just as most teams require huddles and time-outs, how we nurture our team will require gatherings, but for God’s sake that is not the game.

Don’t listen to the anxious noise. Don’t believe the lie that the future of the church depends on more hype, more professionals, and more stagecraft. I’ve been to enough neighborhoods to tell you that *presence* trumps performance every single time.

Words Create Worlds

In college I majored in rhetoric. While this might explain why I’ve never had a “real” job, it also instilled in me a profound curiosity about the reality that “words create worlds.” In a very real sense, the language of our everyday life actually cultivates and makes possible how we see the world, which naturally affects how we live. So, as someone who’s called to give my life to the future of the church—and who cares about words and language—I’m particularly passionate about how everyday people use and misuse the word *church*.

This became apparent when my son Lukas was about two years old. He seemed to be expanding his vocabulary every week, and as a result his sweet little world was growing. One day a simple thought struck me. It was so piercing it demanded an immediate parental summit with my wife. What world would be created if Lukas grew up thinking about the word *church* as I was taught? As you can imagine, this required a strategic meeting of the highest order.

After passionately making my case and some pretty hilarious back and forth, it was settled. We agreed that in our home, to the extent possible we would never allow our precious Lukas to utter the phrase “going to church.” He could say going to a church *building*, attending a church *program*, or participating in a church *gathering*. In his mind it would be impossible to go to something he already belongs to. He would not confuse identity with participation.

We go to concerts and baseball games and picnics. We don’t say when we are in this place that we are the baseball team. No, it’s something we attend. But we cannot attend something that we, along with others, indeed have already become: the church.

Somehow, over the course of a few generations, our language has crystalized into a betrayal of the word. Of course, we go to gatherings, we attend services, and programs require our involvement. These are important, but we need to ask what they are for. We can’t keep calling what happens within the church building as the entire thing itself. We blunt and minimize the powerful potential of the local church by turning it into a commodity purchased with our attendance at an event. We simply can’t keep allowing our language to betray us, because our words create our worlds.

So, what world do I want my son to grow up in? I bet it’s a lot closer to what you want and what God wants as well. I want Lukas to grow up thinking that the word *church* means a ragtag community of men, women, and children who are more like uncles, aunts, and cousins than awkwardly friendly strangers in a religious building. I want him to see the church as a movement with an ancient history and a promising future. I want him to make the connection between the messy and

beautiful shared life of these aunts and uncles in the neighborhood as the key to understanding what the gospel of Jesus looks like. I want him to be swept up in the stream of a tangible community in his everyday life that prioritizes justice and creativity and resilience. Essentially, I want Lukas to be surrounded by people who want to follow Jesus with their entire lives and love their neighbors as themselves.

What would happen if he grew up with a group of friends determined to welcome others, to have a special concern for our neighbors who are suffering, a team relying on God to make our neighborhood whole again? A neighborhood full of life, beauty, welcome, and people who understand that their own transformation is inextricably bound up with the transformation of their neighbors? Effectively, I want him surrounded by people of hope. I desperately want that for your kids, for your grandkids, and for you as well.

This vision should not be viewed as “out there” or unusual or even particularly innovative. Shouldn’t our dream be that our kids grow up thinking, acting, living, and speaking of this vision of the church as obvious and ordinary? Isn’t this the view that we should hold as well?

This is not some crazy, cutting-edge vision of the church. It’s simply who we are. It is also who we are called to be. We need this now more than ever. The good news is that God is calling us to become this kind of people—now. I believe that God is building this movement; *we just need to be able to see it.*

All Is Gift

If we accept the joy and burden of transforming how our neighbors and we experience what it means to be the church

in our everyday lives, it won't be manufactured by flawless execution. If we are willing to reclaim God's call to be disciples of Jesus with our whole lives, we need to name our dependence on the living God upfront. If we have the audacity to chart a path that could make history, it will not be our own doing. It's critical to say upfront that this transformation we seek is a gift to be received by our active God, not a technique to be mastered by driven people. Our future will hinge on this reality. Renewal movements throughout church history have always been led by ordinary people who are so desperate for change that they forfeit their capacity to make it happen in their own power. If we become the kind of people who simultaneously pray and hope desperately for change while refusing to control the outcomes, we will be astounded at what we get to experience.

When this happens, we will say that we got to be a part of what God was doing in our day. We will tell stories to our kids, our grandkids, and our great-grandkids about God's prevailing work among the confusion of the early twenty-first century. When we look back, we will be overcome with gratitude, not pride. We will shake our heads in wonder. Our creased faces will smile in appreciation. Our tired bodies will hold within them hundreds of stories. When we look back, we will know we took the chance to partner with what God was doing in our day.

That's all coming—but first we need to look forward and have the courage to ask some hard questions. We need to uncover the hidden forces that keep us from being what we are called to become. We need to be honest with how most people

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experience the church and wrestle with what its purpose is, what it exists for.

We are either in the moment before the movement or the meltdown. Our present future has so much at stake. Everywhere we look God is doing a new thing in our day, and we get to receive this as the gift that it is.

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