

# WHY WOULD ANYONE GO TO CHURCH?

A Young Community's Quest  
to Reclaim Church for Good

KEVIN MAKINS



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To my wife, my mother,  
and that guy who recognized me on a writing  
retreat at the monastery and spent twenty minutes  
telling me how much our church had let him down.  
You kept this book humble.

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## PROLOGUE

### Why Would Anyone Do This?

Two summers ago, my wife decided she wanted to be a DJ. The challenge was that she only wanted to play *emo*, short for *emotional music*, a subgenre that rose in popularity during the early 2000s when millennials like us were going through our most over-the-top heartbreak. One popular lyric from the time, undoubtedly tattooed on hundreds of thirtysomething moms today, reads, “The truth is you could slit my throat, and . . . I’d apologize for bleeding on your shirt.”

You can see why this stuff isn’t in regular clubbing rotations.

My wife knew the only way she could DJ a full set of emo hits would be to throw the party herself, so she rented out a local bar, printed off hundreds of posters, and decorated the entire venue, including a MySpace selfie booth in the back. Our friends arrived first, donning old band T-shirts and wearing studded belts, but an hour later, the place was packed with total strangers: punk rockers with big, spiky hair, college students with caked-on black eyeliner, hipsters on cocaine, grungy anarchists, and parents who had finally gotten their kids to bed and were ready to relive their youth. Sad anthems blasted through the speakers as heavy boots

and Converse shoes jumped to the beat, the old wooden floors vibrating beneath us.

Then I noticed a guy who was definitely having a little too much fun. He was tall and had a round face with bloodshot, dopey eyes. I knew Dopey Eyes. He had visited our church on a couple of occasions over the past few months, and while pastors are supposed to be agents of grace and compassion, the truth is, I always found him a little grating. But that's when he was sober. Tonight he was on a whole other level, trying to sing along but mostly just yelling in people's faces, trying to jump around but mostly knocking people over.

There was shouting behind me, and I turned to see an angry giant pushing his way through the crowd. He had a shaved head, a thick, dark beard, and a beet-red face from fury or drugs—or both. He also had a single rage vein running up the side of his neck and looping over his bald head. He stormed into the middle of the party and shoved Dopey Eyes hard in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Rage Vein leaned down, and sweat dripped onto his victim's frightened round face: "I'm only gonna tell you once. Get out of here, or you'll regret it!" The music continued to play, but no one was dancing; everyone was just staring at the two of them. Dopey Eyes slowly rose to his feet and shuffled his way to the exit. Hoping to avoid any more drama, I left for a toilet break.

As I walked down the bar's skinny hallway, the sound of rock-and-roll heartbreak grew muffled behind me. At 1:30 a.m., the bathroom was not looking so hot. The dark red walls were tagged from top to bottom in black marker—mostly with phone numbers and phallic imagery. Toilet paper had fallen to the floor and rolled open, the sink was running for no one, and the ground was soaked with what I hoped was tap water or beer. I slid into the stall and attempted to relieve myself, when I heard the door to the bathroom being kicked open. It hit the wall with a SLAM. Someone stormed in, shouting profanities before full-swing punching my stall, which shook violently. I jumped against the far wall and froze. I could see

movement through the crack of the door. Slowly, carefully, I peeked out from the stall to see what was going on. It was Rage Vein and three of his friends. He was pacing back and forth across the room. “I’m going to knock him out!” he shouted at the ceiling, bouncing around the tiny bathroom in a hurricane of fury.

I cautiously stepped into the open and approached Rage Vein carefully, as if de-escalating a grizzly. “Is . . . is this about the kid you pushed?” I asked, trying not to make any sudden movements.

“What?” he spit out as he noticed me for the first time. “Yeah. That kid was yelling at everyone, then he bodychecked my friends and spilled my girl’s drink all over her. So now I’m gonna drag him outside and knock him out.”

“No! No, no. Hold on.” I stumbled forward, hands held out. “You don’t have to do that.”

“He’s asking for it.”

“Oh, I’m sure he is,” I responded. “I know that kid and I agree he’s being super annoying . . . but I can’t let you beat him up.”

“Why not?” he snapped back.

“Because . . .” there was a brief pause as I looked to the ground, sighed, and finally admitted, “because . . . I’m his pastor.”

This, for the record, is exactly what I don’t like about church. The fact is, I found this kid irritating from the moment I met him, and seeing him sloppy drunk made me like him even less. This wasn’t the kind of person I wanted associated with our church. He was the last person I would have picked to join my team. It was so tempting to sneak out of the bathroom and remain uninvolved.

But I tell you this story because, for some reason, this guy had decided to walk into our church service two or three times prior to this dance party, and that small action meant that, in some inconvenient and infuriating way, I was now connected to him. I couldn’t let him get jumped outside the bar, even if a swift punch in the head might have been good for him.

In seminary, I learned how to preach sermons and study the Bible. I was taught how to plan Sunday services and make hospital visits.

But being associated with people I wouldn't have chosen and don't particularly like? That was an element of church I didn't see coming.

Then again, there were a lot of things about church I didn't see coming. I didn't expect to start a community full of spiritual misfits when I was just twenty-three years old. I didn't know how much fun it would be to make up our own holy days or how vital a good sense of humor would be. I didn't realize how much pushback we'd get from more established religious organizations or the myriad ways people in our own congregation would hurt and disappoint each other.

Perhaps most unexpected was when my wife and I attended a church planting assessment center, the tried-and-true way to know if God has called you to start a new Christian community. After three days of grueling psychological and spiritual warfare, the experts flunked us and said, "God has not called you to church plant, and to do so would put your community and your own souls in jeopardy." This was awkward news to receive, especially since we had started our church years earlier.

I'll get to these stories in a little while, but I mention them now to let you know what you're getting into. This book is unflinchingly honest and often humiliating. When we set out to start a new congregation, it was because we had a desire to connect with people that "organized religion" seemed to miss. We had more questions than answers, questions that couldn't be solved by reading another book or attending more lectures. We had to live out the answers together, little by little, over a long period of time. We had to get our hands dirty.

But that's not such a bad thing. I've always found God most present in the mess.

## **Totally Outclassed**

Dramatic bar fights aside, most people in our church are pretty easy to love. Today, our community is made up of college students and seasoned saints, lots of young adults and a seemingly never-

ending onslaught of squishy babies. There are artists and doctors, baristas and software engineers, stay-at-home parents and the occasionally employed. There are cyclists and advocates and porch sitters. Together we've created a home for skeptics who had never warmed a pew bench and for religious burnouts who ran away years ago. Perhaps the best description I've heard of our church is that we are a "front door/back door" community. Many in our congregation are either entirely new to faith, coming in through the front door, or they are people who grew disenchanted with the traditional church, but on their way out the back door, a friend suggested they give it one more try with us. These two groups couldn't be more different. They've had entirely opposite experiences, but they find themselves crossing paths in the same place: the edge of faith, on the borderland between the sacred and secular, the profound and profane. Together they are asking the most pressing questions:

"What does Christian community look like for this next generation?"

"Who will it be for?"

And the big one: "Why would anyone go to church?"

My assumption is that for many of you reading this, the word *church* immediately raises some red flags. Many of us picture Christians rallying behind politicians and theological camps, engaged in a never-ending culture war. We think about all the times we've seen congregations fixated on growth and success, buying bigger buildings with larger parking lots and the occasional private jet. We've heard preachers justify racism and bigotry with smooth spiritual language. Christians online often seem hypocritical, fearful, and self-righteous. Organized religion has covered up sexual abuse scandals and participated in cultural genocide. Christian communities have often functioned as a judgmental courtroom instead of a loving home.

For all these reasons and more, church isn't exactly popular these days. Most of my nonreligious neighbors assume that every congregation is full of closed-minded bigots, but even Christians I know are wondering whether church is a necessary component of faith. CNN reports that statistically about half of all the young people raised in American churches will walk away disillusioned. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has said that my country is on track to close over nine thousand sacred buildings in the next decade, roughly one-third of all our religious spaces.

Maybe the church has just been outclassed in the modern world. Local music venues will host better concerts, while comedy clubs and storytelling events give you more thoughtful and honest reflection. Yoga nurtures a sense of spiritual calm, and any club or team can connect you with like-minded people. And that's before you consider all the internet has given us: TED talks and podcasts feature the world's best communicators, streaming services allow every piece of music to be just one click away, and social media pulls from hundreds of millions of people to find others who think just like you. And it's all so instant. Forget waiting until Sunday; in your pocket right now is every song and lecture, every documentary and article you could ever ask for.

What does the church offer us that can compete with all that?

To start, churches usually meet on Sunday morning, one of the two days of the week most of us are allowed to sleep in. They have eager greeters with clammy hands. The sanctuary is always too hot or too cold but never just right. Typically the music is either an organ, the most expensive and unruly instrument in all of human history, or a bunch of dads shredding guitar solos to the added chorus of "Be Thou My Vision." There is reciting of old prayers and a surprising amount of standing and sitting, followed up by a book report on a two-thousand-year-old letter written to a tiny community in a backwater city of the ancient world. Then everyone heads to the fellowship hall to make small talk over mediocre coffee.

People give up free evenings to go to Bible study and catechism classes. They join teams and committees. They budget for the church, clean the carpets, and run Friday night youth group for teenagers who haven't yet discovered deodorant.

And do they get paid to make all this happen? No. They *give* money to be a part of it. Many people give *ten percent of their income* for the honor of doing all this weird religious stuff.

People ask me if I'm surprised that so many are leaving the church. Surprised? Are you kidding me? I can't believe *anyone* still does this church thing. And yet they do. For two thousand years, people have continued to be a part of the church, despite war and persecution and corruption and organ music.

Why has church survived? Surely something has made it so meaningful to so many people for such a long period of time.

That's what we were trying to understand when we started a new church a decade ago. What we discovered is that few of our peers are interested in competing with the culture around us. The Jesus followers I know aren't sticking with the church because church is better than a concert or more interesting than a podcast. They're staying because there are primordial elements of Christian community that are far more rooted than all that superficial fluff.

These are the deeper truths that need to be uncovered if this next generation is going to reclaim church for good.

Each chapter of this book will explore one of these truths we've learned about church, while sharing both my story and our congregation's journey. I should point out that I have no special authority when it comes to this stuff. All I have is our testimony, which I have tried to share honestly while also being as charitable as possible. Every event described is my own best recollection, which is fallible to memory and bias; though, as you'll see, I don't always come out unscathed. While I have occasionally played with the sequence of events, everything is true as best as I can capture it.

## Word Made Flesh

If we're setting the table for the rest of this book, allow me to make one final arrangement before we sit down.

At the center of the Christian faith is the story of incarnation: God becoming human in the person of Jesus. Or, as the author of the Gospel of John puts it, "The Word became flesh." When I look around the modern world, I see a lot of opinions. Every day my Twitter feed is filled with thoughts, rants, and think pieces about how things should be. We have no shortage of words. But the church presents us with a challenging question: Can you make that word . . . flesh?

Can you put it into practice? With thirty people? With a hundred people? With two thousand people? Can you take that abstract idea and live it out together? And if you can't . . . no offense, but I'm just not interested. There are enough opinions out there. We've got plenty of words. We need more flesh.

We need incarnation.

Over the years we've come to see the church as an incarnational force. Perhaps it's fitting that, historically and biblically, the church has been referred to in feminine language, both as the bride of Christ and as our mother. The church isn't an *it* at all. The church is a *she*. And she refused to let us stand at a distance.

Church threw us into adventure and difficult relationships. She called us to redeem our city streets and our calendar. She taught us how to seek unity in our differences, how to forgive those who hurt us, and how to process rejection. More than anything, she refused to let our ideas stay in our heads. When we said, "Christians should feed the world," she responded, "Great, there's a refugee family down the street and they need a meal." When we cheered, "Christians should love everyone," she replied, "Good, now go spend time with this one annoying person."

Which brings me back to an emo dance party filled with sad boys and girls.

After narrowly avoiding a bloodbath, I dragged a very intoxicated Dopey Eyes out onto the snow-covered sidewalk and called him a cab. While we waited, I launched into a stern pastoral lecture about how he was acting, and then, out of nowhere, he started to cry. I was so angry with him for being a numbskull and annoyed that, instead of dancing at my wife's party, I was stuck babysitting a twenty-year-old in the frigid cold. And yet, at the same time, I felt strangely grateful. Grateful that the church was inviting me to make the word flesh—not on a scenic hike or in a beautiful cathedral but outside a dingy bar on a winter night.

Despite my reservations, I stepped forward and hugged Dopey Eyes. His tears began to fall and soak the shoulder of my jacket. I shook my head and thought:

*So this is church . . .*

*Why would anyone do this?*

# 1 GETTING OUR HANDS DIRTY

No one comes to Jesus without first encountering the church.

Sometimes the connection is obvious. Many of you reading this book were raised as faithful Sunday attendees or joined up after a friend invited you to a weekly Bible study. Other times, the connection to church is more subtle. If you prayed in a moment of desperation, it's because someone (a friend, a grandparent, or even that weirdo on the Christian radio station) taught you that there was such a thing as prayer and that it was a real way to speak to God. If a book helped you understand faith in a new way, you have to recognize that the author was writing out of their own history with church. Even if you first heard about Jesus when you were all alone, flipping through a Bible while bored on a work trip, it's only because a bunch of Gideons snuck into the hotel room first and hid it for you to discover. And they also are a part of the church.

I don't know how you would describe your beliefs. You may be someone who would comfortably use the label

“Christian,” or perhaps you’d prefer to check the “no” or “it’s complicated” box. What I know for sure is that you didn’t arrive there in isolation.

When it comes to faith, we’re all growing out of the same soil. Whether our experience has been positive or negative, we can’t talk about Jesus without talking about church.

And that requires looking back.

## **Pilgrim**

What is your first memory of church?

As a kid, I thought I attended the only church in the world. Even back then, the Canadian culture was thoroughly secular. My classmates didn’t talk about Jesus, and my neighbors’ cars sat in their driveways on Sunday mornings. While my friends were at home playing Super Nintendo, I was putting on a white button-up shirt, tan corduroys, and cheap black dress shoes that, if you kicked at just the right angle, would leave a long, black streak on the floor of Pilgrim Lutheran Church. My early church memories are of a wonderfully ordinary community. One-hour gatherings ran through the same words, repeated week after week, the cadence and chants now lovingly carved like initials into the tree bark of my mind. “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.”

The congregation numbered no more than ninety on a given Sunday, but each person had a role to play. The parents washed dishes after coffee hour, seniors babysat the children and tithed, young adults flirted, and we kids sat silently in the back rows, playing with tiny trucks and chewing on Cheerios next to a sign that proudly declared: “These Pews Reserved for Parents of Small Children.”

Our denomination was Lutheran, but Pastor Schnarr was quick to point out we were “Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” the more conservative of the two streams, which had emerged after a

messy split in 1963. These party lines ran not only through our congregation but through our extended family as well. Pastor Schnarr was also my uncle, and his siblings were split on which brand of Lutheranism deserved our loyalty.

Theological knowledge was highly valued in our church. By the time I was nine, I was expected not only to sit silently through the service but also to be in the front row, listening at full attention. Every week Pastor Schnarr would give the kids a quiz sheet, which had questions about the sermon written on it:

“Why do we love God?”

“How do we know our faith is true?”

“What do we do to earn salvation?”

I absolutely destroyed these quizzes, nailing the answers with extreme Lutheran focus:

“We love God because God first loved us.”

“The Bible is God’s Word to us and fully trustworthy for all matters of faith, life, and doctrine.”

“Nothing; salvation is the free gift of God, given to dead sinners.”

You might think I was a model theologian, eager to expand my knowledge of the Lord, but the real reason was far more childish: if we answered correctly, Pastor Schnarr gave us a full-size candy bar.

Half of my theological education was motivated by that chocolate.

## **Seeds**

After two years of weekly classes, I was officially “confirmed” in the Lutheran church and invited forward for Communion. This part of the service, often called “the Lord’s Supper” or “the

Eucharist,” is when the congregation comes forward to a table where they receive a bit of bread and wine, which represents Jesus’s last meal with his disciples. Standing with me were a few thirteen-year-old peers, who had also spent over a hundred Thursday afternoons in the church hall with Pastor Schnarr, learning the foundation of Christian theology (Jesus is Lord) and Lutheranism (Luther was also pretty great). In an ironic twist, this ended up being one of the last times we all came to the table together. Once their children were confirmed in the faith and officially committed to following Jesus, parents seemed a great deal more lax about their kids’ Sunday attendance. At first, just a few of the youth dropped off due to hockey practice. Then, others had piano lessons. One after another, the youth of Pilgrim vanished until my sister, my cousins, and I were all that remained. The pew in the back row, the one reserved “For Parents of Small Children,” now sat empty most weeks. The Lutheran church was becoming a statistic, experiencing radical decline like so many other North American congregations. At the time, I wasn’t too troubled; while I was fine to sit in a pew once a week, it was mostly because my parents made me go. My personal connection to church—and to faith—was still quite shallow.

Some seeds lie dormant a long time before they begin to grow.

## **Gardener**

The Bible often uses images of gardening to describe God’s work in the world. Jesus talks about the Good News being like seeds that are scattered. Some land on the gravel and are eaten by birds; other seeds shoot up quickly but die just as fast. Thankfully, some seeds find a home in the dirt and begin to crack open. Over time they will sprout, stretch up, and produce fruit and even more seeds. Jesus also describes a farmer who goes to sleep and awakens to see that the crops have been growing, even while he did nothing. Jesus asks his listeners to consider the mustard seed, which is

small and seemingly insignificant and yet becomes a massive plant, tearing through dirt and creating a home for the birds of the air. The apostle Paul, one of the earliest church leaders, describes the life of a congregation in agricultural terms, noting that while he planted seeds and others watered, only God could make it grow.

And then there is Mary Magdalene, who encountered the resurrected Jesus and mistook him for a gardener.

And she was correct.

The resurrected Jesus is the great Gardener, cultivating a new creation in the midst of the old. The new creation breaks through the hardened soil, gives shelter to those toiling under the sun, and nourishes the world through all that it yields.

What a compelling image! Who wouldn't want to be part of that movement?

Except, the Bible tells us the tangible expression of this new creation is . . . the church?

I remember being sixteen and looking around our sanctuary, seeing gray hair and decade-old felt banners, and thinking, "This is God's plan to save the world?" I was bored by the church and distracted by other, more important things. Like sports and friends and video games and *girls*.

But Jesus is sneaky.

## Girls

My friend and I were hanging out on the beach when we saw them: cuties. It was the summer before our last year of high school, and we were desperate for female attention. We stood around them awkwardly until they finally said hello. The three of them were sisters. There was the blonde-haired punk rocker; the brunette, who was sweet as sugar; and the one I was smitten with, the spunky redhead.

As summer vacation came to a close, I discovered a secret that scrambled my teenage brain: the cuties were Christians. The Lutheran

church I went to was a closed loop; we didn't have summer camps or youth conferences. Up to this point, I had assumed that my sister, my cousins, and I were the only remaining young Christians in the world. I felt blindsided. Luckily, I had a secret weapon with which to impress the ladies: my thorough religious education. I attempted to bond with them over Luther's forty-first thesis, but it was completely ineffective. Turns out they were some other breed of Christian that I had no category for at the time: charismatic Christians. These are the shout-it-out, *on fire*, "PRAISE JEEEE-SUS!" zealots you picture when you imagine a tent revival. They were into the baptism of the Holy Spirit, hour-long worship sessions, and knowing your spiritual gifts. I thought they were lazy theologians.

That fall, the blonde and brunette sisters kept inviting me to their youth group, another part of their foreign religious culture I didn't understand. Lutherans didn't have youth group. We had catechism. I gave them a "no" and listed off a bunch of good reasons I would never give up my Friday night to hang out in some Bible chapel.

Then the third sister, the one I had a crush on, asked me if I'd like to go. "I'd go to hell for you," I replied. "How bad can youth group be?"

Enter the other half of my theological motivation—girls.

## Germination

Looking back on those times can be very confusing. Most youth groups are a tangled web of holiness and hormones, grace and circle games. They are politically incorrect sermon illustrations, road trips without enough seat belts, and awkward "sex talk" nights. Youth groups are often bad theology with good intentions, a handful of burned-out volunteers, and a bunch of needy kids. I can't separate out what is good from what is bad or what is helpful from what is harmful. It's a cocktail: once it's shaken together, your only options are to dump it or drink it.

Nevertheless, for me, youth group was incredibly helpful. I learned how to pray out loud with friends, how to share my faith with other people in a way that was authentic, and how to worship God without an organ. More than anything else, I experienced Christian community, seeing firsthand what it looked like as a teenager to love God. The youth group was almost entirely youth led, which meant we were quickly given responsibilities and often made mistakes, but it didn't matter. We were a part of something bigger than ourselves. We had a mission, which gave a direction for our teenage angst. We experienced rapid growth that year. I'm still not quite sure how to make sense of it. When I joined in the fall, the youth group was made up of about thirty people, but by the end of the school year, over a hundred teens were showing up every Friday night. Many hadn't grown up in church, but we were all learning how to love God and each other while eating our way through the youth budget.

Even as teens decided to follow Jesus, none of us really knew how church fit into the equation. As far as we could tell, entering into a personal relationship with God was what really mattered; then we could decide whether to tack on going to church.

The most rapid spiritual growth of my life happened during that last year of high school. In my naïveté, all I saw were the green shoots that were suddenly breaking through the surface.

I forgot that each one of them had come from an old seed, which had been patiently sown over a lifetime.

## **Rebaptized**

Shortly after my youth group revival, I was baptized . . . again. As a newborn, water had been poured onto my head, sealing me with the promises of God within the community of his people. But my nineteen-year-old brain was only excited by what had happened in the last year and needed some way to express it. Despite being long-standing Lutherans, my parents respected my wishes and

even came to the baptism ceremony to show support. We weren't in a sanctuary this time but at a small lake just outside the city. I went up to the microphone to share my testimony and gave an impassioned speech about the youth group, explaining that now I was *finally* able to understand what it meant to be a Christian. Everyone in the crowd cheered, and I went under the water full of holy fire. When I emerged, I looked out at the smiling faces and immediately felt doused and confused. My mom was clapping along in support, but her red eyes and sullen face revealed something was off.

After the baptism, I found her sitting at the edge of the lake, staring over the water. She didn't want to talk about her running mascara, but I pestered her until she opened up. "I'm so glad that you love God and want to follow Jesus, and I'm grateful for your youth group," she said to me through tears, "but you sort of threw the Lutheran church under the bus. You talked about us like we were part of the problem, as if God hadn't done anything in your life before now. But I remember all the Sunday school teachers who invested in you and how Pastor Schnarr would sit in the office and quiz you on the Bible, and the hundreds of times you and I had honest conversations about faith when you were a kid. You forgot all of that." I felt punched in the gut. She was right.

In the process of making my faith my own, I had failed to recognize all I had received.

## **Nurtured and Wounded**

Maybe you can relate to that feeling. You look back on the church you were raised in or the youth group you were a part of and feel a coldness or resentment. You don't believe what you believed back then. You don't see things the way you used to. Ironically, just a few years after my baptism, I'd come to feel quite cynical about my years in the youth group as well. It's tempting to dismiss what we've recently moved on from.

But part of growing up is recognizing how we arrived at the place where we are. It's a long process, but we're always a product of where we've been planted, at the mercy of those who came before us.

Some of you had a negative experience of church. Perhaps that was the place where you first learned who was *not* welcome or which political party was God's favorite. Maybe church was where you were judged for how you dressed or where you were taught not to ask hard questions. Tragically, some people reading this were taught that God is angry, always on the edge of throwing you into hell, simply because you have doubts or are a thirteen-year-old boy who is attracted to other boys.

But there are other stories. Perhaps church was the place where you experienced unconditional love, learned to play an instrument, or had someone older than you invest in your life for the first time. The church taught many of us to forgive, to be patient, and to trust God when we feel that we are in over our heads. The church tied us into a long story filled with saints and sinners, giant fish and fiery furnaces, death and resurrection. She gave us a narrative out of which we could live our lives.

At the very least, the church taught me how to be bored for an hour. That builds character.

I don't want to downplay the harm that church has done. Nor do I want to ignore all the good. The truth is that most of us have experienced a bit of both. Church is a family, and I don't know anyone who wasn't simultaneously nurtured and wounded by their parents.

But we cannot ignore the more extreme situations. Many of us know someone who was sinned against by someone in the church in a way that can only be described as evil. If you're reading this and you experienced abuse by those in the church who were supposed to nurture you, I do not know what to say except that I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry that happened to you, and I believe Jesus is with you and weeps with you. I hope that through good counseling, prayer, and relationships, you will be able to find deep healing and that, in time, God will use your story to encourage,

build up, and protect others. The master Gardener is really good at taking the crap of our lives and turning it into fertilizer.

That said, it's important for us to remember that in most cases, the church is made up of simple people trying their best to help. They didn't intend to cause any harm. They were just dumb.

You know, like the rest of us.

Perhaps when your parents didn't see the growth they wanted, they accidentally overwatered the garden, drowning out the small sprouts. Maybe your youth leader trampled around the mud in his big, heavy boots, and instead of helping, he flattened the tiny bud that was blooming. We don't need to excuse such ignorance or pretend it wasn't hurtful. But we can be mature enough to forgive those who, with the best of intentions, accidentally harmed us. They were products of their environment just as we are products of ours. We can give them grace, knowing that while we are no better than they are, we must learn from their successes and mistakes. We must continue to grow.

Throughout this book, I'm going to share more than a couple of strong opinions about church, but I hope by now you recognize that this isn't just to fling mud at those who came before us. Rather, we honor those who have gone before us by going further than they could. Someday, my daughter is going to point the finger at me and my fifty-year-old friends and tell us that we never should have been driving cars, eating avocado toast, listening to hip-hop music, or . . . I don't know what. That's precisely the point. She'll see things we missed and go further than we can *because* she's standing on our shoulders. Even Jesus said that his disciples would do greater things than he had done.

That's how this movement was always meant to work.

## **Hands-On**

When I was five years old, my Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Francis, told my parents that I asked good questions and was going to be

a pastor. The older I got, the more this prophecy haunted me, staring down at me like the Eye of Sauron. I ran for cover. Why would I commit to a dying organization all my friends thought was irrelevant? Who volunteers to work on the Titanic?

You may not have had this exact experience, but I imagine many of you have asked the same questions I did: Why church? Why stick around? Why should I get on my knees and work in the soil?

These are big questions that you and God need to wrestle through together. But perhaps I can simply invite you to consider the ways you've already gotten a little dirt under your fingernails. Where has God placed you and with whom? How are you already pulling up weeds, handling prickly thorns with extra care, or watering the tiny sprouts around you?

If you're a follower of Jesus, then your faith bloomed in a particular garden. Who cultivated the plot in which you grew? What does it look like for you to learn from their wisdom and their mistakes? What could it practically look like for you to take things further than those who came before you?

How can you get your hands dirty?

Mrs. Francis's seeds lay dormant despite my youth group revival. My commitment to follow Jesus was a prayer that ended with ". . . but I won't become a pastor." Despite my protest, over the years, I began to see that I had a role to play in the church and that perhaps it was more hands-on than I had anticipated. It was only after dropping out of college, working a string of bad jobs, and eventually being fired from the night shift at a fast-food restaurant that I was humble enough to start working in the manure.

I had no idea how messy things would get.