

# Organic Church

**Growing Faith Where  
Life Happens**

Neil Cole

Foreword by Leonard I. Sweet

A LEADERSHIP ✕ NETWORK PUBLICATION

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—Jonathan S. Campbell, Ph.D., author, *The Way of Jesus*

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## About Leadership Network

Since 1984, Leadership Network has fostered church innovation and growth by diligently pursuing its far-reaching mission statement: to identify, connect, and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact.

Although Leadership Network's techniques adapt and change as the church faces new opportunities and challenges, the organization's work follows a consistent and proven pattern.

Leadership Network brings together entrepreneurial leaders who are focused on similar ministry initiatives. The ensuing collaboration—often across denominational lines—creates a strong base from which individual leaders can better analyze and refine their own strategies. Peer-to-peer interaction, dialogue, and sharing inevitably accelerate participants' innovation and ideas. Leadership Network further enhances this process through developing and distributing highly targeted ministry tools and resources, including audio and video programs, special reports, e-publications, and on-line downloads.

With Leadership Network's assistance, today's Christian leaders are energized, equipped, inspired, and better able to multiply their own dynamic Kingdom-building initiatives.

Launched in 1996 in conjunction with Jossey-Bass (a Wiley imprint), Leadership Network Publications present thoroughly researched and innovative concepts from leading thinkers, practitioners, and pioneering churches. The series collectively draws from a range of disciplines, with individual titles offering perspective on one or more of five primary areas:

1. Enabling effective leadership
2. Encouraging life-changing service
3. Building authentic community
4. Creating Kingdom-centered impact
5. Engaging cultural and demographic realities

For additional information on the mission or activities of Leadership Network, please contact:

Leadership Network  
2501 Cedar Springs, Suite 200  
Dallas, TX 75201  
(800) 765-5323  
[client.care@leadnet.org](mailto:client.care@leadnet.org)

## Foreword

Davidson's Mains, also known as Muttonhole, is a Scottish village about three miles northwest of Edinburgh. While there to lead a one-day advance with young leaders from the Church of Scotland, I was befriended by my host, Jerry Middleton, the pastor of the parish kirk. One of the gifts he gave me was his recounting of an experience he had had a few months earlier.

While walking his parish one day in his clerical garb, a couple of kids called to him from across the street, "Hey, mister, would you stop being a minister long enough to give us a hand?" Stunned by the words but braced for the challenge, Jerry crossed the street. When he arrived on their side he found that the chain of one of their bikes had broken and needed to be fixed. So he knelt down right there on the sidewalk and started to dismantle the bike and remove the chain. The two young brothers couldn't believe that this minister would actually get down to help them. And they were even more surprised when he proved skilled at fixing their problem.

When he had finished repairing the bicycle, they apologized for making him get his hands so filthy with oil and grease. Jerry shrugged it off. "No problem, fellas. Want to learn how to get off grime like this?" "No way," one of them said, "you can't get that off here."

"Let me show you," Jerry continued. Once again he got down on the ground, but this time he gathered up dirt and "washed" his hands in some loose soil. After he scrubbed the dirt into his hands, he turned to them and said, "Do you know where we can find some water?" The boys said, "We live right around the corner. Come with us."

So the three of them went marching right into the kitchen of their house, much to the surprise of their mother, who was asked to move over at the sink as she stood openmouthed at the strange priest her children had brought home with them. “Thank you for letting me wash my hands here,” Jerry said as the boys watched the water work its magic on his hands, restoring them to spotless purity. The mother then asked him to stay for tea. Jerry confessed that this was “one of the strangest pastoral calls” he had ever made, but he also professed to having learned a lot about ministry in a postmodern culture from this one incident.

It was not until I finished reading Neil Cole’s fabulous Introduction to *Organic Church* that I began to understand the profound significance of Jerry’s story. This is a post-Christian culture that doesn’t think the church has anything to offer it except when we stop doing church the way we’ve been doing it: “Hey, mister, would you stop being a minister long enough to give us a hand?” People today aren’t coming over to the Christian side of the street. We have to cross over to their side if we’re to give a hand. And ministry happens best not in planned ways but naturally, organically and often when we’re on our way to do something else.

I love how Neil Cole puts it: “If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section.” If the church isn’t willing to get its hands (or lungs) dirty, it won’t have a hearing. The homes and hearts of people are open to the Gospel. But it’s relationships that bring the Gospel home. The church is at its best in two’s or three’s—not in two or three hundreds or two or three thousands. “Where two or three are gathered together, there am I in the midst of them.”

*Organic Church* is less about what we are to do than a book about what God has already done and now is doing. I challenge you to put it down without the picture of what God intended the church to be, becoming a hologram in your heart. Read it and reap a harvest of seeds ready to plant. Read it and weep a harvest of tears at what could be if we were to, as Cole puts it so memorably, “lower



the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple.” The real sin is not what happened in the past. The real sin is what is *not* happening in the present.

Dr. Leonard I. Sweet  
E. Stanley Jones Chair in Evangelism  
Drew University

*This work is dedicated to two generations in my life.  
First, to the memory of Ray Walker, who showed me  
what it means to be a man who loves Jesus and others.  
Second, to Heather, Erin, Zachary, and the next  
generation of Kingdom agents, who will take the church  
to new places we never dreamed possible.*

## Preface

It's raining very hard this night. Neo is escorted by a strange group of countercultural misfits. Part geek, part chic, they act as though they are smarter than the rest of the world.

Neo is controlled at gunpoint and taken to an old abandoned building under the promise of meeting the infamous Morpheus. Here he will be offered some pills from a dark stranger wearing reflective sunglasses and a black trench coat—and *he will willingly swallow one of the pills!*

What would compel him to do so? He is driven by a desire he can no longer resist. An insatiable curiosity and a holy dissatisfaction with the norm push him to abandon restraint. He is motivated to take extraordinary risks now because he can no longer stay in the dull world of normal life . . . of business as usual.

There are polite greetings. Then a most interesting dialogue ensues.

Morpheus begins by describing Neo's plight as similar to Alice falling down the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's story. He comments that Neo has the look of one who accepts only what he sees because he is in a dream and about to awaken, which is ironically very close to the truth. Morpheus tells Neo why they brought him here. It is his chance to learn what the Matrix is; Morpheus asks if he wants to know.

Neo nods slowly, but without hesitation, as if realizing that this is a turning point in his life, marking a change forever. Morpheus explains: "The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to

work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you to the truth.”

Neo inquires as to what truth Morpheus is referring to.

“That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.”

Morpheus opens a small silver box, takes two pills from it, and informs Neo that mere description is not enough; he must see it for himself to understand. Morpheus then leans forward, with a pill in each hand.

“This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo slowly yet deliberately reaches for the red pill.

Morpheus suddenly tells him that he is offering only the truth, nothing more. Neo takes and swallows the red pill, and the adventure begins.

He awakens to find that he was previously in a made-up world known as the Matrix. All that he understood was really a mask covering the truth, meant to hold him and everyone else in bondage to a lie.

This is the plot from the movie *The Matrix*, made by the Wachowski brothers, but it reflects something else that is also real. There is a red pill of sorts that opens our eyes to a more vivid reality of the Kingdom of God. It is the truth of God’s Word that we need in order to be set free and unleash the power of His Kingdom on this planet. The Scriptures have always held the truth, but our mind has been blinded by a warped sense of spiritual reality. This book could open our eyes to see the church, the Kingdom, and our role in both in a more vivid and real light.

Many people are longing for a greater cause. They are no longer content with “church as usual.” They read of the church in the New Testament, and their curiosity is piqued. The New Testament accounts are far removed from their experience every week. They

hear contemporary stories of the church expanding rapidly in parts of China and India, and their hearts soar. Dare they dream for something more? “Can I experience the same power?” they ask. “Can God work here, in this place? Will the Kingdom of God unleash itself on an unsuspecting society such as the United States?” Yes. Yes!

“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Before he swallowed the red pill in *The Matrix*, Neo was given another choice.

“Stop the car!” commands a member of the strange sect that has abducted him and taken him to meet Morpheus. She turns in the car to face Neo with a gun in her hand and demands that he surrender completely to their agenda or to take a walk. He responds with defiance. As he opens the door to leave, Trinity, a beautiful and respected computer hacker, stops him and tells him to trust her. He asks why he should trust someone he’s just met.

Gazing down a dark street with rain pounding down relentlessly, she says, “Because you have been down there, Neo. You know that road. You know exactly where it ends. And I know that’s not where you want to be.”

Neo slowly gets back into the car, unknowingly resigned to an appointment with a red pill.

When you look at the conventional church in America and all that it offers, you are left gazing down an old soggy street. It does not compel you to go further down that road. More vision statements, more Christian concerts, more sermons, and more blueprints for bigger auditoriums are not enough.

You will be amazed what people do for Jesus that they will not do for your vision statement. There is something better. There has to be. Jesus did not die and rise from the dead so that we can have better church bulletins and more comfortable pews.

To adapt the words of a fictional prophet known, in *The Matrix*, only as Morpheus: “Let me tell you why you are here. You are here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain.

But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the Church. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to this book. You know what I am talking about."

After reading this book, you may not want to go back. The ideas shared here have ruined people for the ordinary church. This is your last warning.

All around the world, people are taking the red pill, and they are not going back. Church, as you know it, will change. This is your moment of choice. This is your red pill.

The rabbit hole awaits. Let the adventure begin.

# Introduction

Christianity has been buried inside the walls of churches and secured with the shackles of dogmatism. Let it be liberated to come into the midst of us and teach us freedom, equality and love.

—*Minna Canth*

For many years now I have taken to going to church less and less because I find so little there of what I hunger for. It is a sense of the presence of God that I hunger for.

—*Frederick Buechner*

“Houston, we have a problem.”

This historic understatement was uttered on April 14, 1970, by Cdr. James A. Lovell while floating aimlessly in a small metal capsule hundreds of miles from earth aboard *Apollo 13*. Something had gone terribly wrong. Without enough oxygen or propulsion to get home safely, the spaceship crew and the team of NASA experts in Houston faced a great challenge. Well documented in dramatic fashion by Ron Howard in the movie *Apollo 13*, this episode could have become either a great tragedy or NASA’s finest hour. The statement echoing in space began the process of looking for creative solutions to a complex challenge.

Today the Church can say something similar. “Heaven, we have a problem.”

The words in this book may not be something you want to hear, any more than Houston wanted to hear those words. But if we are

not willing to face our problems, we will never be able to correct our path. It is a love for Jesus and His church, His bride, that has motivated this writing.

Modern pollsters tell us that a large number of those who are not Christians are indeed interested in Christ but not in attending church. One bumper sticker reads, “I love Jesus; it’s Christians I can’t stand.”

I attended a meeting with several thousand pastors to view Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* before its release to the public. The buzz at the meeting was that this movie was going to be very popular and cause multitudes of people to come back to church. Sermons reaching out to the seekers for this occasion were already written and available for download online. Slick and colorful advertisements were produced to draw the masses to our church services. Entire theaters were rented out to have private showings, assuming that the people that were invited would come to Christ and naturally want to join our churches.

The film took everyone by surprise and sold more tickets than anyone imagined, making more than \$600 million in sales internationally. Perhaps even more surprising, our local churches never saw any increase in attendance.

This shows us that there are many people in the United States who want to hear and believe in the message of Jesus but are not interested in the institution of church as it is. This should be a clear and compelling warning to us all. We have a problem.

Apparently, the world is interested in Jesus; it is His wife (the Church is the bride of Christ) that they do not want to spend time with. Unfortunately, we have reduced the Gospel message so that it is inseparable from the institution of church. We tell people that they must take the bitter pill of “church” if they want to even hear about Jesus. Most would rather die of the disease than consume that medicine.

The local church has become so undesirable that many, even among the convinced, are rejecting it altogether. In his book *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, Reggie McNeal



makes an alarming observation: “A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith.”<sup>1</sup> These are strong words. Could it be that the “churched culture” indeed is spiritually toxic? We have a problem.

Church attendance, however, is not the barometer of how Christianity is doing. Ultimately, transformation is the product of the Gospel. It is not enough to fill our churches; we must transform our world. Society and culture should change if the church has been truly effective. Is the church reaching out and seeing lives changed by the Good News of the Kingdom of God? Surely the number of Christians will increase once this happens, but filling seats one day a week is not what the Kingdom is all about. We do Jesus an injustice by reducing His life and ministry to such a sad story as church attendance and membership rolls.

The measure of the Church’s influence is found in society—on the streets, not in the pews.

We are not alone in this ecclesiastical descent. All around the world, wherever church follows the Western institutional pattern, its influence is in decline.

A short time ago, I was in Japan speaking in front of a church made up mostly of young Japanese people. My wife and I were the only Caucasians in the facility, perhaps in the entire city. I mentioned that the number of church members in Japan is less than 1 percent of the population of that country. They all nodded with a sigh that exposed their fatigue in light of this reality. I then mentioned that I had been there a few months earlier, and the percentage of church members was less than 1 percent then too; nothing had changed. Noting this lack of change, I asked, “What’s wrong with you?” They laughed at the ridiculous expectation.

I went on and told them that I had been in Japan three years earlier and the percentage of Christians in Japan was less than 1 percent then. This time they did not laugh. I announced that ten years ago the percentage of believers in Japan was less than 1 percent. I then asked, “Do you know what the percentage of Christians

in the population of Japan was one hundred years ago?" They were now near tears as I answered my own question: "Less than 1 percent." After a pause, I said, "There is something wrong with the way we are doing 'church' here in Japan." (At this point, I would like to comment that we Westerners are the ones who taught them how to do church.)

For Japan to be changed, Jesus will have to give the people something new and powerful. The same is true here in the United States. It is not the local church that will change the world; it is Jesus. Attendance on Sundays does not transform lives; Jesus within their hearts is what changes people.

The Church in the West has sacrificed so much of what she is supposed to be about that her relevance is lost to the lost. Para-church organizations, such as seminaries, mission agencies, Christian counseling agencies, and evangelistic ministries, have risen to accomplish so much of what God intended the Church to do. She expects others to do evangelism, leadership development, and social care. We send the people with serious problems to professional counselors.

If you ask non-Christians why the local church is relevant, they will usually think of only two things: it is where you go to get married and buried (hitched and ditched), and many people are trying desperately to avoid both. Is this what Jesus bled and died for? Is this the best we can do with the power of the resurrection? We have a problem.

Whenever the local church does attempt to engage the world in evangelism, it most often employs a "y'all come" type of outreach. The church, in effect, throws some type of party and expects the world to come to it. Under the banner of reaching the unchurched, we spend much time thinking up ways to make this sacred hour on Sundays relevant to them so that they will want to come. Books, seminars, audiotapes, magazines, and Websites are devoted to finding ways to make the Sunday experience so impressive to lost people that they too will want our Jesus. Do we really think that they will actually be impressed by our performance and that

this will lead them to want to be among the churched? Is making them churched a sufficient objective?

How far will we go to get people to come to our Sunday worship show? How much will we compromise to gain attendance? The most extreme example I have heard was a church in the Northwest that actually advertised it would pay people money if they came each week for a minimum of a month. They literally paid people just to attend their worship services! This example is not very subtle, but have we resorted to buying attendees with our professional music, messages, and drama? It seems to me that we have lost the plot somewhere along the “seeker-sensitive” path. We have a problem.

Why must people wake up early on Sunday, get dressed up, and drive to a specific location to sit in rows looking all morning at the back of some guy’s head while a person they don’t know talks to them about the latest prescription of three steps to a better life? Is this experience really supposed to change their lives forever?

A missionary family who has started organic churches in some of the most dangerous fields in the world once returned to the states for furlough. On the first Sunday back, they visited a large Baptist church that supported them. They arrived early in their best clothes because Dad was going to share in the service. As the mother and two kids were seated on the front row watching the lights and sound being checked and the instruments tuned, the oldest turned to her mother and asked, “Mom, are we going to see a show?” Their whole church experience was more like a family atmosphere in homes, and this church seemed totally foreign to these childlike eyes. I am convinced that most of us are too familiar with it to see how strange our customs really are.

It amazes me to consider how much effort and how many resources (time, money, and people) are expended for a single hour once a week. We have made church nothing more than a religious show that takes place on Sunday, and after it’s done we all go home, until church starts again next week, same time, same place. Is this what the bride of Christ is?

The Great Commission says that we are to “go into all the world,” but we’ve turned the whole thing around and made it “come to us and hear our message.”

We expect people to come to church in order to come to Christ, and the people of the world want nothing to do with church. We are so obsessed with our own religious club that we actually identify those who do not have a relationship with Jesus as the unchurched. It is as though just joining us on Sundays for an hour and a half is enough to say they are “in.” Salvation is not determined by your Sunday calendar or your smiling face in a church pictorial directory. We know this is true doctrinally, but nevertheless we still divide the populace into the church and the unchurched, as though all they need so as to be right is to come to our organization. No wonder our message is convoluted. We have lost sight of our prime directive and substituted creation of more people who are like us, rather than like Jesus, in its place.

Instead of bringing people to church so that we can then bring them to Christ, let’s bring Christ to people where they live. We may find that a new church will grow out of such an enterprise, a church that is more centered in life and the workplace, where the Gospel is supposed to make a difference. What will happen if we plant the seed of the Kingdom of God in the places where life happens and where society is formed? Is this not what Jesus intended for His Church?

What would it be like if churches emerged organically, like small spiritual families born out of the soil of lostness, because the seed of God’s kingdom was planted there? These churches could reproduce just as all living and organic things do.

We have seen such churches meeting in restaurants, offices, homes, university campuses, high school facilities, and beaches. We’ve had churches meeting in bars, coffeehouses, parks, and locker rooms. One of our church networks has as its purpose statement “To have a church within walking distance of every person living in Las Vegas.” Another claims, “Every Christian is a church planter, every home is a church, and every church building is a