



THE TANGIBLE KINGDOM

Creating Incarnational Community

THE POSTURE AND PRACTICES
OF ANCIENT CHURCH NOW

Hugh Halter and Matt Smay

Foreword by Reggie McNeal

A LEADERSHIP ✕ NETWORK PUBLICATION

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PRAISE FOR *THE TANGIBLE KINGDOM*

“Hugh Halter and Matt Smay are not just men of words but of actions. They have broken from the pack of theorizers, philosophers, and abstract theologians by diving into the deeper waters of experimentation, struggle, failure, and success. The results are sharper principles packed with punch because they have been refined in the fires of real life. Take confidence that what they teach will work.”—**Neil Cole**, church starter, director of Church Multiplication Associates, author of *Organic Church*

“Hugh and Matt are real live heroes, not only because they provide some original insights into the nature of the mission of incarnational ways of church, but because they courageously pave the way for the rest of us to follow. Laced with the inspirational authority that only practitioners can provide, this book deserves to be taken seriously by all concerned with mission and church in the twenty-first century.”—**Ian Hirsch** (theforgottenways.com), author of *The Forgotten Ways* and *The Shaping of Things to Come* (with Mike Frost), founding director of Forge Mission Training Network

“In *The Tangible Kingdom* we are given a picture of hope that the church really needs right now. Do you want your church to become a community of incarnation that displays the Kingdom throughout the world? Are you humble enough to admit you don’t know how? Then you need to read this book. Finally someone is telling us how to do that very thing.”—**Rick McKinley**, pastor of Imago Dei Community, author of *This Beautiful Mess* and *Jesus in the Margins*

“I have spent my adult life in church planting, evangelism, and church consultation. I’ve had hundreds of conversations with totally sincere people trying to crack the code of “what it really means to plant a missional church.” I could sense some directions in which we needed to move, but I was always simultaneously aware of big holes in my thinking—and even bigger holes in my experience base. Thankfully Hugh and Matt have filled the gap. This is the most real-storied, coherent, and

practical book I have read on the subject.”—**Todd Hunter**, national director, Alpha USA

“Plunging deeper and deeper with Jesus into a grassroots incarnational life is what this book is about. Many aspire to it, some write about it, but very few live out the rhythms of such a holistic lifestyle in the way that Hugh and Matt and their families are currently doing. I am thrilled to see their journey in book form.”—**Andrew Jones**, tallskinnykiwi.com

“I don’t need another book to tell me that the cultural currents of our time have shifted and the church is floundering in uncharted waters. That’s as clear as the nose on your face. What I need are practical, biblical, tried-and-tested steps to piloting the church through these shifting currents. In Halter and Smay you have practitioners who aren’t just holding on for grim death in the midst of rough seas. They are riding the shifting cultural swells, surfing the rising waves, and having a ball doing it! Written by experienced church planters who love what they do, *The Tangible Kingdom* is a navigational guide for the stout-hearted missional leader.—**Michael Frost**, author, *Exiles* and *The Shaping of Things to Come*

“In the rapidly secularizing environment of the post-modern West, there are a myriad of voices trying to give guidance to existing or potential followers of Jesus, many of whom are perplexed and disoriented. This volume is a clear voice. It is accurate, inspirational, and most importantly, written by practitioners and not theorists.”—**Sam Metcalf**, president of Church Resource Ministries

“Taking from the past to define the present, Hugh Halter and Matt Smay are not just thought-leaders of exceptional ability but leading practitioners of missional communities and innovative congregational forms. This book is a roadmap of the future.”—**Eric Swanson**, Leadership Network, co-author of *The Externally Focused Church*

“The Kingdom of God alive among us, that is what we all want. And that is what Hugh and Matt give us in *The Tangible Kingdom*. Be not fooled into thinking that “tangible” means simple, or one-size fits all. In this delightfully helpful book we are reminded that tangible means real-life. This is a book that reminds us and calls us to a faith with real-world implications.”—**Doug Pagitt**, author of *A Christianity Worth Believing*

“As someone who has been in this field for thirty-plus years, I can say with confidence: this is the direction of the future of the church. Missional, incarnational ministry gives hands and feet to the body of Christ in ways that communicate the profound reality of Jesus to the world. Hugh and Matt have stripped ministry back down to the early church essentials, and rooted it in a strong Christology.—**Bob Logan**, president, CoachNet International Ministries

“Written with honesty, humor, and a deeply felt hope for the body of Christ, *The Tangible Kingdom* will be an essential resource in helping people discover their own answers for what the church can look like. Whether you serve an established congregation or are in the process of starting something new, you’ll find inspiration here for your ministry. You’ll find a church that’s not about form but about function.”—**Bob Logan**, president of CoachNet International Ministries

“*The Tangible Kingdom* is a guide that leads us into a new vision for church without making us feel guilty for not knowing about it earlier. It takes the mystery out of missional and makes it practical and doable. You may not want to be a Christian when you get done reading, but you will definitely want to follow Christ.”—**Jim Henderson**, author of *Jim and Casper Go to Church*

“This is a book about seeking the Kingdom of God relentlessly in a world of fractured journeys and dead-ended good intentions. With Kingdom eyes, Hugh and Matt glimpse possibilities for the church that inspire me and can help set Christian leaders free to imagine and explore.”—**John Hayes**, Director of InnerChange, author of “*Submerge*.”

“This is a book that will take you where you need to go if you have any kind of future care for the church. Within my sixty-five years I’ve witnessed many shifts, and trends come and go like the ever-changing breeze. A clearer, radical, life-transforming focus that has been tested and tried according to the ways of Jesus has been desperately needed. *The Tangible Kingdom* provides that focus. This is a book of hope for the future of the church, and anyone who dares to lead within it. This book will bring the honest clarity and focus and encouragement your soul has been longing for as you seek to be a part of a community of faith that will impact the world God’s way . . . missionally, realistically, tangibly, incarnationally . . . forever.”—**Wes Roberts**, co-author of *Reclaiming God’s Original Intent for the Church*

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To our wives, Cheryl and Maren, for living on faith and fumes. You've never complained about the cost of this life, you've shared in every part, and now we hope we make a few dollars on this book so we can take you out for a really nice dinner! To our children, Ryan, Alli, Mckenna, and Maegan. There's not a story here that you weren't a part of. Thanks for letting your dads work in their office.

FOREWORD

Reggie McNeal

RECENTLY I WALKED BY a “church” that was holding “services” on a Sunday morning in an upscale community in Northern California. Organ music drifted out of the open doors, spilling onto the streets where passersby made their way to coffee shops, art galleries, and antique stores, oblivious to the goings-on of the band of worshipers ensconced behind stucco walls.

Is this situation worrisome to that congregation? Apparently not. No one was outside to engage anyone on the street. Nametags were on prominent display in the entry plaza next to the “sanctuary.” The clear message was “Members only.” If you wandered in on the activities absent a nametag, you’d stick out like a sore thumb.

Contrast this picture with what you see and experience as you read about the early days of the Christian movement in the Book of Acts. The Kingdom was spreading like a virus, invading every aspect of society. There wasn’t a possibility of containing it inside a building; it was unleashed onto the street.

If you are a church leader, you will self-select into your own future of spiritual expression. Either you will participate in some kind of religious activity that is increasingly disconnected from its surrounding culture, or you will join the ranks of those who want to experience the life of a Jesus follower. You don’t need much help in making the first choice. However, if you want to participate in the Kingdom here and now, you might need some help in knowing how to prepare for that. Enter Hugh Halter and Matt Smay.

I met Hugh and Matt at a Christian leaders’ gathering. As I got to know them, I sensed transparency, authenticity, an inquisitive spirit, humility, and . . . joy! As these two guys shared the story of Adullam, their community in the Denver area, I kept thinking, “This story needs to be told.” Months later, I was thrilled to find out it was happening. Now you have their journey notes in your hand.

I can recommend this book for lots of reasons. It will help you re-language your conversations as a Christian leader so that you can imagine different solutions for greater missional effectiveness. Their cultural analysis is good missiology. The descriptions they provide of how they operate give you concrete ways to move forward if you want to become more incarnational. This book could change your mind about how you view church, mission, and the culture we've been called to influence. Its strength is that it pops open new thought while telling about how the ideas flesh out in real life.

But what Hugh and Matt most want to do is give you hope. Hope of experiencing the Kingdom here and now. They certainly helped me believe all over again. Now you can, too.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AS WE'VE TRAVERSED THROUGH our story, many people have had a genuine influence, and we're honored to recognize them here.

To our CRM family, led by Sam Metcalf and Paul Rhoads: Thanks for living out your motto of "empowering leaders worldwide." As well to our CRM personal support teams, who have sacrificially given to this work, thus giving us a chance to be missionaries in our own country.

To Steve Ogne, Bill Malick, and Bob Logan, for helping architect the tools that set in motion a church-planting movement.

To our Aussie mates, Alan Hirsch and Mike Frost, along with the FORGE Mission Training Network, for adding your fresh voice to our Western context.

To our Adullam family: Our story is your story, and we look forward to our common call in Denver.

To Grace Chapel in Denver, Imago Dei Community and Open Bible Church in Portland, and Core Community in Omaha: Thanks for making small but critical investments in our story and looking beyond your own church walls.

To Phil and Laina Graf, for your formative work with us, for living out this book more than any other people we've met, and for the free Harley.

To our literary agent Greg Johnson, and editor extraordinaire Becky Johnson: You know how much you did!

AN INVITATION . . .

IF YOU'RE THE TYPE of reader who likes to skip introductions, now's your chance. No one's watching, so if you'd prefer to get to the action and angst, you'll be satisfied as our story and chapters unfold. But if you can hold tight with us for a few pages, the things we say here can truly help set up the book.

Picture, if you will . . .

A small boat drifts calmly along the southeast coastline of Italy. The weary sailor steering the boat wakens from a short sleep after a hard night fighting the currents, wind, and rain. He's come from across the seas in search of a quaint fishing village known for its hospitable inhabitants, constant sunshine, cool breezes, and hope of a new future. He's fled from the opposite—a place of corruption, greed, tension, violence, and despair. He had heard about this peaceful enclave from others who sent back word of the possibilities available to anyone who wishes to come. But the word also came with a caution. They said this harbor town, surrounded by steep jagged cliffs, is not easy to get to. It used to be easy to access, but the unseen reefs and rocks have shipwrecked so many that now the downed vessels themselves have become hindrances for others who try to get in. The carnage is visible to everyone. And most people, like this traveler, though drawn powerfully to what they have been told is on shore, are reluctant to navigate the wreckage.

Of course, some people can find their way in. A way has always been open to those who listened carefully to the local guides. Years ago, they erected three buoys out in the middle of the harbor. They stood 20 feet high off the surface of the water and were placed a quarter-mile apart starting from the neck of the bay, through the obstacles, and into the docks.

Because the guides had to be built upon dangerous underwater reefs, the locals knew not to steer directly for the pylons but instead to use them as guides for a correct angle of entry. The problem was that this was counterintuitive for most of the savvy, well-sailed skippers who preferred to rely on their experience or their trusty vessels than on the wisdom of those who knew what was under the surface.

So what is this tale of a perilous harbor and difficult navigation doing in a book about Christianity and the church? The answer is that it represents both the hope and the despair so many are feeling and experiencing in the idea of “church.” For years, we’ve hung on to the hope that God loves the world and intends to bring his redemptive ways to a broken human condition through his people, his church. We read epic accounts in our holy scriptures about people who changed humanity and experienced a level of communal power that we long to find. We’ve preached and listened to preachers who tell a story we’d all love to find ourselves in, yet we feel the gap between what we hear and talk about and what we experience.

For far too many of us, when we hear the word *church*, our eyes tear up, turn bloodshot, or glaze over, with emotions that represent the irrelevance of our communal expressions, or because we don’t know what to think anymore. Our faith and loyalty used to keep us on board, but now reality is beginning to curl over both like a 20-foot wave.

The idea of God’s Kingdom is now relegated to the realm of heaven, the afterlife, and we just assume that we won’t get to see God and his beautiful redemptive plan until we pass over. The church therefore becomes something we may not need anymore, something that at best is worth only our recreational enjoyment. Our massive hope about God, his Kingdom, and our place in a unique community of people who change the world is all but dead, and we’re left feeling like the searcher who wants in but is reluctant to face the dangers of navigating our collective faith and purpose.

If you’re like the authors of this book, you’ve gone down with a ship or two trying to make the Kingdom story tangible. You may have tried a few different churches, methods, programs, leaders, teachers, styles, and sizes only to find yourself stuck on a ship that seems to be attracting no one and can barely hold your interest.

Maybe you’ve abandoned the boat and are treading water, hoping a rescue vessel will appear. Perhaps you’ve abandoned the vessel and are swimming for your life, trying to get away from the shipwreck of bad (or less than fulfilling) church experiences. Even if another boat appeared, you wouldn’t trust it to take you into the harbor—you’ve wrecked too many times. Or, you’re already sitting up on the rocks, sopping wet, staring off into theological oblivion, wondering how much of the ancient story can really be true for today.

Maybe you’ve captained one of these ships and, without knowing it, found yourself sailing toward irrelevance. You have people on board, but they seem to have lost their heart. You would love to change course. You would be happy to sail toward something new even if uncharted,

but you wonder if you'd be sailing alone. Quite possibly you've lost your energy, and even if the wind of a new program came up, you'd be too tired to open the main sail again. Maybe it's just better to drop anchor and wait until the storm blows over?

If you don't identify with any of this story, then this book may be a waste of your time. However, if something seemed to prick in your heart or pique your mind, then maybe our story will be of help to you.

Our Purpose

Our Purpose is simple. We want to talk to you about the church. We want to let you know that the unsettling feelings you are experiencing are ones that hundreds of thousands of people are also working through. We also want to give you hope and a real-life picture of a preferred future.

At the same time, our intent isn't to try to figure everything out for you, because we don't have all the answers. We won't tell you to dry yourself off and get back on another boat. We also won't tell you which boats are good or bad. We don't care if your context is mega-church, house church, or whatever-church. We don't think it matters. Therefore, we won't ask you to swim toward *our* pylons, as if we've got the corner on the *one way* toward safety. What we hope to do is to explain what's below the surface, which way the currents are moving, and what the guideposts or pylons represent. If these thoughts make sense to you, as they have to us, we hope your intangible dream of God and his church—the Kingdom Jesus talked about—will become tangible.

Matt and I wrote this book because so many people pestered us to put our story down on paper. We had spent seven years traveling throughout America and overseas, training church planters, church dreamers, and existing church leaders in the hope that they might become more *missional and incarnational*. These two words together describe an orientation toward the ancient faith communities described in the Book of Acts and throughout history, who lived a countercultural, communal experience that always influenced the cultures they found themselves in. These missional/incarnational communities were therefore the natural framework God's church was and must still be built upon if we are to continue their rich legacy of making apprentices of Jesus worldwide. Although small and unsanctioned, these early communities were powerful and authoritative. Although they were on the run and decentralized, they were organized and strategic. Although they didn't know much about starting or growing churches, they did both naturally. Church just happened, and it was deeply meaningful.

We have found bits and pieces of their story in our story, and we hope this book captures enough of both to help dry you off and begin to navigate your way back toward God's mission in the world.

If you're discouraged with your own spiritual story or with your church's struggle to meaningfully influence and engage those around you, this book may give you hope that it can still be done. If you're discouraged with church altogether, our story may help you reimagine a new community, one that you might even want to start or participate in.

Most of the stories in the book come from Hugh. Matt helps coach you and your community by contributing the Reflections at the end of each chapter.

A word about the tone in which this book is written. As you read, we believe that you'll come to trust that our heart is for the church, both existing and emerging. For our own mental sanity and to help us write, we take pokes, jabs, or make light of how we have done church. Yes, we could have sanitized this a little so as not to offend anyone, but we've concluded it would be unfair to thousands of people who need to hear some emotion that they can identify with. We need to be honest with our story. We know we're not alone in our thoughts and feelings, and we hope that the exercise of listening to each other, laughing at ourselves, dreaming of a preferred future will help pull us together so that we are all pulling in the same direction.

Our Story

Our story is simple: As a bunch of friends living in Denver who were committed to live out ancient ways in a modern context of community, communion, and mission, we suddenly found ourselves in the company of followers, most of whom did not come from a meaningful church background or any church background at all.

Initially, we were resistant to starting another church, since we ourselves were still wet from previous shipwrecks. But something intangible happened that sparked our collective interest. We saw jaded Christians smiling again; we found people consistently initiating spiritual interest in our communities, and we, as leaders, found ourselves overwhelmed with the enjoyment of church while desperately trying not to be a church. When we could no longer deny God's unique work among us, we named our community *Adullam*, an Old Testament cave name that means "refuge." (When we mention "in Adullam," we don't mean—or say—"at Adullam." This is intentional, as we don't want to convey that Adullam is a building. You'll see why as the book goes on.)