

This book calls us back to first principles – leadership is just advanced discipleship. And the consistent message across the New Testament is that disciples follow the way of the cross through the power of the resurrection. The problem is that the cross is as foolish today as it was 2000 years ago. Thus, Alain gives us a prophetic call that cruciform leadership is the path to experience the power of God. The church needs to hear this word.

BEN C BLACKWELL  
*PRINCIPAL, WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL CENTRE*

Our culture is experiencing a crisis of leadership just when we need it most. We elect braggards and bullies, put narcissists on pedestals then kick away the legs, nurse wounds of coercion – even (especially?) in the church – and in our pain resent and reject the very notion of leadership itself. In this timely book, a seasoned pastor depicts another kind of leadership, marked by the cross. Learning lessons from the greatest leader of all time, this is a message of healing and hope for those who aspire to lead with the counter-cultural humility and defiant kindness of Jesus.

PETE GRIEG  
*24-7 PRAYER*

From beginning to end this book is Spirit-filled, cross-draped, pet-theory-denying, cosmically-alert, and Christ-shaped – and it is personal in the best sense of the word. The book is an apostolic, pneumatic, and christological pastoral theology. Church leaders have too often run to the latest book on leadership instead of, as Alain Emerson reminds us, turning back to the example of Jesus and the words of the apostles. We are at a turning point in the church worldwide, a turning point that (we pray) will lead to a new vision for what a pastor is. This book needs to be in the discussion of that turning point.

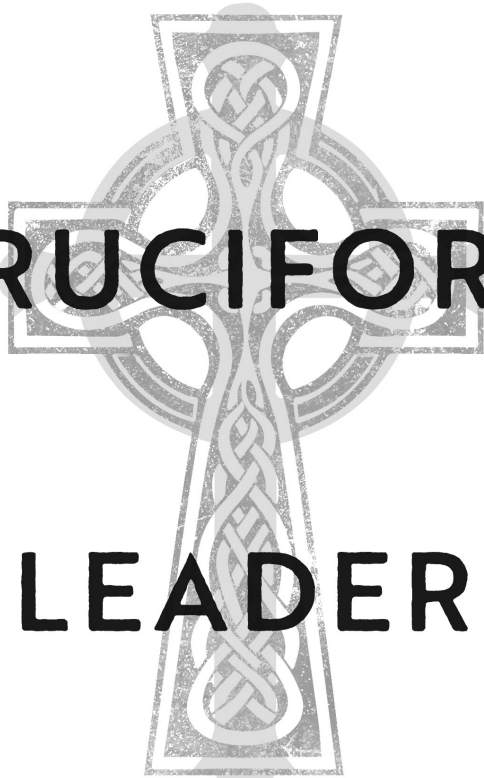
SCOT MCKNIGHT  
*VISITING PROFESSOR, WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL CENTRE*

This book is prophetic – not in the sense of deserving a ‘Christian’ adjective to connote its specialness, but in the sense of humbly covering both corrective and constructive bases and capturing a ‘now’ word from the Lord to his people. To his leaders. In these pages, you will find not just an invitation to a particular form of ministry, but fresh invitations to encounter with the Lord himself. May we each heed this invitation to become more holy, humble and hungry.

DAMILOLA MAKINDE  
*TEAM MEMBER, KXC & EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE*




**THE  
CRUCIFORM  
LEADER**





# THE CRUCIFORM LEADER



ALAIN EMERSON

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FOREWORD BY  
MARK SAYERS

Published in 2025 by  
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-914553-29-5

ISBN Epub/Mobi 978-1-914553-30-1

Typeset in Minion by Revo Creative Ltd, Lancaster  
Cover design by Faceout Studio, Jeff Miller.

Printed in Great Britain by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow.

*To my Uncle Phil,  
for friendship and partnership in the  
gospel over decades and for discipling  
me in the cruciform way.*





## FOREWORD

In the 12 months before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, I felt a tremendous sense that the platforms of influence and postures of leadership that had long existed both within society and the church would be rocked. I was under no illusions about the damage and disruption this would cause. And so the reckoning arrived. To describe it in detail would require an entire book. Yet it ranged from moral failings, abuses of power and social upheaval to a loss of trust in institutions and leaders. We are still living in the implications of this reckoning. The danger is that in reaction, we retreat and recoil from leading. The potential pitfalls can seem too great. From this perspective there appears to be little upside to stepping into a calling of leadership. We can become cynical, rightly seeing what has gone wrong but doing so from a distance, offering little in the way of renewal, referring and reshaping our imagination of leadership.

Yet, there is another way. As I listened to the Lord, I began to recognise the movement of his hand in history. Yes there was a reckoning, but there was also a revealing. A new cohort of leaders was being called into leadership. Others, already leading, were being called to lead in a new way. This way of leadership would not be shaped by culture, which offers various models of leadership, many of which are running aground. Instead, it would be moulded by the living and leading that emerges from someone who understands Jesus' work on the cross. Such leaders would be hungry, holy and humble.

Such leaders would be hungry for God's presence. His holiness will shape those who live in his presence. Such proximity to God's presence inevitably leads us to understand our place in God's created order and to live with true humility – something missing in so many contemporary models of leadership.

As the pandemic broke across the world, breaking our sense of normality and putting immense pressure upon leaders, I saw many hungry, holy and humble leaders being shaped in the crucible of crisis. I will never forget the call I made from my house during lockdown in Melbourne, Australia, across the world to a gathering of Irish Christian leaders. As I shared this vision of a rediscovery of hungry, holy and humble leaders, I could sense the Spirit's presence. The book you are reading is Alain taking this idea and running with it, fleshing it out, and indeed, we need it fleshed out. It has been said everything rises and falls on leadership; therefore, if readers can take the wisdom of this book and apply it to their own leadership, becoming cruciform leaders, partnering with God, new creation and new possibilities break out in our world.

Mark Sayers  
Senior Pastor, Red Church  
Melbourne, Australia

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have come about without the incredible patience, dedication and skill of my publishers Muddy Pearl and their team of editors, Katharine Grimes, Fi Boon and Pamela Shaw. In particular, I would like to thank Stephanie Heald for her belief in this book and her encouragement as I was writing it.

Many other people have influenced how this book has made it into the world. My friendship and shared love for New Testament ecclesiology with Roger Ellis has been a significant and ongoing source of wisdom and insight. I'm grateful to the staff and students of Westminster Theological Centre for granting me an opportunity to teach and develop the core content of this book. Friends around the world, particularly those who are part of the beautiful global 24-7 Prayer family, have inspired me immensely through their embodied examples of cruciform leadership – in season and out of season – and have helped form so many of the thoughts in this book. Thank you to Mark Sayers for writing the Foreword and for the anointed words along the way which have resonated deeply.

My local church, Emmanuel Church – everything I know about leadership has been learned by serving you and being loved by you. Thank you for your patience in all the times I have been less cruciform! And to the elders of Emmanuel Lurgan and Emmanuel Portadown, I count serving Jesus and his church alongside you the highest honour.

I could not have completed this book without the unflinching prayerful support, dedication and unconditional love of my parents, Alan and Geraldine, and my wider family circle. What an incredible tribe I have been blessed with.

My kids, Annie, Erin and Finn, loving you three is my greatest joy. Thank you for all the times you have released me to write this book. Let's go away together again soon!

And to Rachel, my incredible wife and the one my soul loves. Thank you for making me laugh, for knowing when to encourage me to keep going and when to take a break. I love all the ways you prevent me from becoming too intense. Thank you for embracing the cruciform way in ways others will never know so I might get to write about it. 'Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you' (Matthew 6:4).

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## CALLING FORTH THE HUNGRY, THE HOLY AND THE HUMBLE

It was the final week of 2019. A whole new decade was beckoning. 2020 felt significant. 2020 even sounds significant. Closing the curtains on one year would simultaneously kick open the door to the next ten years. As a church leader this was a seismic moment of opportunity, one I had to take advantage of. Fifteen years of experience had taught me how to maximise the first 'Lord's Day' of every January. I had a well-established and pretty polished routine of presenting a compelling vision to our church family at the dawn of every new year. 'Vision Sunday' we like to call it.

The first Sunday of a new decade provided an even greater sense of opportunity that simply had to be seized. This was the chance to unveil the new '2030 vision' – a captivating presentation of how we would plan to change the world for Jesus over the next ten years. The pressure was on, but I had always thrived on that type of pressure.

Except this time.

There had been a lot of 'noise' in the surrounding culture throughout 2019. Debates in the public square and online around contentious issues of morality, race and ethics were getting louder and angrier. Shocking statistics concerning mental health and anxiety confirmed that we had reached a crisis point. The radical secularism which had been sweeping across the Western world over the past thirty years had become firmly established. Data was being released about the phenomenal wave of 'dechurching' that was taking place, particularly in the USA and the UK. Further to all of this, in my own country, Northern Ireland, where the sectarian spirit simmers under the surface of most public discourse, things were tense.

It felt like we needed a rallying cry. A clear and compelling vision that could counter the angst and negativity. Surely the turn of a new

decade was a moment to stir up fresh holy ambition in the church.

I have a tendency to feel overly responsible for almost everything in life, so I was even more earnest than normal in my attempts to get this unique moment right. I adopted my usual routine over those final days of 2019 – seeking God in the holiday period between Christmas and the New Year; journalling earnestly and preparing myself for a few days of fasting in early January. All of this was in anticipation of a heavenly ‘download’ that I expected God to give me – a spine-tingling revelation for the next decade and a call to respond that I would present to our church.

The result of this intense seeking?

Almost nothing.

No big vision, no extraordinary prophetic words or images, no high-level strategic goals. No exciting blueprint about how we could change the world for Jesus in the incoming ten years.

Except ...

A simple picture, a passage of Scripture and a gentle whisper.

The picture? *A tree.*

The Scripture? *Some verses from Psalm 1.*

The whisper? *‘Be like a tree, son ... hold your nerve ... go deep ... in this season you will take ground by standing your ground ... stay faithful.*

I still have these words written in my journal.

And so, on the first Sunday of 2020, as we stepped into a brand new decade, I delivered my worst vision talk ever. Or maybe my best?

I told our growing and expanding church family, Emmanuel Church, *‘to be like a tree’.*

Almost apologetically, I confessed to our church that our leadership team didn’t really have a vision for the next decade. Except the words of Psalm 1.

*Blessed is the one*

*who does not walk in step with the  
wicked*



*or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the  
LORD,  
and who meditates on his law day and  
night.  
That person is like a tree planted by  
streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither –  
whatever they do prospers.*

PSALM 1:1–3

I can't describe to you how difficult it was to dial down my inner activist to deliver this talk; to choose not to manipulate my sermon into something more aspirational. Beautiful and poetic as Psalm 1 is, surely it wasn't the right passage to launch into a new decade with. I mean, it's wonderful as a devotional but *'be like a tree'* isn't exactly the compelling headline required for mobilising the church of Jesus Christ into a new decade, right? Did we not need something with more strategic intent, something that carried more prophetic urgency, something more cutting edge?

Despite constantly questioning myself, I knew I had to be obedient.

*'Be like a tree,' I told our church family. 'Let's hold our nerve as we enter 2020. Let's not be anxious. In this season we will take ground by standing our ground. Let's go deep.'*



Fast forward three months and the turbulence we were experiencing in our own little part of the world at the end of 2019 was dwarfed by a new worldwide level of disruption.

Covid-19.

Everything changed. As things do in global pandemics. We couldn't really do anything. We couldn't go anywhere. Everyone was

scared, and people do and say strange things when they are scared. Everyone was ‘pivoting’ and everything was ‘unprecedented’.

The pressure I had felt about presenting an aspirational vision at the start of 2020 completely dissipated, only to be replaced with much more intense and immediate pressure. Leadership in this season had nothing to do with inspiring people to achieve great things for Jesus over the next decade. It was simply about trying to help people get to the end of the day, alive.

Strangely, I felt that I had been partly prepared for such an ‘unprecedented’ season. I had been meditating on Psalm 1 ever since I shared it with our church family in January, three months before Covid came to our home town. I began to realise those divinely inspired words had carved a deeper reservoir of peace into my soul.

*‘Be like that tree, son, hold your nerve.’*

But I needed to keep returning to these words often over the coming months as the implications of the pandemic further unfolded. As I adapted to the process of ‘doing church’ in this new normal – preaching online, leading Zoom prayer times, trying to do Covid-safe pastoral visits, leading our staff team remotely – I didn’t always like what I was seeing in myself. Insecurity, competitiveness, striving – all of this was coming to the surface.

God was doing something deeper in me. Those whispers from the Father at the start of 2020 had been the perfect preamble to what he would teach me in the coming months. The hidden underground parts of my life were being invited to wind their way to fresh streams of living water again.

*‘Be like that tree, son ...’*



Prior to Covid-19, we had planned to launch a new event in May 2020 – an exciting new festival where lots of partnering churches would join together to seek God for a fresh awakening of the Spirit

in Ireland. Covid meant we had to cancel everything. On the date of the planned festival, we hosted an online Zoom webinar instead. My friend Mark Sayers, pastor of Red Church Australia and author of a number of wonderful books, agreed to join us online. Mark helped us think about the unique ways God could use this extraordinary ‘crisis’ we were living through to challenge the church, especially the church in the West. In particular, he encouraged us to pay attention to the self-promoting shadows God was bringing into the light during this time of enforced solitude; shadows that had lurked behind the bright lights of the platforms of our ministries; shadows we could now see more clearly because we had no platforms to stand upon.

Many of those listening to Mark had grieved for the well-known and internationally respected Christian leaders whose private lives had been exposed publicly in recent years. Acknowledging our need to authentically lament the current crisis Covid had precipitated and to learn from the heartbreaking stories of fallen leaders, Mark then provoked us towards a more hopeful and redemptive reflection.

What if God might also be using this wilderness period, this time of testing, to raise up a new cohort of leaders around the world? What if there was a generation of men and women, hidden to the world but passionately seen and known by God, who were being prepared to lead the church in the days ahead with the courage and conviction required to change the narrative of our times? Mark described this new breed of leader he believed was being mobilised for such a time as this as *‘the hungry, the holy and the humble’*. It was a simple sentence, but it was pregnant with prophetic potency. One of my friends listening online, overcome with emotion, literally fell off his chair as a tangible experience of the fear of the Lord drove him to his knees. Mark’s words reminded me of the prophet Hanani’s rebuke to King Asa recorded in the second book of Chronicles, ‘For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him’ (2 Chronicles 16:9). In 2020 God was still looking for hungry, holy

and humble ones and I could almost see them, as if rising out of an open atlas, as Mark spoke to us.



Since that online meeting in 2020, devastatingly, many more well-known leaders have fallen. We are without doubt at a crisis point in the Western church when it comes to the area of leadership. The church has never been more scandalised. To help prove the point, Jon Tyson reflects how these days people attending your church are less interested in your worship style, your small group structures or even your theological distinctives. Rather, the questions people really want answers to are: ‘Who is your leadership team accountable to?’ ‘What is the governance structure of this church?’ Of course these questions are important in their own right, but Tyson argues the sad consequence of the widespread leadership fallout we have experienced in recent years means we face a depressing new reality: many leaders are now being forced to prioritise staying out of the newspapers rather than courageously advancing the kingdom in the power of the Spirit.

Almost every week another leader’s dirty washing is aired in public. What has been exposed is heartbreaking. Bullying. Abuse. Sexual immorality. Narcissism. Misogyny. Stealing. The body count of leaders falling is stacking up. Worse, the body count of individuals hurt by these leaders is exponentially higher.

People have been damaged.

Badly. Really badly.

Today as I write these words, I’ve become aware of yet another ‘fall from grace’ from another respected Christian leader.

Something needs to change. The time has come to disavow some of the elements of Christian leadership culture in the Western church.

On top of the integrity crisis surrounding leadership, we are managing decline in the church at a seriously depressing rate.

\* Jon Tyson, ‘Rediscovering Church: Restoring Leadership Credibility to a Scandalized Church’, *Church of the City Podcast*, 17 July 2023.

Many denominations are haemorrhaging people at levels we have not known before. In the UK, church attendance has been steadily declining for the past forty years. Research led by the Policy Institute at Kings College London\* has shown that, internationally, the UK public are now among the least likely to believe in God. Just under half the UK population (49%) said they believed in God in 2022, down from three quarters (75%) in 1981. The same research also reveals that the percentage of the UK population who say that belief in God is not important in their life has almost doubled in the last four decades. As many had ruefully predicted, America has followed these trends in the UK approximately twenty years later. According to Jim Davis, Michael Graham and Ryan P Burge, in their important recent book, *The Great Dechurching*, America has entered into its most significant religious shift in US history. The headline is forty million people in America have left the church in the last twenty-five years! To add to the dramatic effect, 'more people have left the church in the last twenty-five years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined.\*\*

These are staggering statistics. Especially when we reflect that over the same time span on a human capability level we have witnessed the best and biggest versions of church that human beings have ever built. We have more resources, more technology, more intellectual know-how and more strategic vision than there has ever been, yet it is all proving insufficient to meet the need of the hour we are living in. It seems our well researched growth strategies and charismatic leaders are not enough to truly penetrate the zeitgeist of today.

\* WVS team at the Policy Institute, Kings College London, 'God, Heaven and Hell, and Life After Death: Data Reveals UK's Low Religious Belief Compared with Other Nations', *UK in the World Values Survey*, 19 May 2022, [uk-values.org](https://uk-values.org) (accessed 7 March 2025).

\*\* Jim Davis, Michael Graham and Ryan P Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Zondervan, 2023), p5.

What do we need?

In short, we need a move of God.

And we need a new breed of leaders to lead the way. Hungry, holy, humble ones who will seek the manifest presence of God above all human methods, ministries and models.

Where are the hungry, the holy and the humble?



Vision is required in this next season, but it is the source of vision that the leaders of this hour need to critically discern. Yes, we need leaders with vision, but we need holiness more. Yes, we need leaders of competence, but we need hunger more. Yes, we need leaders who are confident, but we need humility more. The answer to the current leadership crisis we are facing is not no leadership, but cruciform leaders. This should be the defining characteristic of all leadership in the kingdom of God. As Scot McKnight says, “The character of a king shapes the character of that king’s kingdom, and the character of our King is cruciform.”\*

The word ‘cruciform’ in most dictionaries is defined as ‘having the shape of the cross’. Perhaps the best biblical definition of the cruciform life is given in Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi when he exhorts these early Jesus-followers to embody the same mind as Christ, going on to quote what is confirmed by many scholars as one of the first hymns of the early church:

*who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God  
something to be used to his  
own advantage;*

\* Scot McKnight, ‘You might be a kingdom-mission church if ...’ in *Gospel, Kingdom and Leadership: Voices from the Missional Movement – Volume 2 Chapter 4, North American Baptist Conference*, July 2019, nabconference.org (accessed 7 March 2025).

*rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a  
servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a  
man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death –  
even death on a cross!  
Therefore God exalted him to the  
highest place  
and gave him the name that is above  
every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee  
should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under  
the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge that  
Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*

PHILIPPIANS 2:6–11

The appeal at the heart of this book is for leaders of the church to return to these words of Philippians 2:6–11 in a spirit of humility and repentance. For these words speak not only of the death of Christ in his crucifixion but the life of Christ in his way of ‘*cruciformity*’. Theologian and author Chris Green is a helpful guide here as we further unpack the meaning and the shape of cruciform leadership. Green uses the physical structure of the cross to describe the kind of life which actually reflects true biblical holiness. The vertical beam of the cross, Green says, speaks of the otherness of God, whose ways and thoughts are far beyond ours. Cruciform leaders therefore are those who identify with Christ’s death on the cross and as a result find

themselves being transformed into his very likeness. The horizontal beam speaks to us about the otherness of our brothers and sisters, both those inside and outside of the church. Cruciform leaders learn to appreciate the strangeness of our fellow human beings in the same sacrificial ways Jesus showed us.\* The cruciform way is therefore an ongoing participation with Christ in a life of joyful sacrifice which makes room for others to come into the glorious knowledge of the Father's love and the recreation of all things. Loving God and loving our neighbour – this is the cruciform way, and the world is crying out for leaders formed in this cross-shaped way.

What if we stopped co-opting the words from the latest celebrity leadership guru and obsessing about the biggest online 'influencers'? Or, what if, at least, we made sure this wasn't our primary form of inspiration? What if we returned to the Spirit-inspired words of Jesus, quite simply the greatest leader who ever lived?

As leaders of the church today I really believe we are being invited to submit ourselves to a process of relearning what we know about leadership at the feet of that luminous Nazarene. The church fathers were quick to point out that the blessed man of Psalm 1 points to The Man, Jesus Christ. "Blessed is the man that hath not gone away in the counsel of the ungodly" (verse 1). This is to be understood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord Man, stated St Augustine.\*\* What if such a reorientation of our leadership in the way of Jesus is what the whole world is crying out for? Going back to the way of Jesus which was so climactically demonstrated on another tree at Calvary. Going down on our knees in repentance at the foot of the cross.

\*Chris EW Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness and Scripture, Second Edition* (CPT Press, 2020).

\*\* Augustine of Hippo, 'Expositions on the Book of Psalms' (1888) in P Schaff ed. and AC Coxe tr. *Saint Augustine: Expositions on the Book of Psalms - Volume 8* (Christian Literature Company), p1.



And what if we reflected on the example of the first Apostles,\* who, after an intense three-year immersion and apprenticeship in the way of Jesus, literally led a movement which changed the world and is still continuing to this day. Why would we stop looking to them for inspiration? We could argue the first Apostles were the original ‘influencers’ of society. Up until this point in history, the world had never witnessed the radical effect of such powerfully embodied servant-leadership. Their words and their lives continue to shine as a beacon of hope to us in these bewildering times. For, as we step further into the uncertainty of our postmodern, radically secularised, Western world, many of the complexities, pathologies and changing realities we are facing are pointing us back to the context of the first churches.

Surely, those who planted the first churches in such a godless and idolatrous culture, buffeted by imperial might and persecution, yet able to say with confident humility, ‘follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ’ (see 1 Corinthians 11:1) have something to teach us? These imperfect men and women, flawed at almost every conceivable level, became the pioneers of a new type of humanity\*\* simply because they actually led like Jesus.

In the chapters ahead we will seek to rediscover this cruciform way of Jesus and his Apostles, taking time to describe different characteristics of these servant leaders whose lives literally changed the world. In doing so my aim is to provide leaders today with what can be described above as lived theology – real, embodied examples of leaders who led like Jesus. They are still our best example of the cruciform way.



\* For clarity, I will capitalise ‘Apostle’ when referring to one of the original Twelve and Paul, but not when referring to other sent-out ones of the early church.

\*\* This phrase ‘pioneers of a new humanity’ was inspired by a quote from JB Phillips in *Letters To Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (The Macmillan Company, 1956).

I do not believe the solutions to our problems today, whether within the church or the wider society, will be solved by ‘cancelling’ failed leaders or overreacting to those failures with our own politically correct virtue signaling. We may feel we have good reasons to be skeptical of leadership in this current cultural moment but we should be careful that we do not become cynical. For God can use the smouldering ashes of this intense refining moment for the church to remake crowns of beauty,\* placing these upon the hungry, holy and humble servants he has been quietly preparing for this moment in history. My friend Pete Greig, leader of the 24-7 Prayer movement, often says, almost every move of God throughout church history has been preceded by some kind of crisis. What if the dark shadow of the recent leadership crisis that rests over the Western church could begin to disappear as leaders repent of their ways, turn again to Jesus and a new cohort of consecrated leaders is raised up for this hour?

I noted above how Davis, Graham and Burge have brought a stark wake-up call to the church, regarding the shocking trend of dechuraching in the USA, but their analysis doesn’t end there. They also have discerned the hopeful opportunities that exist on the other side of crisis.

The Great Dechuraching is reversible and doesn’t have to have the final word for faith communities in our country ... The Great Dechuraching could well be the American church’s most crucial moment and greatest opportunity. As church leaders, we consider it the privilege of a lifetime to serve in this moment.\*\*

One recent piece of information which backs up this claim is that research has shown in the last year the sale of Bibles has jumped by 22% in the US, despite overall book sales in the country only

\* See Isaiah 61:3.

\*\* Jim Davis, Michael Graham and Ryan P Burge, *The Great Dechuraching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Zondervan, 2023), p239.

rising by less than 1%.\* On top of this, more and more stories of God moving powerfully on university campuses all over the USA are filtering through our media channels.\*\*

And there is further evidence to back up this redemptive thread of opportunity. In the post-Christian culture of the UK, despite what many may think, God is moving. The statistics of decline and unbelief I outlined above should sober us, but they also require a more nuanced commentary. For, while the headlines often focus on what can appear like the terminal decline of the Western church, the truth is, growth is taking place somewhat 'under the radar'. Mirroring the increase in the Bible sales in the USA, research compiled by the SPCK Group in the UK has shown an 87% increase in Bible sales between 2019 and 2024, largely attributed to a sense of spiritual renewal among Gen Z.\*\*\*

The 24-7 Prayer movement, of which I am a part, is witnessing more churches than ever hosting night-and-day prayer rooms around the UK. My friend and Senior Pastor of *Jesus House*, London, Agu Irukwu, has been instrumental over the past decade in gathering up to 40,000 people from across denominations and ethnicities to pray through the night in London's ExCel arena. Alpha, born out of Holy Trinity Brompton in London, has proven to be an extraordinary evangelism tool over the past thirty years, reaching thirty-two million people around the world, and in 2023 it had 200,000 participants in the UK alone. Reports are filtering through that in Wales hundreds of healing miracles have taken place over the past ten years. A fresh wave of church planting has also emerged in many streams of the church, with new life-giving

\* Milla Ling-Davies, 'US Bible surge led by first-time buyers', *Evangelicals Now*, 26 December 2024, e-n.org (accessed 7 March 2025).

\*\* Erin Conner, 'God is Moving in Secular Places', *Christian Union*, 4 March 2025, christianunion.org (accessed 20 March 2025).

\*\*\* Kaya Burgess, 'Spiritual Gen Z drive increase in Bible sales', *The Times*, 14 March 2025, thetimes.com (accessed 20 March 2025).

churches planted into the soil of major city centres, rural villages and council estates across England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. A research project called *New Churches in the North East*\* conducted in 2014–2015 by the Centre of Church Growth Research, based in Cranmer Hall, part of St John's College at Durham University, found that since 1980, 125 new churches have been planted in this region of England alone. Research undertaken in United Reformed Church\*\* and Anglican Church circles has shown while there is undoubted decline in church attendance a high percentage of their churches continue to have a disproportionate impact on their local communities. Even smaller, often struggling churches continue to faithfully love their neighbours, feed the hungry and welcome the stranger. Maybe most encouraging of all are the stories of thousands of Gen Z and Gen Alpha young people, representing the breadth of the denominational spectrum sensing God calling them to a deep level of consecration and passionate pursuit of his presence. In Finland over the last eight years church attendance among young men between 15–29 has more than doubled.\*\*\* In France at Easter 2024, a record 12,000 people were baptised across the country, 36% of which were aged between 18–25!\*\*\*\*

I could go on and on. The point is, Jesus is still building his church.

A tangible, real-time expression of this hope-born-out-of-crisis which took place during the months I have been writing this book, was the spiritual renewal that took place at Asbury University,

\* 'New Churches in the North East', *Centre for the Study of Modern Christianity*, 2015, [csmc.webspace.durham.ac.uk](http://csmc.webspace.durham.ac.uk) (accessed 7 March 2025).

\*\* 'Church at a Crossroads: 6 Lessons from our United Reformed Church Research', *Theos*, 4 July 2023, [theosthinktank.co.uk](http://theosthinktank.co.uk) (accessed 7 March 2025).

\*\*\* Santeri Marjokorpi, 'Against the Odds, Researchers Find an Increase in Religiosity Among Young Finnish Men', *Evangelical Focus*, 18 January 2024, [evangelicalfocus.com](http://evangelicalfocus.com) (accessed 7 March 2025).

\*\*\*\* Caroline de Sury, 'Record 12,000 People were Baptized in France on Easter', *America – The Jesuit Review*, 4 April 2024, [americamagazine.org](http://americamagazine.org) (accessed 7 March 2025).

Wilmore, Kentucky in 2023. After a normal midday chapel service – a routine part of the seminary’s weekly schedule – a number of students, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, spontaneously made their way back to the chapel and began repenting of their sins. Their obedience occasioned a wonderful outpouring of God’s love and power on the university and within hours the dumbfounded young leaders found themselves facilitating a gathering of continual worship which lasted for twenty-one days. It is estimated that this move of the Holy Spirit brought approximately 70,000 visitors to Wilmore during those three weeks. A specific call to repentance and consecration among the students marked this particular renewal and it resulted in multiple salvations, a deep work of healing in the many anxious minds, and a supernatural sense of peace in the Holy Spirit. Among all these wonderful results one of the striking characteristics of this move of God was its simplicity. The outpouring at Asbury will be known for how distinct it was from the platform and performance driven forms of church services we have become accustomed to in the Western church! It has been reported that the short talk given at the initial chapel service was, at face value, mediocre, and the musical standard of the worship during the revival, average. Not to mention they didn’t even have PowerPoint! Rather, this wonderful outpouring of the Spirit was marked by hungry, holy and humble students, the names of which most reading this book still probably don’t know. Asbury builds on the testimonies throughout history of God’s revival power moving in out-of-the-way places. Whether it be the pagan island of my country Ireland where God captured the heart of a young slave boy named Patrick; the back streets of LA through the yielded life of William Seymour, the one-eyed son of a slave; or the Hebrides through the passionate and persevering prayers of two octogenarians. The common denominator in each of these revivals had little to do with the place and everything to do with the characteristics of hearts which God by his Spirit was drawn to. Holiness. Hunger. Humility.

Asbury gives us hope. But it also provides us with a challenge. The young students who stewarded the renewal there remind us that leaders of Jesus' church require less haughtiness and more holiness, less hubris and more humility, less hype and more hunger.



I could never have imagined what 2020 would have brought forth as I stood, seemingly 'visionless' at the turn of a new decade. But no impressive vision would have prepared me (or those I lead) for what was ahead anyway. All I needed were some simple words latent with ancient inspired wisdom, *'be like that tree, son, hold your nerve, let the roots go deep.'* I have since come to recognise that around 2,000 years ago the Apostle Paul gave his young apprentice Timothy similar advice for the turbulent days of leadership which would lie ahead for him, 'be prepared in season and out of season ... keep your head in all situations, endure hardship' (2 Timothy 4:2, 5). Paul knew if Timothy established a life of deep-rootedness in the presence of Jesus, that this persevering stability would ultimately produce fruit of eternal quality which would feed others in times of disorientating instability.

Approximately 500 years after Paul wrote this leadership advice to Timothy, a young, ordained priest called Ciaran from my nation of Ireland had a vision of a tree growing high in the middle of his land. Ciaran was the son of a carpenter and as a boy worked as a cattle-herder. At some point in his early years, he was seized with a passion for Jesus and devoted himself to the monastic life. Columba of Iona would say of Ciaran, 'He was a lamp, blazing with the light of wisdom.\*' Ciaran committed himself to study and spiritual formation under the tutelage of the great Irish saints, Finnan of Clonard and Edna of Inishmore. It was during Ciaran's time on Inishmore, one of three islands in western Ireland known as the

\* Bridget Haggerty, 'St. Kieran of Clonmacnoise', *Irish Culture and Customs*, 27 September 2024, [irishcultureandcustoms.com](http://irishcultureandcustoms.com) (accessed 7 March 2025).

Aran Islands, that he had his life-changing vision. The tree Ciaran saw in the middle of the ‘Emerald Isle’ was protecting the whole of Ireland, the sweet fruit it produced surrounded the whole country and Ciaran could see birds coming to take fruit to other lands. Having shared this vision with his mentor, Edna wisely recognised the tree was Ciaran himself. Ciaran had been called to plant his life in the soil of his own land and in doing so bring the blessing of God to Ireland and the nations. Edna therefore sent Ciaran to the middle of Ireland to establish a monastery and in AD 544 Ciaran finally settled in the strategic location of Clonmacnoise. Ciaran’s monastery would be situated centrally in Ireland, at the place where the major east-west land route meets the River Shannon which runs from north to south. Tragically, Ciaran died at the tender age of thirty-three, only nine months after the monastery was established, but his vision of the miraculous tree came to pass nonetheless. In the years that followed Ciaran’s death, Clonmacnoise flourished. The monastic settlement at the centre of Ireland became one of Ireland’s most famous places, establishing itself as a major hub of religion, learning, craftsmanship and trade. Dignitaries and scholars from all over Europe visited it and many monks were trained, equipped and sent out to the nations to proclaim the gospel.

Fast forward another 1,000 years approximately when the great reformer Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew the world was ending. He famously answered, ‘I would plant a tree.’ For Luther, the planting of a tree was an act of defiant hope, the establishment of life-giving, fruit-yielding creation in the soil of a world full of decay. Hope, like the trees, that will outlive us.

It seems the words of Psalm 1 which I unexpectedly heard the Spirit whisper to me at the start of 2020 are ironically the kind of words which actually do change the world. In a church culture that has been poisoned by the cult of celebrity yet left disillusioned by the conduct of the leaders the people once looked up to, what if the great saints like the Apostle Paul, St Ciaran and Martin Luther

recognised that the most visionary thing a leader can do in this hour is to concentrate on becoming people who are planted beside the streams of living water? Maybe then the church will be able to point once again with confidence to her steady, godly and consistent leaders. Men and women who have drunk deep from the river of God's presence and produced fruit that looks like the character of Jesus.

*Calling forth the hungry, the holy and the humble.*

*Calling forth the cruciform leader.*





## CHAPTER 1

# CHRIST, THE CROSS, CALLING AND THE CHURCH:

### *A BIBLICAL PARADIGM FOR CRUCIFORM LEADERSHIP*

‘The success of the church lies in the hands of its leaders.’ This phrase, or a variation on the same theme, is one that most of us will have come across many times, at Christian conferences or in leadership books. Because throughout the last fifty years the evangelical church growth movement has focused on the subject of leadership.

This emphasis on developing leaders has led to many churches co-opting leadership principles and practices from the world of business, psychology, therapy and education. In many ways the church has benefitted from their practical insights, an important reminder that the wisdom of God is not confined to the pews of the church:

*Out in the open wisdom calls aloud,  
she raises her voice in the public  
square;*

PROVERBS 1:20

The work of writers like Patrick Lencioni, Margaret Wheatley and Jim Collins, with their hard-earned wisdom drawn from their respective spheres of influence, has impacted my own life and