

FOURTH EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

# *The Provocative Church*



Graham Tomlin

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*Fourth edition with study guide*

Graham Tomlin

Forward Movement

Cincinnati, Ohio

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Forward  
Movement

*To Janet*

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## *Preface to the fourth edition*



This book has surprised me by staying in print so long. Reading it again, more than ten years after it was written, reminds me of how much the world has changed in that short time, with September 11, 2001, the rise of militant Islam, the New Atheism, and changes within the Church itself. In the meantime, I have learned a great deal through moving to London and working with Holy Trinity Brompton and the dioceses of London and Chelmsford in the creation of St. Mellitus College, as well as through more theological and other reading. My colleagues at HTB, at St. Mellitus, and in both dioceses have also taught me a great deal, which is probably reflected in unknown ways through the changes in this edition. My thanks are also due to Simone Odendaal for her help with preparing this edition.

## *Preface*



Evangelism and theology haven't always gotten along terribly well in the past. The common assumption is that if you're an evangelist, you're basically pragmatic and not that interested in theology—it doesn't matter how or why, as long as you get them converted. On the other hand it's assumed that if you're a theologian, then evangelism comes pretty low on your list of priorities. Thankfully this is changing—I keep coming across students and younger Christians who are passionate about evangelism and the desperate need for it in the Church today, yet who also know that if the Church is to be responsible, to succeed and thrive, it needs a strong theological base.

This book is a contribution to the task of building that foundation. It tries to blend together theology and practice, doctrine and experience.

Martin Luther once wrote that the Church is “hacked to pieces, marked with scratches, despised, crucified, mocked—like Christ, but to the sight of God, a pure, holy, spotless dove.” The description is probably as true now as in any other time in its past. The obituary of the Church in the West has been written many times, and almost every week new statistics suggest its imminent demise. Yet somehow it survives. Perhaps it's because God loves it. And if God loves it, then the first attitude any Christian must have is to love it too. So, although this book does occasionally offer a critique of the way churches have operated in the past, these are offered in a spirit of love and affection, not hostility.

In one sense this book has taken over forty years to write. It comes out of long experience of church life, as a child growing up in church, as

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an involved lay person, and subsequently as an ordained minister of the Church of England. Over the years, I've sat through hundreds of services, been heavily involved in at least seven different churches, and known many more through missions, speaking engagements, friends in church leadership, and so on. As they say in movies, any resemblance between the churches described here and any of these is entirely coincidental!

I have gained and learned more than I can tell from the Christians in the churches I've been privileged to belong to. As anyone who's been involved in one knows, churches can be frustrating but are often rich and good places to be. They remind me of oysters—not always pretty to look at from the outside, covered in wrinkles and hard edges, but of immense value, because they contain a pearl of priceless value—Jesus himself.

A lot of the ideas here have been written out of my own experience, so perhaps it's best if I explain some of that. I grew up a Baptist, am now an Anglican, and I write with a knowledge of Anglican churches in urban or suburban settings in the forefront of my mind. I still hope some of it will be of use to those in other churches and in other contexts. I've tried not to give a blueprint for what every church must do but instead to point out some things churches need to think about and work out what they might mean in their own context.

Writing the preface to a book is a little like giving a speech at a wedding—there are always more people to thank than you have time to. Alison Barr and the editorial and production teams at SPCK were very helpful in enabling the book to emerge from my computer into the object you hold in your hands. The ideas were developed in a course taught while I worked at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, and I'm grateful to all the students who helped refine the ideas, challenged me where I was wrong, made me see new perspectives, and encouraged me to write it down. Wycliffe had a great staff team who were friends as much as colleagues, and students whose passion for Jesus, the Church, and for evangelism frequently humbled me. In particular I'd like to thank Geoff Maughan, Andrew Goddard, Peter Walker, and Michael Green for stimulating discussions on these themes, and those students who helped it along by their encouragement, criticisms,

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and questions. Several friends read through parts of the manuscript; some (in a real act of sacrifice!) read it all, and I'm very grateful to Simon Featherstone, Phil Ritchie, Andy Buckler, Chris Smith, and Simon Downham for their comments. They won't all agree with everything, and are certainly not responsible for it, but I am thankful for such good friends and wise counselors. I'm also profoundly grateful to Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga for his excellent and thought-provoking artwork for the cover of this book, and special thanks to Phil Ritchie for his expert help with and contributions to the study guide that appears in this edition. Last but certainly not least, I am indebted to and eternally grateful for my wife Janet, and Sam and Sian, who have taught me a great deal about living together and enjoying the life God gives.

## CHAPTER 1

# *Evangelism that works and evangelism that doesn't*



John Diamond was a journalist for the London *Times*. He died of cancer in March 2001 and became widely known in the UK for a series of penetrating and disarmingly honest articles on his struggles with the disease. Along with his book *C: Because Cowards Get Cancer Too*, these articles helped many people discover a new approach to dying. Two months before his death, he wrote in characteristically courteous tones about the many Christians who had read his column and emailed him with spiritual answers:

There is no level at which the evangelists and I can engage. They tell me about their spiritual product as if I might not have come across it before...as if in forty-seven years of living in a Christian country I might not yet have stumbled upon the concept of Christ as redeemer...They don't seem to understand that I can't force myself to believe what I don't believe. Which is the point at which agnostics usually say "I only wish I could believe," and I used to say that myself. But I've discovered that it's not true. I'm happy not believing, and that's what the evangelists don't seem to understand.<sup>1</sup>

The words are worth pondering slowly. Sometimes Christians assume that people "out there" are eager to listen to what the Church has to say. The only problem is learning how to say it louder and more clearly. Yet, over the past few decades, indications suggest that more

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and more people are exactly like John Diamond. Not hostile to or uninformed about Christianity, they are often interested in spiritual questions and prepared to face the difficult issues of mortality and meaning. And yet the Church is the last place they would look for answers. With a note of sadness, the journalist Paul Valley (himself a practicing Christian) says: “For most people today, the Church no longer says anything worthwhile.”

Churches are working hard at turning this around and, slowly but surely, many are finding ways of reaching those outside their walls. Various “process evangelism” courses have proved excellent tools to pick up those people, often on the fringes of church life, who are interested in finding out more about Christianity. This is especially true of the Alpha course, an evangelistic course in basic Christianity. Popularized in the Church of England in the 1990s, it spread to The Episcopal Church and other denominations worldwide. Yet sometimes it is hard to get people to come to such courses in the first place—people like John Diamond who are simply happy not believing. What about those who are not particularly interested in finding out more? Those who wouldn’t choose to come to an Alpha course, even if they were invited to do so? Those whose point is not that they don’t believe, but that they don’t want to believe? What would provoke them to think the Church had anything worth listening to?

So far, so bleak. However, God is not dead. Nor has God yet given up on the churches in the West, even if it’s the churches in places like South East Asia, Africa, or South America that are thriving. Despite the well-documented weakness of many of our churches, people still do become Christians today, even from the hard-nosed worlds of media, journalism, and politics. One of the best ways of learning is to listen to people’s stories. Another very different tale perhaps might help us glimpse a way ahead.

## **Finding Jesus**

Derek Draper was a successful political lobbyist who subsequently worked behind the scenes for the government in London. A bout of clubbing, cocaine, and ecstasy tablets, along with a very public scandal about political corruption, led to depression and resignation from his government work. Having been told by therapists that he needed some kind of “spirituality” to balance his life, he found that yoga, New Age remedies, and Buddhism all lacked something. Then a powerful experience on a visit to Westminster Abbey was followed up by an invitation to his local church, a high Anglican parish with an attractive mixture of the solemn and the informal. The impact is probably best described in his own words:

I started to discover Jesus Christ, his life and teachings. I’m still learning about the liturgy, and there’s no doubt that as I read I struggle both with aspects of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and with the actions, past and present, of the organized church. What I know, though, is that none of that matters too much. The core of my Christianity is a belief in the wisdom of Jesus’ words as told in the gospels. Now I look back on that time of excess in the mid to late nineties (work, money, drink, drugs, sex, power) with horror. I’m going to try to live my life according to what Jesus laid down 2,000 years ago. I used to live a shallow, materialistic life. I was impatient and intolerant. Now, I try to think and act with others in mind. It’s a nauseous idea to many, but there is no other way of putting it: “God is love,” says the Bible, and that is what I bear in mind now—love for everyone I meet, unconditional, patient, and kind.<sup>2</sup>

Interesting. In fact there are quite a few fascinating things about this account. First, Derek Draper was drawn to the spiritual search by a moment of crisis. Depression and drugs are a potent combination, and usually add up to despair. While he was living his successful political career, high on adrenalin, narcotics, and power, Christianity was not remotely even on the horizon. It took something to stop him

in his tracks, to make him think again. It's a fairly typical prodigal son story, substituting advertising and politics for the far country, and a rehabilitation clinic for the pigsty, but it follows a well-traveled route—through despair to discovery, through sleaze to salvation. Despite affluence, financial security, and even the pleasures of family and friends, crises still hit people's lives now as much as they ever did. The questions of why there is life at all, what it means, and how it is to be lived have still not gone away, even if the Christian answers seem less obviously true than they used to.

However, cancer too is a moment of crisis and, as John Diamond teaches us, crises on their own don't inevitably lead someone to God. The question is whether and how Christians can offer something at moments of such crisis to open up a viable way ahead that satisfies the restless soul and answers the questions that are being asked, rather than the ones we Christians like answering. This leads us to the second thing: Derek Draper's transformation happened through a church—a provocative church.

We sometimes say these days that people don't drop into churches very often. Maybe it's true. Maybe they don't do it as much as they used to. However, at least Derek Draper did, and the key question was what he found there when he turned up. At that stage his interest in Christianity was on a par with his interest in yoga, Buddhism, and ancient Japanese healing. In other words, his interests were pretty standard for someone on the spiritual search today. Like many others, he dipped his toe into the water of each of these pools and, naturally enough, was drawn to the one that felt right.

A number of years ago I was given the difficult job of organizing a study day for students in two very different church institutions, with a goal of making sure it wouldn't end in theological warfare. I decided to get them all out on the streets, using a basic questionnaire to ask ordinary people about their impression of church. One finding that surprised us all was the very high number of people who had been inside a church within the past year. Whether it was a baptism, a

funeral, a wedding, invited by a friend, dropping in for some peace and quiet, or just trying it out, we were amazed by how many people had drifted in to a church. The other side of the coin, however, was that they had also drifted out. Presumably there was little there to make them want to come back. Derek Draper's church was different. There was something about it that gripped him:

That Sunday, I walked into a church service for the first time since I was thirteen. I had stumbled upon the perfect church for me...the splendour of the robes, the incense and the beautiful choir mixed with an informality that was summed up on All Saints' Day, when two altar boys mounted the steps with day-glo trainers showing under their vestments. That first Sunday, the vicar managed to combine a sermon addressing fear with a genuinely funny joke...I was hooked.

The point is not the style of worship—similar stories can be told of less liturgical churches. The point is rather that he sensed something real, different, and distinct in the life of that church as they met together: something provocative. It makes us ask a question of any local church—if he had dropped into yours, would it have made him come back for more?

Third, what interests me is the word he uses to describe what attracted him about Jesus: what appealed to him was the practical *wisdom* of the teaching of Jesus. We might have wanted him to come armed with a number of key theological questions, such as “Where can I find forgiveness for my sins?” or “Is this logically coherent?” but, doctrinally at least, it wasn't as clearly formed as that and it rarely is.

Derek Draper was looking not for a guaranteed place in heaven or his guilt forgiven but a better and less superficial way of life. It was the prospect of learning a style of life steered by the priority of love, which seemed so much better, richer, and more fulfilling than anything he had found elsewhere. It was not so much the ideas and intellectual content of faith that were at issue, but Christianity as a way of life. Christian doctrine and the Bible became valued not primarily because

they could be shown to be objectively “true,” but because they were the foundations of a healthier and more rounded existence. Perhaps this shouldn’t surprise us, if we know anything about the contemporary culture, with its suspicion of truth, or even the Bible and its vision of an incarnate Word, but here was a search for something spiritually satisfying and practically workable.

Douglas Coupland is a perceptive Canadian author, who wrote the book and coined the term “Generation X” to describe the children of the 1980s, born into affluence and apathy, committed to nothing, laid back, and heavily overdosed on irony. In one of his books, *Life after God*, he writes of this generation as the first to have grown up without any sense of God at all—their parents were at least taught the basics of Christianity as they grew up, only to reject it as adults. Now their children were emerging into life after God. Toward the end of the book, the character at the heart of the story drifts off alone into the wild in search of something almost indefinable and expresses his heartfelt desires:

Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I am no longer capable of giving; to help me to be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me to love, as I seem beyond being able to love.<sup>3</sup>

I have occasionally heard this quotation used by Christian preachers and apologists: at last here is a true postmodern person telling us that God is necessary after all. Yet I wonder if the most important thing here is not the fact that he needs God but the way in which he expresses his need for God. Like Derek Draper, he doesn’t sense a need for God to forgive him, teach him the truth, or to satisfy his curiosity about the origins of the universe. Instead, he needs something or someone who can help him learn how to give, to be kind, and to love. Now a

Christian might say we learn these things by first learning that there is a God who gives to us, who is kind to us, and who loves us with a passion far deeper than we can ever fathom. You can never separate Christian doctrine from Christian ethics. Yet the question is framed in this way—he wants to learn these moral qualities, which he knows are essential to human flourishing, and looks for a place where he can learn them.

These three lessons offer some directions for the way ahead. They tell us that the questions are still there; they tell us that the quality of church life is a vitally important issue for evangelism, and they tell us that if Christian faith can offer a radically different agenda, a style of life distinct from those available elsewhere, it will have a great appeal to many people. Yet, somehow, we have to come clean, and admit that very often, it isn't working.

## **The Church and the spiritual search**

It's common in both church and non-church circles to say that despite all the prophecies of wholesale secularization, interest in spirituality and the spiritual search is growing, not declining, today.<sup>4</sup> Buddhism, yoga, meditation techniques, feng shui, and New Age therapies are all suddenly respectable. Religion and spirituality sections in bookstores are far more likely to stock titles such as *The Spiritual Teaching of the Tao* or *The Dalai Lama's Book of Wisdom* than the most recent volumes in Christian theology. Secularists are right in that this spiritual search has not seen a mass return to Christianity. In fact, church is often the last place that people who read such books would look for something truly "spiritual." It's estimated that around two-thirds of those who have become seriously involved in New Age-type practices and beliefs have tried church at some time or other and found it had nothing to offer.<sup>5</sup> Christianity seems part of the old world being left behind, not the new age that is coming.

*Evangelism that works...*

If there is this turn toward spirituality, why then has Christianity not seen the benefit? Two broad reasons might be given. On the one hand, parts of Christian theology cut directly across postmodern and New Age concerns. Christians believe there is such a thing as truth and that it can be found. They believe there are kinds of behavior that are objectively right or wrong. And what is more, the Christian faith has always declared that Jesus is the one and only Lord of heaven and earth, a claim most contemporary people, deeply influenced by pluralism and relativism, shudder at.

More important perhaps is the second reason, which is that, as Nigel McCulloch puts it, “the issue that the churches must face up to...is not so much that people do not believe in God, but that they do not find the churches credible.”<sup>6</sup> There is something missing, something that many a spiritual searcher looks for but fails to find in church life. Jean Baudrillard, commenting on the way in which postmodern culture is dominated by the surface image, writes some prophetic words: “None of our societies know how to manage their mourning for the real.”<sup>7</sup> A sense of a lack of depth, a lack of reality, pervades this culture so much that no one quite knows any more what is real and what is fake. For Baudrillard, this nostalgia for reality is one of the key hallmarks of a postmodern world.

Graham Cray, a perceptive commentator on postmodern culture, tells of a student who commented after a presentation of the Christian gospel: “It doesn’t seem real. It seems true, but it doesn’t seem real.”

George Monbiot, the author of the influential book *Captive State*, and a key figure in the anti-globalization movement, describes himself as not religious. Yet he speaks for many when he offers his reasons for drifting away from church:

I was brought up with the classic middle-class Anglican stance, which effectively means plenty of form, and very little function, and just a semblance of belief—going through the ritual of going to church on Sunday morning but not allowing your professed belief to interfere in any way with the way you lead

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your life. It's a very easy ethos to shed, because it isn't really an ethos at all... What counts is what churches do, much more than what they profess... they must match the positive things they say with action.<sup>8</sup>

Put Baudrillard, the anonymous student and George Monbiot together and again we find another clue to why the churches don't seem to appeal. It's not so much a lack of truth (there are many words in churches, claiming and even demonstrating truth) but a missing connection between the words uttered and the style of life that results from it: a lack of authenticity, of depth, of correlation between words, images, and reality.

To put it bluntly, church attendance sometimes doesn't seem to make any great difference in people's lives. If going to church and calling myself a Christian makes almost no discernible difference in the way I live my life, spend my money, or use my time, then it is not surprising if my friends who are not Christians are not that interested in finding out any more about it.

One of the key themes of this book is that unless there is something about church, or Christians, or Christian faith that intrigues, provokes, or entices, then all the evangelism in the world will fall on deaf ears. If churches cannot convey a sense of "reality," then all our "truth" will count for nothing. Unless someone wants to hear, there's no point in shouting louder. Churches need to become provocative, arresting places that make the searcher, the casual visitor, want to come back for more.

Now this might seem a pragmatic point about supply and demand. However, there is an important theological dimension to it as well. To put it simply, the Christian God can only be found by those who desire God. The point can perhaps best be explained in the words of the great seventeenth-century Christian apologist, Blaise Pascal.

## **The God of the philosophers and the God of Jesus Christ**

Pascal never saw his fortieth birthday. He was an anguished, illness-ridden, often lonely man who, at the cutting edge of contemporary scientific experimentation, felt keenly the intellectual ferment of his times. One November night in 1654, he experienced a profound encounter with God, which turned a distant and arid faith into a gripping sense of mission and devotion. He died eight years later in voluntary poverty, leaving behind scattered papers, probably intended as a grand apology for Christianity. These were subsequently gathered together and published by his friends as the famous *Pensées*: “Thoughts on religion and various other subjects.”

Among these fragments, two simple points are made again and again. First, Pascal pointed out that because of basic human sinfulness, we tend to believe what we want to believe. If we don't *want* something to be true, we are remarkably good at thinking of reasons why it isn't. Second, he argued that the Christian God doesn't stand at the end of an argument, ready to be proved, then checked off as something known and then ignored. Ours is an intensely passionate God who, when coming into relationship with people, “unites himself with them in the depths of their soul...and makes them incapable of having any other end but him.”<sup>9</sup> You either have this kind of intimate personal encounter with God, or you don't have God at all. Those who are idly curious, who don't really want this kind of God and who are only playing theological games, will not find God. It is only those who hunger for God deep within themselves, who are desperate to know God, who will find what they are looking for.

So, for Pascal, presenting someone with a list of proofs for Christianity or evidence for faith is probably a waste of time. If someone basically doesn't want to believe, no amount of proof (or proof texts) can ever convince her. And even if she were convinced, then it

wouldn't be the Christian God she had come to believe in, but only what Pascal called "the God of the philosophers." The crucial factor in persuading someone to believe, then, is not to present evidence but first to awaken a desire for God in them. In other words, when commending Christianity to people, "Make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is."<sup>10</sup> Such arguments as there are for Christianity can convince those who hope it is true but will never convince those who don't.<sup>11</sup>

Pascal would probably have thought that many of our assumptions about evangelism start in the wrong place. I have been on (and even led!) many evangelism training courses that have spent quite a bit of time persuading Christians that they need to know how to answer lots of complicated questions, such as "Why does God allow suffering?" and "Don't other religions also lead to God?" Now these are important issues, not least for Christians to work out; after all, they puzzle believers too, not just unbelievers. Or evangelism training sometimes focuses on learning a memorable presentation of the gospel that can be explained to people, often with diagrams drawn on the back of an envelope. In themselves, these are useful things, good for helping Christians to understand the basics of their faith and also sometimes perhaps for explaining it.

Yet perhaps we need to start a stage further back. It is not just a case of shouting a little louder or explaining a little more articulately. The truth is that it doesn't work like that in the twenty-first century any more than it did in the seventeenth. Pascal's point is that before we ever get to the stage of explaining or convincing, there needs to emerge in people the desire, the question, the hunger to discover more, to find God. Now Pascal, like the great Saint Augustine before him, was fully aware that only God does that, only God can touch the heart and make it long for God; yet Pascal also knew that God often uses people like himself and ourselves to awaken that desire.

## **Creating the desire for God**

If all this is anywhere near true, the first stage in a church's approach to its non-Christian neighbors may not be in wondering how we can persuade them that it's true but by asking how we can make them want to know more. This might involve questions of personal lifestyle: "How different are my values, my home, and my behavior from those of my neighbors and friends who are not Christians? Is there anything there that might make them want to know more, to want what I have?" It also involves frank and honest questioning of church lifestyle: "Is our church just another little club for like-minded people who happen to enjoy singing, religious emotion, and sermons? Or is there anything in the life or worship of our church that would make an outsider looking in want to have what we have?" An evangelistic lifestyle then becomes one that simply makes other people think. It stirs a faint echo of desire to discover what it is that makes the difference. And this cannot be done alone. To maintain a lifestyle that is different from the culture around is lonely work. It can't be kept going for too long without the strong support and encouragement of a few other people committed to living this way. Derek Draper's story teaches us that when the Church lives by and displays a different wisdom, then God can use even something as small as a sermon to help people conquer fear, or even bright-colored sneakers to create the desire for himself.

In other words, a community of people that lives by God's ways, that has learned to place love, humility, compassion, forgiveness, and honesty right at the center, will make people think. To put it differently, a church that lives its life under the kingdom of God cannot help but provoke questions. And when it does that, then is the time for evangelism. That is the time for the simple explanation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

But that is to get ahead of ourselves. Before we step out on the path of understanding "how," we need to ask the question "why."

Why do we do evangelism? Why, in a pluralist, relativist world, would Christians want to make themselves unpopular by forcing their views on others in the first place? Wouldn't it just be easier to keep quiet? These are important questions. The next chapter goes back to basics to try to give some answers.

## Notes

- 1 *The Times Saturday Magazine*, 6 January 2001.
- 2 *The Times*, 21 February 2001.
- 3 Douglas Coupland, *Life after God*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 359.
- 4 P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, outlines this development in some detail.
- 5 Nigel McCulloch, *A Gospel to Proclaim*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992, p. 84.
- 6 McCulloch, *Gospel*, p. 46.
- 7 Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations' in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. Peter Brooker, London: Longman, 1992, p. 159.
- 8 George Monbiot, *Third Way*, August 2001, p. 22.
- 9 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by Alban J. Krailheimer, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966, p. 169.
- 10 Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 34.
- 11 For more on Pascal's Apologetics, see Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999, pp. 207–55.

*“The Provocative Church is one of the best, most honest, most theologically grounded and therefore most practically helpful books on evangelism to have come out in recent years.”*

Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford

This lively book offers a practical theology of evangelism and the local church. We need “provocative” churches that address the questions: “What does all this mean? Why does the Church matter?” Only when people have seen something in church or Christian life that is provocative or attractive, will they be intrigued enough to want to know what’s going on. Christians are not meant just to try and do good, be nice and help the world work a little better. They are instead to act as signposts to God’s kingdom, which can be glimpsed in this world through the arrival of the king, Christ Jesus, who makes all things different and new. Graham Tomlin presents a compelling path for transformation into provocative churches, places that joyfully welcome all to celebrate and honor the kingdom of God.

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