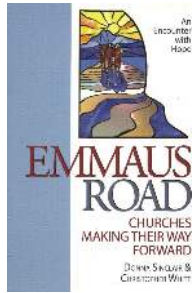


Book Review



Emmaus Road: Churches Making Their Way Forward

by Donna Sinclair and Christopher White
Kelowna B.C. Wood Lake Books Inc. © 2003

This book is a must read for all of us who struggle with the tension of leading the church through change in the 21st century while maintaining for many of all ages the rich fabric of the faith that has been the connector between them and the message of hope found in the ageless gospel. Too often the tension between the old and the new has forced desperate church leaders to rush forward to grasp the contemporary hoping this will bring renewal, but destroying for many that which has been their life experience of faith; what it means to be faithful followers.

Of course the opposite is true. Sometimes in fear of losing what is currently there ministers retreat to the known, the status quo of yesterday, causing those who need more to quietly leave the church, maybe to find it at a place more experimental elsewhere.

Sinclair and White present us with the challenge to move forward to the future while recognizing the importance of being rooted in the past. In the upper right corner of their book we find these words: *An Encounter With Hope*. And indeed it is.

Rooted in the timeless story of the post-crucifixion journey of two disciples traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, the authors call us back to what it means to be the community of Christ in the world. But this is not a ‘back’ to the past. Rather they call us to a dynamic future while encountering in a contemporary and relevant way what the ancient journey of the disciples means for us who are on the same journey from despair to hope found in the living Christ. Step by step the authors take us on the dusty painstaking trail of these disciples with crushed spirits as they encounter the stranger, hear the ancient story in words that stir their hearts and see in the breaking of the bread with new vision He in whom they had lost hope. “Did not our hearts burn within us?”

The future of the church lies not in the ‘magic potion’ of some quick fix to discover what it means to be church in a contemporary world. Rather it lies in the quality of those who formed the early church, those who began that early journey of hope which we continue on as disciples. In these people of courage we find the characteristics of ingenuity, perseverance, alertness to the world about, generosity, understanding, compassion, hospitality, confidence, obedience, and open-mindedness to name but a few.

It is not a magic formula! White wisely reminds us that “The early church grew in Rome not because of its brilliant liturgy but because of the quality of its *community*”. The authors demonstrate for us from their deep understanding of what it means to be church and from their collective experience in leadership what that community can be in today’s world and culture, a community that embraces diversity, honors all, young and senior, struggler and elder, those craving the familiar, those seeking the new and sometimes the

emotive. To quote “God loves diversity.” How can the church reach its fullness if it can not embrace difference and spend the time listening to the faith story of others, be that in the form of narrative story, rich symbols, new expressions of living faith, ancient song and modern lyrics rising from the soul of the community? How can we call ourselves community if we are not prepared to listen to those rich voices that express our faith with all its diversity?

Sinclair and White call us back to a new future in ways that challenge our thinking and provide us with living examples that have, can and will work. But don’t expect a book of quick fixes. This is a deeply theological book, rooted in scripture and founded on the central reality of the living Christ. It is a theology that is not the reserve of the academic but the language of conversation for the whole people of God.

The road, like the Emmaus Road, is not an easy one. The authors challenge our comfort zones and bring new understanding to being depth of community. But it is a message we all need to hear. It is the way of the church as it finds its new place in the world not in the ghettos of an institute that serves its members, be that as a private club or an ecstatic enclave speaking a language unknown to the masses. It has been shown time and time again that the new and exciting that misses what it means to be *community* usually comprises the circulation of saints who stay until something once again pulls them to experience a new consumer fare.

Concerned about the church? Seeking a way forward while recognizing that being called as leader is a Call to be minister and spiritual leader to all within the fold? You may not agree with all the authors have to say. That is fine. We need to embrace diversity even in our understanding. Struggling with the concepts will stimulate ideas, generating a new understanding of what it means to be a genuine community of faith embracing all in obedience to the command of Christ. This is not merely an act of toleration, but of love, with a deep compassion for all and their unique differences. This is what makes us, the church, an exciting place to be.

The church is indebted to the authors for a fresh new look at what it means to be church. With courage they stand between the current trend of finding the mega experience and the risk of perceiving the church as a remnant community waiting for some final conclusion. The authors provide for us a fresh and stimulating look at how to move forward in a community in transition in a new encounter with hope. This book will become required reading for my students who hopefully will go forth to serve the church and community with sensitivity and compassion.

Andrew Irvine, for the Centre for Clergy Care and Congregational Health © 2006

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