

OCTOBER ABC DISTRICT CHURCHWORKER'S CONFERENCE

READING MATERIAL FOR ORGANIC CHURCH WORKSHOP

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Book Review and Position Paper on *Organic Church* by Neil Cole

Rev. Mike Kuhn

Summary

Has the Christian Church in North America forgotten her identity? Has she lost track of her calling and purpose? Has she been wooed away from devotion to Christ and His Word by false promises of quick fixes to her problems? Is there any hope that she could be restored to a more vital existence? In his book, *Organic Church*, Neil Cole discusses these questions and challenges the church in North America to get back to her roots.

Cole sees the Church, in her current form, as a shadow of what God intended her to be. She was to be on a mission - bringing light and salvation to those living in darkness and death - but has hidden her light "safe" within the walls of our church buildings. Her fellowship was to be a tight-knit community that relied on each other on a day-to-day basis, but most of her present day adherents keep their church involvement to one hour per week ('and no more!' in some cases). She was to be a living, growing (organic?) church - Christ living in her and the life of Christ spreading through her to others - but she has become an institution that leans more on seminars and marketing strategies for vitality and growth than she does on her Saviour.

Cole calls upon the Church to repent; to sit at the feet of a farmer more than a CEO when trying to discern the path forward. By using the sower and seed parables from Mark 4, Cole calls the Church back to Christ's design for kingdom expansion. He reminds his readers to sow good seed by telling others about Jesus (rather than your church, its children's program, or its pastor!). He counsels people not to be troubled if the majority of evangelism contacts do not result in faith-confessing disciples because Jesus taught that not everyone is good soil. He bids us to remember that seeds grow without human help when they have adequate light and water. Trying to prod and coax people to faith and fruitfulness by giving them anything other than Christ and His Word is a waste of time. He also points out that our goal should not be to plant churches (since the Bible never calls us to do so), but rather that we should spread Gospel seeds while entrusting the job of forming churches to the Lord of the Church.

Cole challenges a number of trends in the North American church as well. While many of our people value larger gatherings, Cole urges the church to go small - saying that groups of 2 or 3 is an ideal number. Another trend is to entrust the tasks of evangelism and church planting to the most trained and spiritually mature while sheltering new believers from evangelizing and church planting. Cole counsels us to consider the presence and working of the Holy Spirit in the life of a new believer as 'more than sufficient' and to encourage new believers to share their newfound faith freely and form churches while they still have many friendships with people who do not believe. Yet another trend is for churches to focus their evangelism and church planting efforts in wealthy suburbs of our cities. Cole argues that it can be hard to find good soil in these communities and that we would be better off looking for people who 'have lots of spiritual fertilizer in their lives' when trying to start churches because they are typically in more obvious need of the Gospel and know many others who might be eager to hear it.

In order to return to a more vital expression of church in our day, Cole urges Christians to a renewed commitment to the pursuits of faith in God, love for our neighbour and giving hope to those outside the faith. To grow in faith, Cole calls for a return to in-depth Bible study and application. His counsel is *not* to produce more Bible study materials and curricula. Rather, it is for Christians to repetitiously read and study large portions of the Scriptures. (He advises that we read 25-30 chapters per week!) To grow in love for our neighbours, Cole urges Christians confess their sins to each and discuss scripture with each other within a small church (or group - even a group as small as two or three). To grow in giving hope to those outside the faith, Cole urges Christians to pray fervently and frequently for harvest workers, for the souls of the lost, and against the forces of Satan, the world and sinful flesh. Of course, he counsels Christians to boldly share the hope-giving Gospel as well.

Challenges

As Lutherans, there are a few aspects of Cole's work that are challenging. For the most part, they can be boiled down to ecclesiology and preaching and/or administering the sacraments without a proper call.

Cole devotes an entire chapter to the question, "What is church?" He rightly points out that it is an important question to ask if forming new churches is the hoped-for end-goal of our evangelism efforts. The main point of the chapter is that Jesus must be present before any gathering can be called a "church". At first

blush, this assertion is not in the least bit troubling. However, Cole does not associate Christ's presence with the preaching of the Word or administration of the Sacraments. Rather, he links Christ's presence as being self-evident when 'lives are changing.' We teach that Christ is present and working wherever and whenever His Word is being proclaimed and His Sacraments administered (AC 7 & 8). This is true even when the people hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments are still struggling with sins and vices; it is even true when God's people regress in obedience.

Regarding the concern over preaching and administering the Sacraments without a proper call, the problem is obvious. Our confessions state that "no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called." (AC 14) Coles' counsel to encourage lay-evangelists to baptize those who have come to faith because of their witness and to start and lead their own churches obviously contradicts what we believe and teach concerning church order. That said, the fact that issues like laypeople reading scriptures in public services and enabling pastors to be trained alternatively in our synod continue to be debated in our conventions and winkels suggests that we are not as clear on the question of 'who can do what and when' as we might like to think.

Position

As one who has been attempting to plant a church in suburban Calgary since 2004, Cole's book is enlightening, challenging, thought-provoking, inspiring, and frustrating all at once. In my humble opinion, our church *has* forgotten who she is at her core, what her purpose is in this world, and what God has called us to do to fulfill that purpose. We may not agree with all that Cole has to say, but the questions he asks and perspective he gives on the Church and her mission are worthy of our consideration.

Our church spends too much time and energy trying to solve the riddle of how to attract people to our churches while we leave the simple call to "Go" unheeded. It is time for the Church in North America to think less about effective marketing strategies, improved programs, curb appeal, and the like. It is time for us to think more about *going*, about how to initiate and build relationships with people outside the Church, how to build our people up in their Biblical literacy and heart for the lost, and the like. Cole has excellent counsel for us in this regard.

It would also be wonderful for our church to remember that she exists for mission. The mission does not exist for the Church. All too often, our churches only begin to concern themselves with 'outreach' when their numbers start dwindling. If the Church could grow in love for lost sinners, remember the identity given to her by her Lord as spiritual light in a dark world, and her calling to let that light shine, the Church would concern herself with God's mission because that's who she is and it's what she does. The Gospel has the power to dispel the shadows of sin, death and hell, but our Churches tend to safe-guard this light behind our walls instead of letting it shine in the dark places of our land. Again, Cole's perspective on this is much needed.

Book Review and Position Paper on *Organic Church* by Neil Cole

Rev. Jody Rinas

Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens. By Neil Cole. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005. Hardcover. xxxii + 240 pp.

Neil Cole's book is located among the writings in the *Leadership Network*. This network profiles innovative thinking and ways for churches to meet new situations. The books seek to assess and grapple with the challenges surrounding the church. Cole has authored or co-authored a number of resources, some listed in the Endnotes.

In the four-page Preface, Cole advises the reader that "Church, as you know it, will change" (xx). Something is wrong: Many are not satisfied with "the ordinary church." Chapter two is thus named "Awakening to a New Kind of Church." The reader wonders, "How does mine measure up?" More properly he should ask, "Is there anything new under the sun?"

The author's target audience should be noted. Throughout the nine-page Introduction, Cole repeatedly uses the words *we*, *our*, *us*. He is speaking to a particular group. While he may consider me a target, I did not envision myself within his intended readership. Cole sees himself in the Western Church, but his *we*, *our*, and *us* really do not speak from the catholic tradition.

In defining organic churches, Cole mentions the house-church model. But *organic* emphasizes "the healthy life and the natural means of reproducing" (23). Not necessarily in houses, such churches spring up where the message goes: coffeehouses, campuses, businesses, even vacant lots, parks, and parking lots. According to Cole and his associates, "church should happen wherever life happens" (24). Key to spontaneous church multiplication is that we need not bring people to Jesus (e.g., the conventional church). Rather, we bring Jesus to people, so that He will become available to others right there. Buildings, therefore, are of no consequence. Also, in accord with Jesus' Word, a church can be composed of only two or three persons.

The book's middle section works from three of Jesus' parables in Mark 4. Jesus used organic metaphors: natural, agricultural themes. Therefore, if we understand the organic nature of the kingdom of God, Cole states, we are better equipped to sow, grow, and multiply.

Cole first mentions the parable of the sower (64). Specifically, he declares that sowing the Word of God will reap the kingdom of God. This is important, considering that many Christians unknowingly seem to skip this fundamental step of sowing or planting. What is needed is good seed and good soil. If you have both of these, you will have fruitfulness "every time" (65). Unfortunately, "our churches" are full of bad soil (70).

This leads to the question, how do we find good soil? Cole points the way: take a ride with the police, search the paper for bankruptcies and foreclosures, find the twelve-step recovery groups, visit abortion clinics and crisis pregnancy centers. Such routes will identify good soil (75). One may ask if this is some sort of "soil testing." To me it almost appears as a subtle variation on the Calvinistic "Limited Atonement." Cole insists that there are some places in which you just should not invest your time (70ff.). This contrasts with the foregoing parable of the sower who sows his seed recklessly and all over, not caring about the wasted resources.

One gets the impression from his book that sin can be overcome. "We must transform our world" (xxiii). "Healthy disciples make up a healthy church" (96) When speaking of small groups in the congregation, he says, "If we can instill a healthy DNA...the entire church will have health throughout." This, however, is no option when sin infects us to the core.

When considering the next parable (Mark 4.26-29), Cole rightly reminds us that it is not possible for us to cause growth (86). "We must yield control..." (89). The very next sentence, however, works against his argument: "I believe that if we unite the Spirit of God with the Word of God in our hearts, we will see a

spontaneous movement that will astonish the world.” Theology of glory? Then, in its appointed chapter of fifteen pages, the third parable hardly gets a mention (97f.).

Cole does some good myth-debunking: the church is more than one hour a week, more than a building, not bound to a single location (34ff.). “Church Shopping” (93) well critiques certain methods for Church Growth. “We cannot compete with Hollywood when it comes to entertainment” (95). An entertainment mentality in the church creates a cycle of “program upgrades, staffing improvements, and building campaigns.”

New churches can start easily, due to the zeal of new believers. “New converts can often be more effective” (151). Connected to this is our concern for the lives of the lost. No quibble there. Jesus had compassion, so also should we (143ff.). If we have “the right heart for people” (156), we’ll have a good motivation for reproducing churches.

Joined to this is “obedience-oriented education” (113). Such education is necessary to spontaneous reproduction. This is typical of Reformed mission methods: appeal to the law. All throughout, Cole opens sentences with *We need* and *We must*. Shades of Spener’s *Pia Desideria* from the era of Pietism. Indeed, some Christians of that day were also dissatisfied with the institution of “church,” leading them to meet apart from those of organized religion.

To found churches that will also reproduce, Cole uncovers five principles of Jesus (173ff.), each with the acronym POP: Practice of Prayer (appeal to Christ for new workers), Pockets of People (go to those who are receptive to the message), Power of Presence (the power of heaven and earth accompanies you everywhere), Person of Peace (find a “conduit” for passing the message), People of Purpose (a pocket of believers will start a growing “epidemic” of faith in the community). These methods are different from the “traditional approach,” which typically takes new believers *out* of their communities and brings them into our church buildings (187f.). A healthy doctrine of vocation, in contrast, would do a world of good to Cole’s approach.

Cole discusses the pattern for spontaneous and indigenous church expansion. How does the gospel spread? Or how did St. Paul so quickly begin thriving churches? Cole says the pattern must be received personally, repeated easily, reproduced strategically (110f.). This pattern begins with Christ Himself and is easily passed on by both example and teaching. This can be called “napkin theology”—it’s not worth passing on if it can’t be written on a restaurant napkin.

I confess, I had a hard time heeding calls to repentance (154) from someone who eliminates the distinction between clergy and laity and seems to ignore both doctrine and pastoral care. Clergy are disparagingly referred to as “the professionals” and “the ordained” (112, 132, *passim*). Holding a symbolic view of the sacraments also puts his status in question (111, 132). Another whopper: “The Bible doesn’t command us to be baptized, but to be baptizers” (205).

The reader must move through the book to confirm what had already been suggested a number of times: “I believe we are leaving the day of the *ordained* and ushering in the day of the *ordinary*” (215, emphasis original). In short, he refers to lay ministry (“we are all qualified,” 85). This is nothing new, and it is already present in much of the church, catholic or otherwise.

Neil Cole’s book is about trial and error. He details what he’s tried, where he’s come from, and where he’s presently at. Indeed, it’s good to note our progress. Moreover, it’s also good to consider whether another model will yet replace the latest unsatisfactory one. The church that is aware of its identity will not be swayed by many of the novel suggestions offered here.

While many gaps remain throughout, this book is easy to read. It is also challenging. Some passages serve as good critiques of present attitudes and practices. Cole supplies many anecdotes and pop culture references that will resonate with many neo-evangelicals. His lists of principles also assist in memory retention. His record of successes and the mentioning of influential persons serve to inspire the reader to make the shift to

his new kind of church. Nevertheless to me, this is just the latest fad following “organically” in the wake of the Meta-Church movement from the 1990s.

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Critique of *The Organic Church*

Rev. Vic Morris

Preamble

The first time I heard the expression, “chew the meat, and spit the bones” was at the seminary. The context for this admonition was usually when we as students were dealing with a difficult issue and were engaging other sources outside of our Confessional Lutheran circles for perspective, opinion, or another point of view. The context of the advice was to be wary—to filter what you were receiving through the lenses of our theology. It was also an admission that there were things we can learn from people who might hold a different confession (the meat), although we should expect that as we begin to digest this information, we would probably be coming up against a few things (the bones) that just did not line up with our understanding of the Word of God, and our exposition of this Word in the Lutheran Confessions.

It remains solid advice, and having read many books, articles, posts, blogs, etc. since those seminary days, I find myself more cognisant of this advice than ever as I attempt to stay current with the latest offerings from the world of popular Christianity. This is also how I approached this book by Neil Cole; *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*. Further, I believe there is some meat we can indeed chew on here as we consider “what does this mean” for our context and culture of Lutheran Church- Canada.

Our theological context and culture is that we are a small, conservative, autonomous, Canadian, Lutheran synod. When we consider words like *mission*, *evangelism*, and *outreach*, we are probably more inclined to think of our synod’s work in places like the Ukraine, Thailand/Cambodia, and Nicaragua. When we think of mission work at “home” it is more likely that Lamp, BC Mission Boat, or Crew Ministries come to mind. When we consider our history of mission within our synod, we probably think of the work of gathering together former European immigrants in various places across this great country, and providing Word and Sacrament ministry to them, leading these people to be formed into the congregations that many of us serve today.

The result of this faithful work is that our synod now stands at 319 congregations, with 70,000 members.ⁱ But we are dying. Looking at the summary of synodical statistics over the last 8 years since 2001, our losses are 10,400 soulsⁱⁱ. In the last three years—from 2006–2009 alone—we find that we lost 2 congregations and 5,700 soulsⁱⁱⁱ. Further, when we do consider our “gains”, we need to consider our metrics. Removing growth metrics such as child baptisms, transfers, or confirming adults^{iv} (from another Christian confession) we are left with adult baptisms as the most indicative growth metric for souls. We find that in 2007, 39% of congregations did not have a single adult baptism. 16% of congregations had one. 19% had two. 10% had three and 6% had four. This translates that roughly 80% of our congregations had four adult baptisms or fewer.^v

Why are we dying? We have the most solid, orthodox, Biblically sound confession of faith. We are *Faith Alone, Grace Alone, Scripture Alone, Christ Alone*. We are confessional, evangelical, and Biblical. There is substance to what we preach, teach and confess. Our congregations are full of incredible saints of God, who know they are saved by grace, led by faithful pastors who dearly love their Lord, and who desire that more would come to know Him.

Is our world “worse” than the time of Peter, Paul, and the disciples? Are people not as receptive to the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified as they were in the past? Is this a sign of the last days and end times?

Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens is a book that challenges us in light of our current culture, context, and missional practices, in light of our declining membership, and in light of our practice of “mission, evangelism and outreach” from the past and where we are today in 2010. As mentioned at the beginning, though, there is some chewing and spitting that needs to take place along the way. To that end I present this critique organized in two sections: The Meat and The Bones.

The Meat

- Cole points out that people today are not coming to our side of the street (and into our church buildings), and that we must cross over and go to them. If you abhor the “seeker driven” motivation which drives worship services as outreach efforts, this is good news. If you are of the “if we preach it, they will come” motivation, this is very bad news. They are not coming.

- Cole describes the mission failure of missionaries in Japan—nationals who were using the methods, practices and approaches of their American teachers. After a period of years there were little gains. How much of our Canadian influence, culture and context do we impose on the nationals in the countries we are invested in?
- This book is a call to take seriously the work for which the Church was commissioned. There are some very poignant moments and Cole is very compelling in that much of what we are experiencing as a dying Church in a dying world is because of our failure as Christians to be the message and take the message to our world.
- Cole is a master with his use of popular culture analogies. He cites the work of the epic films *The Lord of the Rings* more than once. One powerful example was the depiction of King Theoden, who chooses to hunker down in Helm’s Deep (a fortress that offers a false sense of security) and hope for the best. I think we have to challenge ourselves as congregations and as a synod and ask if we are guilty of the same. Are our buildings missionary outposts, where we gather to be nourished for our vocations, or are they castles into which we are retreating to wait out the storms of life? We do not sing, “A mighty fortress is our...church building”; we sing that the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church, and that God is our fortress. We are encouraged to go on the offensive.
- Cole does a good job emphasizing the power of a person’s story and their witness by a transformational life. He also places a high value on being rooted deep in God’s Word. This is emphasized repeatedly.
- Cole does an excellent job laying out the parable of the sower and the four soils. He states that when you understand that this is how the Word “works”, it takes the pressure away, as we are not the one who causes growth (only God does); we are called to be faithful and proclaim.
- Cole rails against “consumer Christianity” and catering to the perceived needs of people in order to get them to join our churches. This is some of the best stuff I have ever read on this topic.
- Cole challenges those who are so concerned with “getting it right” that we fail to “get it out”.^{vi}
- Cole also challenges our level of compassion for the lost. He accurately wrestles with how to motivate people to care that their friends, family and loved ones that do not know Jesus are going to go to hell.
- Finally Cole does a fantastic job in unpacking the Greek word for household (oikos) and explains how God surrounds us with relationships and we are called to “go here” as a witness. He suggests the Church move away from event-driven, seeker-driven, program-driven missiology. This chapter alone would be a great starter for our context.
- Cole ends where he started, encouraging us to meet people where they are at, and not expect them to come to us. Instead he encourages us to go where sinners go.^{vii}

The Bones

- Cole uses the opening scene of *The Matrix* where the main character is offered the blue pill of continued ignorance (in church as we know it) or the red pill of a great awakening to reality. He then offers this book as the “red pill” to reveal a new way to see Church, the Kingdom of God, ministry, etc. Very early on in this book his disdain for the institutional, denominational, traditional church is quite evident.
- Cole envisions a Church that emerges organically, separate from buildings, non-denominational, without pastors (though the leader would no doubt default to that role), whose chief purpose is to birth new churches. There are all kind of practical, sacramental and governance issues here. By the end of the book I did not feel he ever dealt with those challenges.^{viii}
- Cole does a nice job unpacking the incarnational reality of Jesus, but leaves Him in the manger and does not get to the cross or the empty tomb. We are left with a lot of “Kingdom” talk but very little “Cross”.

- Cole sometimes makes comments that are so blatantly false they are laughable. He is almost guilty of revisionist history with some of his comments. An example is when he argues that the early church had no buildings for the first 300 years. Yet the Bible clearly speaks about homes being provided for the Church to gather, the early Church meeting in the temple courts, and going to the synagogues. It is unfortunate that Cole’s “anti-establishment” bias is so strong at times, whether it is a reference to church buildings, pastors, the sacraments, or authority and obedience in the Church. Another comment is his assertion that the Apostles struggled with the temptation to settle in one place and build. This is completely false when you consider the travels, the missionary work and the places of martyrdom in which the apostles found themselves. He also asserts that God had to raise up other apostles to “get the job done” because of this.
- Cole makes the point at times about not investing into programs, gimmicks, fads, etc. which seems a bit ironic, and even hypocritical considering that this book claims to be the “red pill”.
- As much as Cole says that all the “growth credit” belongs to God, he struggles at times to differentiate between our work and God’s work, our effort and God’s faithfulness, etc.
- Although not a surprise, it is a disappointment for one who has such a high value on Scripture to toss the sacraments aside so easily, and write them off as “simple exercises to proclaim in physical action the truths of the Good News”.
- I have the same criticism for his interpretation of why Jesus taught the Lord’s prayer.
- At times, Cole slips into the “sovereign God demands obedience” camp, as opposed to the “we love because He first loved us” aspect of our understanding of motivations and sanctification.
- There is an incredible bias against the organized church at times in this book. Cole describes his past experiences as a mission developer for his denomination, and the mountains and valleys that went with that vocation. It is apparent that at some point he felt he could do this better and on his own apart from the organized Church and unfortunately that comes out repeatedly over and over again in this book.
- Cole points out many deficiencies in the Church today, but does not offer much in the way of solutions.

ⁱ <http://lutheranchurch.ca/resources/2009statsumsummary.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.lutheranchurch-canada.ca/what.php?s=stats>

ⁱⁱⁱ These are rough numbers, I had to add up the individual district information from 2001 and then subtract that from the synodical total of 2009. However the 2006-2009 information is in composite form already at the above provided link

^{iv} I say this because we have not recorded whether these child baptisms were members children, or others. Also we have no influence over the transfers that come to our congregations, nor those Christians who come from other confessions and become members through confirmation/adult instruction.

^v Report to Board of Directors, Ian Adnams

^{vi} The late Dr. Barry suggested both!

^{vii} I can’t help but think of some great conversations I have had in hockey locker rooms, the bar for a UFC fight, or riding around, climbing mountains etc with soldiers. Jesus was accused of keeping the company of “sinners”. Food for thought.

^{viii} In fact, going on their website – there are entire sections devoted to answering how to solve conflict, sacramental issues etc. My assumption is that these things came up and had to have resources provided to deal with them.