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Unlocking the Growth Trust

The Trust has been founded to educate the Christian church in seeking to encourage the mobilization of every church member to invite. See www.unlockingthegrowth.com

Unlocking the Growth

You will be amazed at
your church's potential

Michael Harvey
with Rebecca Paveley

MONARCH
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For the millions of people who need
a simple invitation.

And to my family Eike, Ben, Kirsty
and Lydia without whom none
of what follows would have been
possible.

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Foreword

This book is about helping churches re-learn how to make disciples. A challenge from the “Back to Church Sunday” initiative, it goes right to the heart of what it is to be church, namely, worshipping God and infecting his world with the goodness of Jesus Christ. Ever since Philip first urged Nathanael to “come and see” (John 1:46) the practice of invitation has been crucial to spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When I was Bishop for Stepney in the East End of London, one of the Hackney churches sported a sign that had been erected years before carrying this stark message for the parishioners: “This is your church.” Since that sign went up, just after the Second World War, the urban parish around it has changed many times over. Initially there was the struggle of clearing up after wartime bombing, the years of rationing, then the beginnings of greater prosperity. Along with this went the gradual exodus of many of the original inhabitants, the arrival of new communities, initially from the Carribean and soon from every continent. Then followed a succession of urban renewal schemes with greater or lesser degrees of

success. The “you” to which the sign was addressed was constantly changing, but what did the church mean by addressing its parishioners in this way? Crucially, what sort of invitation was on offer?

At worst, I am afraid, at times it meant: “This is your church because you live here, come and help us pay our way!”

Or at best, it meant: “This church is all yours – come here if you will, and make yourself at home.” Happily there are some of those who first arrived from the Caribbean still worshipping there, for whom that church stood out then as a place of welcome in an otherwise hostile community. A place of hospitality, refuge, and hope.

Or was it in fact an invitation, though written for those outside to read, which had to be read from the inside too? After all, congregations can all too easily settle for claiming the church for their own, a refuge from the big bad world outside. The Church, as Archbishop William Temple said, is a community unique in this, in that “it exists for the benefit of those who are not yet its members.” It is as if we are saying to everyone, this is your church – it is not just for us, in fact we are incomplete without you. God is giving you an invitation to come and be guests of Christ, whose Church it is. Running the risk of cliché, it is as that other “hackneyed” wayside pulpit asks, Ch...ch? Who is missing? – UR.

This book will help churches reconsider their relationship with the people they serve, and for whom they bear witness to the love of God in Christ. It offers the building blocks for a

culture change, practical steps towards becoming an inviting, engaging, hospitable church where people make friends with each other and with God.

The challenge, at the end of the day, is still the question, whose church is it? Learning to attract, engage, and nurture new worshippers is a vital step towards an even greater goal, the transformation of whole communities with the love of God in Christ – the Kingdom of God, something much bigger than what we call church. I pray that all who read this book will see their church fellowships growing both in numbers and in spiritual maturity to make a difference, and that they will be inspired to join in.

+Sentamu Ebor

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In Australia thanks go to Bishop Stuart Robinson, who was the first to pilot invitation, and to Bishop Andrew Curnow and Bishop Stephen Hale, who invited me to a Bishops Conference.

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In New Zealand to Revd Tony Gerritsen, with whom I spent one of the best weeks of my life taking invitation across the two islands, and to Claire Onslow, who can recite my seminar from memory.

I have met so many brilliant men and women of God in my journeys and I wish I could mention all of you.

But above all thanks to the hundreds of thousands of Christians who have attempted an invitation for the sake of the extension of God's kingdom.

Preface

This book is about how to unleash growth in our churches by doing something so simple that a child could – and often does – do.

It's about simply inviting a friend with you to church. Maybe you do this on a regular basis anyway. If you do, then you could stop reading this right now.

But if you are one of the millions of churchgoers who find it difficult to do this, then I hope this book may give you the confidence to try. At the time of writing, I have been involved with an initiative called Back to Church Sunday for eight years. The initiative has seen an estimated 250,000 people accept invitations to church. For some of these people the invitation will have been the end of a long journey; for others it may have been the first time they have attended an ordinary service of worship. Some of those invited may stay, some may not come back. If nothing else, I hope this book will help us to judge success not by the numbers who stay, but by the number of people we actually ask.

I don't believe in church growth. Now, that might sound odd, given that this book has the aim of growing the

church! What I do believe is that God gives the growth, but we sometimes “lock it down”.

What does this mean? Here’s an example. Around 250 years ago a young man challenged the church authorities of the day, because he wanted to take the good news out to the nation and he didn’t mind preaching in the open air or stepping across parish boundaries. The church leadership of the time tried to stop him, and encouraged other church leaders to whip up opposition. Nowadays, we look back with great fondness on John Wesley and believe God raised him up for the work. But the church leaders of the day wanted to lock down God’s work through Wesley. They just didn’t know that they had *the* John Wesley in their midst!¹

This locking down is often to do with us, frankly, being unaware of how blinkered we are. We don’t know what we don’t know, and it takes a moment of epiphany to show us what has been obvious to others all along. Sometimes we lock down through fear, but we may not be aware of this until it is brought to the surface. Later, I will explore the idea that there could be ungodly thoughts, or rubbish, which reveal the lock that is preventing us from moving on. As Jesus points out, in the verse about the speck and log in Matthew 7:1–5, it is easy to see other people’s rubbish but much more difficult to see our own.

But it is worth making the effort. I have seen how removing this rubbish can lead to churches doubling or even trebling their congregations in a day. The lock was a limiting vision: replace it with a high-expectation vision, and the

growth is unstoppable. People have overcome their fear of rejection by facing this fear head on and asking friends and relatives to church. I have also seen the expectations of people invited to church surpassed by what they describe afterwards as a wonderful experience. Locks exist at every level, from the first thoughts about inviting someone, through to the acceptance of that invitation.

Often the most dramatic results occur when people are made aware of what they are thinking, believing, and expecting, and they can then see how this affects their actions. I think these locks are actually what some of the Church Fathers called sins of omission. In our generation, the church is fixated with sins of commission, the supposed big sins which everyone can see, but the sins of omission are equally debilitating. And as they can be hidden away, they don't get brought to repentance.

The whole process of unlocking growth reveals the things we ought to do but we don't do. We need a specific confession of where we miss the mark in our inner life. We need to recognize the sins of omission – what we don't do but ought to – confess them to God, repent, and then move in the opposite direction. If we don't do this, the sin or limiting practice appears in a different guise at a later stage. If we think it is important to keep short accounts with God, then we need to pay attention to what we are thinking and how that is affecting our life of service with God.

There are parallels with the story of the children of Israel leaving Egypt. They left behind their homes and a lifestyle

that was secure in its own way, at least compared with being in the desert. And the further they went on the journey the more attractive their old life seemed, even as slaves! At many points on the journey, they wanted to go back to Egypt. We can all get so comfortable with our lifestyles, our bank accounts, our homes, and our careers, that we don't want to change, despite the fact that we are living lives way below our God-given potential. Even if we know our lives aren't that great, we are comfortable with them, and for many of us it is very difficult to unlock the potential within.

There is a science called Neuroplasticity which looks at how our brain works. It studies how the human brain changes as a result of experience. Scientists have discovered the brain is "plastic" and "malleable", when they'd previously thought it did not change after the critical period of childhood. They've discovered, in effect, that our brain is not hard-wired.²

Now, frankly, any student of the Bible could have told scientists that! After all, we have Bible verses such as "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Scientists have done work with stroke victims and there is growing evidence that the brain can be trained to compensate for dead or damaged areas. They've discovered that each time stroke victims repeat a movement or action, a pathway in the brain is formed initially just as a scratch, but it becomes deeper and deeper until it becomes automatic, a habit.

We can use this discovery to focus our attention on what we want to change, and then repeat it frequently enough to make new connections and pathways.

However, just as the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was fraught with difficulties, our individual journeys to unlocking our God-given potential and finding freedom in Christ will have obstacles in the way. In fact, very often we will yearn to go back to the comfort and safety of our former lives. Are you willing to step out of your comfort zone with me, and try?

Chapter 1

Will You Come Along?

Stuart still lived at home with his parents. He spent his days working, going to the pub, eating his mum's home-cooked food and watching TV. He'd never given a thought to God. But one day, a girl at work came up to him and invited him to church. He surprised himself by saying yes – perhaps he thought he was being asked on a date! Elsie picked him up on Sunday morning and took him with her to church. When she asked him afterwards what he thought of the service, he just described it as “OK”. He met some of Elsie's friends and was invited to their homes for meals over the next few weeks.

He came back again, and then again, and then was given a Bible by Elsie, who was leaving to go home to South Africa. Stuart started to ask questions that he said later he never knew he had inside him.

Stuart went on to become an active member of that church. Years later he said that Elsie's invitation and the hospitality of her friends made a dramatic difference in his life, and today Stuart can still be found at the very same church to which he was invited years ago.

A recent survey by the charity Tearfund found that in

the UK alone there are 3 million people like Stuart (and many more in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) who would go to church if only they were asked to do so by a friend. Do you know any of them? You may think you don't but it is very likely you do. It might be a work colleague, a fellow parent at your child's school, or your next-door neighbour but one, who is just waiting for you to pluck up the courage to ask them.

In the years I have been going round churches speaking on the themes of invitation and welcome, I have heard hundreds of personal stories that have convinced me that God is preparing people every day for an invitation. I have heard from people who go past church buildings every day of their lives, who are curious about what happens inside, or for whom the building brings back childhood memories of church, but they don't dare come in. It takes a very brave person to walk into a church on their own, yet we can be sure that God is speaking to them, and perhaps all they need is a gentle invitation from someone they know.

I have often wondered exactly when it became difficult for people outside church to cross the threshold of their local church building. Once the church was the centre of the community. Nowadays we hear people say that they would feel hypocritical if they came. This self-disqualification is reinforced by their non-churchgoing friends. This feeling of being hypocritical can be overcome through simple invitation. I have even recommended holding a service of prayer and blessing over the threshold of a church building, to pray into

the fear on both sides of the threshold.

An “Invitation Sunday” is really a very odd mission! It’s a mission to those in the church already, not those who are outside it. We aim to reach the people who aren’t in church through those who already are.

But the beauty of it is that it is so simple. You don’t have to go on a training course, or agree to wear a special uniform. The thought of unleashing the potential God has placed in each one of us through this simplest of activities is incredible. In Luke 10:1–16, when Jesus sent seventy-two disciples out on a mission, He trusted each one of them to be all that God had intended them to be. When they returned, they shared their surprise and amazement at what they’d experienced. These ordinary men saw and felt the power of the kingdom of God. But the more wonderful thing about this story is the fact that Jesus sent them. He wanted them to share in this simple form of mission. He showed us that mission is not God doing things on His own. He has of course prepared the way, but we also have a part to play. So in the same way that Jesus asked the seventy-two to go ahead of Him, today God is asking us to play our part in His work in our generation. And our part, often, is just to invite.

The success of an Invitation Sunday lies in one person inviting one person. And remarkably, it does *not* rely on one person inviting one person and that person saying “yes”. The answer to the invitation is in God’s hands. One of my favourite authors, Jim Rohn, says: “God has the tough end of the deal. What if instead of planting the seed you had to

make the tree? That would keep you up late at night, trying to figure that one out.”¹

We should not take responsibility for the answer – and yet so often we do, or we try to. We worry about whether they will accept or not, and read into their answer all sorts of criticisms of ourselves. But the reality is, some people will say yes and some people will say no... and we have to get over any disappointment we might feel.

We prove success by measurable results. Now this sounds a bit too harsh and exact for a church, perhaps. But remember that somebody actually counted how many people were added to the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and that somebody counted the number of fish caught after Jesus had asked the disciples to fish on the other side (see John 21 for the full story). Measuring what happens helps us to hear God’s voice. God is speaking to us when something doesn’t go so well, and so to count or measure our results can be helpful in hearing from Him the next steps we are to take. By not measuring, reflecting and re-envisioning, we can often move on too quickly and may miss the move God wants us to make.

I first became involved with the idea of an Invitation Sunday when I picked up a phone call from my friend Gillian Oliver, then the Communications Director for the Bishop of Manchester, who had been searching for ways to get the church moving forward. I was immediately taken with the idea, not just because of the simplicity of it but because of the excitement I heard in Gillian’s voice.

When the name “Back to Church Sunday” first came up, we thought that what God might be calling us to do was to provide a bridge to those who had drifted away from the church. The name “Back to Church” gives this impression. And over the years the main focus of the initiative has been on this group of people, who are returning to church, some after months, some after years, but many after decades. Yet in the second year of the initiative, in 2005, we started to hear from people who had never been to church before, but who had been invited to come on this Sunday anyway, and had stayed. Originally the focus of the initiative had been those who were lapsed churchgoers, but now God showed us how He wants to use our idea by inviting those He has been working with outside church. So why do we continue to call it Back to Church Sunday? Some people have asked for a name change and have suggested that if only it was changed to “Come to Church Sunday”, then thousands would turn up on the doorsteps of our churches!

But I still don't think it was a mistake calling it Back to Church Sunday. The “Back” refers to the momentum coming from God the Father to our generation. You see, God wants us all “back” into a relationship with Him. This is all about Him. Now in every generation there is a momentum coming from Him. We can look back three or four generations and say the pressure to attend church came from society in the days when most people went to church (because it was what people did in those days). Move on a couple of generations and the momentum changed; many people sent their children

to church, but they didn't go themselves any longer. But there was still a momentum. Now we look at our generation and see that neither adults nor their children are coming to our acts of worship in great numbers any longer. But despite that, our God is still at work. In fact He is speaking to more people *outside* the four walls of our church buildings than He is *inside*. In our generation we need to connect with God's momentum through personal invitation. So the "Back" in Back to Church Sunday is not all about us, or those we invite, but about Him.

The "Church" in Back to Church Sunday is not the building, and is not even the act of worship. Church is the gathered people of God in a community, helping to nurture a relationship with God the Father. Now I love participating in worship but it is part of church, not the whole of church. Yet in many places throughout the world we have made the act of worship the only expression of church.

The "Sunday" of Back to Church Sunday is there because I think we have a curse hanging over the church today. It is a word we should not use lightly, so let me explain. The curse that I believe is hanging over the Western church is the mindset which talks about those outside church and says: "If they wanted to come, they would come." The focused Invitation Sunday helps us to overcome the curse, by focusing on being invitational on one day *together*. It may seem a bit forced at first, but after doing it once it will become more natural. We need the focus at first of one Sunday in the year to get us out of the habit of not inviting. At the moment, unfortunately,

many of our congregations simply hope that the someone will come into their church and take over the running of it, saving them the bother. They are sitting back and waiting for people to come through the doors, quoting this curse that if they really wanted to, people would come. It continually reminds them that people used to come in the past and didn't need an invitation.

Now why is this a curse? If we look back to what God our Father did in past generations, when our forefathers built large church buildings to accommodate the communities they served, the very construction of a church building attracted people to come. When the buildings were first put up they would have been packed. Now the fact that people aren't coming in such great numbers leads us to conclude that they don't want to come. But we must remember what a difficult step it is for many just to walk through the door without having been invited in. It takes a very brave (or perhaps desperate) person to come into a church building on their own nowadays, but this doesn't mean that God is not at work in the lives of these people. He is just asking us to connect with the work He is already doing.

Christ is alive and active among our friends, family and community. We need to go and invite them, and accept that some people will leap at our invitation and some won't.

Jim Currin of Churches Together in England and Wales wrote:

BBC and Open University conducted a survey in the UK which invited people to say what Christianity

means to them. The results are very revealing.

The introduction to the survey reminds us that 71.6% of the UK population described themselves as Christian in the 2001 Census, although only 15% of that number belong to, or go to church. Interestingly, the questionnaire is designed to ask people who call themselves Christian why they do not attend.

The questions make it difficult to fill in if you do go to church. The results probably produce a bias which is less representative of the church-going population as a whole, which presumably makes the various conclusions all the more encouraging to people like me.

At the time of checking the survey results in 2009, of those who had taken part up to that point, 75% said they call themselves Christians to other people, and a further 18% would sometimes say so to their friends. These figures are very high which is not surprising as prompted by a programme about the Christian faith.

More striking though, if I have read the results right, is that nearly twice as many men as women have completed the questionnaire: 2114 compared to 1125. I am not sure what that says: do more men watch the programme or take part in online surveys? Virtually all are from the UK as only 207 say they are not.

In passing, I was also interested to see the distribution across the age groups. Apart from the under 20s where 216 questionnaires were completed, and the over 70s where 126 replied online, the twenties

(533), thirties (575), forties (644), fifties (637) and sixties (508) provide a fairly even spread.

The first thing to note is that more than half of the respondents go to church every week and pray every day. No doubt they are the most motivated to complete the questionnaire but remember they have been discouraged in the introduction. More than $\frac{3}{4}$ pray more than once a month. Of the survey target audience nearly half do not attend church regularly, so what have they to say to us all?

When asked why the people don't go to church, the least significant reason is lack of time and peer pressure, while many more say that they "don't feel comfortable" or [have] "not found [a] church that suits me", or simply "don't need to go to church to be a Christian".

Having said that, significantly for such initiatives as "Back to Church Sunday" or any "Invitation Sunday", 57% of respondents then said they would go more often if they could. Chiefly, for these people, what stops them is work, family and other commitments, rather than the church itself.

I find all this very encouraging when the invitation is for people who don't go to church to respond and more men than women have done so, and more than half would go more often if they could.²

There is a huge constituency of people who don't attend church now who were once part of a church. Some postmodern

Christian thinkers suggest this is the last generation, or we are now past the last generation, of people who know much about church or the stories from the Bible, but there is still a surprising resilience among the general population who, in survey after survey, census after census, decide to call themselves Christian. I have a theory about this.

I think the blessings of the church over past generations are affecting us today. A passage in the Old Testament says the sins of the fathers go to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5). If that is true, then could it be true of blessings also? One of the most powerful blessings is that said during the baptism service: "I sign you with the sign of the cross. Christ claims you for His own." This is one of many blessings which have been said over countless adults and children throughout countless generations. Even if our generation has never had this blessing said directly over them, perhaps it doesn't matter. Even if their parents, or grandparents, have never had it said over them, it doesn't matter. Somewhere along the line, back through generations of our families, somebody has had a powerful blessing said over them. And that blessing may still have power today. It links people to the Christian church in some way still. And it might suggest why, in every census in the Western world, when people can freely choose the box that says "No religion", they still choose to tick the box that declares them to be Christian. Many – if not most – of these people have rarely darkened the doorstep of the church, but they still identify themselves as Christian. Who moves the hand that moves the pen to tick the box?

The resilience of these people who don't go to church but still identify themselves as Christian is quite remarkable. It suggests to me that someone is holding them fast. We should take inspiration from this to become an inviting person in an invitational church, and to believe that God has prepared His people for invitation. When Jesus said "Follow me" to those first disciples as He started His ministry, He was revealing to us the invitational nature of His Father.

Interestingly, this huge constituency of people who are open to an invitation to attend church are not just the families and the young people the church can often target its mission at, but also includes the retired and the soon to be retired. Thousands of people every day in the UK are turning sixty. In the days immediately before and after their birthday, they are probably going through a process that sounds something like this:

- Stage 1: "How on earth did I get to be sixty?"
- Stage 2: "Whew, I've got a couple more decades!"
- Stage 3: "Wow! That's all happened fast. Will the next twenty years go so fast, and when will I do something that matters?"

Just as God uses the birth of a child or a wedding to remind people of His constant presence in our lives, He also uses key dates, including some of the big birthdays! By holding invitational Sundays, activities or events, we are working in an area where God has already been working and we are reaping the benefits of His work.

Questions to think about

- Who moves the hand that moves the pen to tick the box “Christian” on the census form?
- Are people open to an invitation to come along?
- Do you agree with Michael that there is a “curse” hanging over the church which says, “If they wanted to come to our act of worship they would come”?
- What is the outcome of this “curse”?