

Christian Book Summaries

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the church of IRRESISTIBLE INFLUENCE

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A Quick Focus

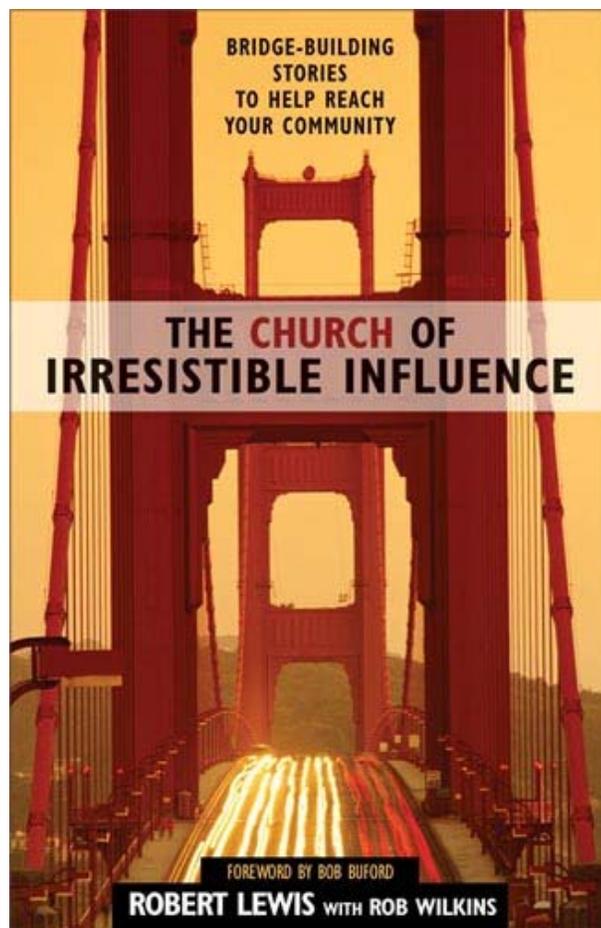
The Book's Purpose

- To show evidence that a great chasm exists between the Church and the community it is commissioned to reach and how to bridge that gulf
- To tell the story of how one church successfully built bridges to its community
- To teach how Jesus and the Early Church transformed the culture around them
- To provide practical strategies for how churches can unleash their members to engage in effective community ministry
- To suggest the changes congregations must make in the 21st century if they want to become churches of irresistible influence

The Book's Message

God has ordained churches and has given them the power to transform communities for the kingdom. Yet with each passing year it seems they become increasingly irrelevant. It is time for all congregations to make the necessary adjustments which will lead them to reconnect with God and their fellow men.

Just as a bridge connects the chasm that exists between two pieces of land, so the Church must construct a bridge which will connect it to the community. The church which successfully accomplishes this biblically-mandated task will become a church of irresistible influence.



By Robert Lewis

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reconnecting reconnecting reconnecting CHURCH AND CULTURE

“i² (irresistible influence) is about the great need that exists today of reconnecting the church with the community in a way that makes the church both *real* and *reachable*.”

The only way churches can connect with communities is by loving people the way Jesus loved people. This genuine love must consist of deeds and not just words.

Bridging the Great Chasm

An ever-widening chasm exists between churches and their communities. This chasm is evident by the fact that preaching is bold, but human needs remain unmet. God’s law remains truth, but the moral compromise of our culture is obvious.

Studies indicate that the public, as a whole, does not see the Church as a relevant social force. In fact, only one-third of pastors believe the Church is making a significant impact on our culture.

Many pastors look at the size of the great gulf and conclude that the task of constructing a bridge is too massive. So they fall back on substitute bridges. Some jump on the bandwagon of being so culturally relevant that they maximize experience and minimize commitment. Others fall back on the health and wealth gospel. Still others expect that simply preaching God’s Word (in expository fashion) will bring the unchurched world across the great divide. And others, believe it or not, fall back on tried and true strategies that worked decades ago, believing they will still work today.

Some things, such as culturally-relevant messages, the use of technology, and the recovery of the arts, are welcomed and long overdue. On the other hand, **“for all its frenetic activity and supernatural posturings, the overall impact of the church on American culture is generally understood to be about the same: just slightly above zero.”**

In an informal survey taken at a large suburban mall, people were asked if the Church was making any impact on the community. One teenager answered with directness, “The Church is crap.” That hurts. But are there elements of truth in his response?

A Daring Bridge Builder

Study the life of Christ and you will discover One who imagined a dangerous dream of building bridges spanning the chasms of indifference, hostility, and skepticism.

He dreamed of a bridge that would connect His people, the Church, to an unbelieving, apathetic world. He urged people to follow Him, and He would teach them how to fish for the souls of men. He exhorted people to let their lights shine in the world of darkness. He told His followers they were salt and, therefore, they should add a tasteful flavor to their culture.

He believed enough in His dream that He said the gates of hell could not stand against His Church. And by dying, He provided the way for all people to be supernaturally drawn to God. Jesus imagined a connecting Church, one that would build a bridge to a lost and hurting world.

So What’s the Problem?

If building churches was the dream of Jesus, then why aren’t we being more productive? What’s the problem? The problem rests in the fact that most evangelical churches exist for themselves. Instead of focusing on the biblical standards of courage, faithfulness, and changed lives, the Church has developed a club mentality whose primary purpose has become making its members happy.

It’s easy to “look Christian” to other believers through programs and buildings and budgets. But members remain stagnant and stifled because they have been secluded from the Church’s primary task of building bridges to the unbelieving world around them. Doomed to irrelevance and frustration is the church that functions with any

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RECONNECTING CHURCH AND CULTURE
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design that is not focused on building bridges.

Imagine New York City with no Brooklyn Bridge, London minus London Bridge, or San Francisco without the Golden Gate. *“Bridges give life through two-way movement!* Without its own bridges to the world, church life~in time~ fades into isolation, self-congratulation, and finally, irrelevance.”

“The church is to be in the bridge-building business, according to the design of Jesus Christ. Over this bridge the church must travel and *prove its reality* to a disbelieving world.”

Biblical Foundations

The bridge that is desperately needed will never be constructed on truth alone. Faithfully preaching the Word might be foundational, but the bridge must be securely suspended by the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Believers must demonstrate a loving God to a watching world by their actions.

What importance does the Bible give to good works? It says we must let others see our good deeds. It says we must love our enemies and do good to them. It says we must never grow weary of doing good and that we must be rich in good deeds. We are even to spur other believers to engage in good deeds. Without these evidences, the Church will remain an impotent force. “What the world waits to see is whether what we have is better than what they have.”

the big idea OF JESUS

The most powerful force on earth is an idea that sparks imagination, sacrifice, faith, and perseverance. Ideas set the stage for the future, whether for good or for bad.

“I Will Build My Church”

Ideas produce churches. The idea that drives the ministry of Fellowship Bible Church can be summarized with two pecks on the computer~i². It stands for irresistible influence. The question we always keep before us is: Do you really believe what our Lord said about the Church? He stated His big idea in Matthew 16:18 when He said, **“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not overcome it.”**

Jesus’ statement pictures a Church on the offensive, not one which sits back and waits on the unbelieving world to come to its turf. He believed the Church would embody His big idea. He lived it out in His ministry. And when He left earth, He commanded His followers to spread out and make disciples all over the world.

Two Anorexic Models

As much as evidence today proves otherwise, the Church exists for the world and not for itself. Unable to bridge the gap of relevance, churches often redesign themselves around two anorexic models.

One model designs itself around strategies for meeting the needs of its own members. Certainly, there is some validity to this approach. However, eventually needs become wants and “us” is all that matters. This self-absorption rarely can see beyond the borders of the church property.

The second anorexic model centers on the concept of success and thrives on size. What drives this church is the bigger-is-better mindset. Heavy emphasis is placed on more members, bigger buildings and budgets, and multi-staff payrolls. Indeed, healthy churches should be growing, but too often these large churches remain strangers to the very communities God has called them to serve.

Fellowship Roots

Patterned after Fellowship Bible Church in Dallas, Fellowship in Little Rock began with 18 members in 1977. The desire for a biblical Christian lifestyle became the focal vision for this new congregation. We focused on six characteristics: a heart for God, the centrality of the Bible, moral purity, healthy homes, bold evangelism, and social responsibility.

After 12 years of focusing on authentic spirituality and Christian lifestyles, church members felt stagnation setting in. It was as if we were all dressed up but had no clue where we were supposed to go. Unless we made readjustments to our vision, we ran the risk of losing our dream. In 1990, keeping the original six characteristics, we added the need for equipping believers for service in the community and world.

For more than five years we helped people discover their gifts and abilities and encouraged them to use them whether in the church or outside the walls. Many shored up needs within the church, and many began new ministries that sent them into the local schools, the halls of government, and foreign countries.

THE BIG IDEA OF JESUS
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We experienced phenomenal growth during these years, with over 3,500 attending each week. Everything seemed to be going so well. But then someone haunted us with the question, “Is our community really being transformed?” Then someone read the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:16 that we are to let our lights shine in the world so that people may see our works and give praise to God. At that moment, it

was like a fresh vision stirred in our souls. We could give our lives to that kind of irresistible church.

The idea of an i^2 church coincides with Jesus’ big idea. This idea has challenged us to become more than a club. It has pushed us beyond the boundaries of success and has compelled us to embrace the higher calling of building bridges.



building the BEST STRUCTURE

How did Fellowship Church move from sporadic community influence into a position that community officials gladly embraced?

Three Significant Ingredients

Confession is the starting point for any church of irresistible influence. We must openly admit that our attempts at building bridges have been flimsy at best. We must become grief-stricken over how inept we are at embodying Jesus’ big idea of being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

When Ezra in the Old Testament helped the people rediscover the Word of God, they confessed their pride and misplaced priorities. But what is most important is that their tears of confession propelled them into implementing courageous changes.

“So let us confess that our comfort, our moral compromises, and our misguided pursuits and priorities have rendered us increasingly impotent before the watching world.”

The second ingredient is vision, the ability to see what God wants us to be. This vision must move beyond the club mentality and success syndrome and focus instead on the passionate proclamation of the gospel. It must concentrate on how to demonstrate a radical love that convinces a lost world that there is hope in Jesus Christ.

Pursuing this New Testament vision led us to make three drastic changes. We finished our campus and stopped building. We eliminated debt so that more resources could be given away. And we hired specialty staff who could lead us to maximize our bridge-building efforts.

The third ingredient is a structure which unleashes people with purpose. Structure, by definition, seems so unspiritual, but it is absolutely essential for maximum effectiveness. There is no one-size-fits-all.

Prevailing Structural Elements

Successful bridge-building calls for three essential structures. First, hands-on i^2 exposures are needed. These exposures allow opportunities

for uninitiated members to crossover and provide positive interaction with the community. The greatest road-block is convincing members that bridges can be built. To overcome this negative mentality requires careful planning of creative ways to reconnect Christians with the world.

Whether it is a helping-hands ministry, working with inner-city kids, or adopting projects important to city officials, Christian leaders must structure these projects and make sure they find priority space on church calendars. Doing so will break down stereotypes, build community goodwill, and demonstrate outreach as priority. **“The church must be *led* into the world.”**

The second structural element is called personal i^2 ministry. This element represents the process of leading members to spiritual depth and community involvement. The typical Sunday school class becomes a perpetual group that enjoys one another but becomes totally disconnected with the world. Fellowship’s structure counters this phenomenon by creating a process that moves people toward a personal involvement in community ministry.

The first step in this process is called Discovery and is designed as a newcomer orientation. It lasts 8-10 weeks. Then the person becomes a part of Season of Life, a three-year small-group process emphasizing relationships based on one’s particular stage of life. Then the member transitions into Common Cause which still includes spiritual growth but focuses more on service to Christ than just Bible study. The Common Cause commitment lasts one year. Then the member recommits for another year or finds another arena of service. Many of these groups serve within the church while others connect with the community.

The final structural element is called strategic i^2 investments. This process channels people and dollars into some region of the world where the church believes it can make a strategic difference. The region does not have to be overseas. It can be right in your own community. For us, two key strategic i^2 investments include church planting and a one-year residency program which equips emerging leaders for ministry.



moving from pew to PARTICIPATION

Lost on an Island

The church that lives on an island is lost. Island life is safe and comfortable. Focusing on programs designed to help the members, the church has retreated from its true purpose. It moves in a circular motion around itself and never in a straight line toward God's vision.

Then someone has the audacity to recommend that a bridge be built so that the church can move from its comfort zones to the people God wants it to reach. Connecting the church island with the real world will always bring change, challenges, and conflicts.

“A
bridge changes
everything.”

How does the church move people from pew to participation? How does the church move its members from concern about their own well-being to a genuine passion for those outside the walls where life and ministry can get very messy?

Transitioning into a church of irreversible influence means moving “from being served to serving, from finding community in the church to impacting the community as the church, from retreating to influencing, from **isolation to engage-**

ment.” There are four major roadblocks standing in the way.

Roadblock #1

Fear is the first roadblock that keeps churches from making these transitions. Leading people through fear is one of the leader's greatest responsibilities. The reality of bridge work is that things will change. And change generates tremendous fear in members. Leaders must convince their congregations that the church is not “our” church, but “God's” church.

Some fear the unknown. At the thoughts of ministry outside the walls, members ask, “What is on the other side of the bridge?” Others say, “We've not traveled this way before.”

Others fear inadequacy. Believers perceive themselves to be unable and/or unworthy. Consequently, it becomes easy to withdraw from the world. And that is why we end up building clubs and fortresses instead of missional churches. We prefer to give money to missionaries instead of giving ourselves to the community. We have largely abandoned the cross, the central symbol of our faith. In place of the banner of the cross, we wave the flags of comfort and happiness.

The best way to overcome fear is to use stories of successful bridge building. It is also helpful to enlarge the definition of ministry to include anything done in the name of Christ. This means helping members understand they can use their existing gifts and passions to minister for the kingdom. And we must provide members with as many first-hand ministry exposures as possible.

Roadblock #2

The second roadblock is confusion. Confusion can rear its ugly head in any of life's major transitions. Moving from the three-year Seasons of Life process into Common Cause can produce a lot of foggy perceptions. Fellowship Church has designed a three-month process which clearly communicates the steps people need to follow. This process brings clarity to the “how” question by helping members understand their gifts and abilities and the kinds of ministry settings that can use those gift mixes.

Roadblock #3

The third roadblock is lack of direction. The “how” question actually is not as important as the “what” question. People do not just want to “put time” in ministry. They want to engage themselves in areas based on their personalities, spiritual gifts, and motivations. Fellowship Church has designed a four-week seminar “Servants by Design” that addresses these issues.

It is not enough merely to help people discover how God has wired them. It is absolutely essential that the church identify a wide spectrum of ministry possibilities so that there will be a fit for each person.

Roadblock #4

The final roadblock deals with the questions of impact. Often people wonder what difference they can make. With all the problems in culture, realistically can there be any lasting impact?

The best way to confront this roadblock is theologically not philosophically. Take a look at the early Church. Those Christians believed that God gave them a special calling. He entrusted them with a sacred duty. They did not measure success by how much the culture changed. They measured success by how well they loved and served others and brought glory to God.

So the question, “What difference can I make?” is not the right question. The right question is, “What has God called me to do?”

true stories of faithful BRIDGE BUILDERS

The chief engineer may hold the master plan, but bridge construction always involves the collaboration of many workers. Sometimes the results are far greater than one could ever imagine. Here are some true stories of Fellowship members who built significant bridges for the kingdom.

“Turning the face of the church outward, giving its resources away, blessing the community, unleashing the gifts of laypeople to serve~this is what our living God desires for his church.”

Jim and Connie and Abstinence Education

Jim was watching a basketball game when God convicted him that being a spectator also characterized his Christian life and that he was lacking in spiritual passion. He went home and shared his conviction with Connie. Together they developed a plan to move out of their comfort zones which would put them in a better position to discover God’s plan for ministry.

Jim and Connie began serving as volunteers in their children’s public school. They began to sense a great need for abstinence-based sex education. At Fellowship they formed a Common Cause group with this ministry in mind. Eventually, they developed a program called Excel. This sexual abstinence and mentoring program is now used in most of the junior high schools in their district. Recently the program was awarded federal funding which allowed them to hire a director and two part-time employees.

The program is now welcomed in thirteen public schools and involves more than 3,500 students and 700 adult volunteers. In addition, 65 local churches have contributed time and resources to make Excel a success.

Dave and the Inner City

Dave chaired the strategic planning section of Pulaski County’s United Way. Seeing the desperate conditions of the inner city, he began to doubt if anything could be done that would provide a lasting impact.

Dave and five others from Fellowship began meeting to discuss ways of connecting the poor with the resources he knew many had at their disposal. One day they attended a luncheon at a private school in one of the worst parts of the city. They came away from that luncheon impressed with the hope and the manners that these neglected children displayed.

These men recognized they could change the inner city by changing the heart of the inner city. The key was not new programs or funding. The key was changing people. Using their creativity and management skills, Dave and others have helped the school to blossom to an enrollment of over 1,000.

The board they formed, the Christian Educational Assistance Foundation, recruits donors to fund private vouchers. Working alongside a national scholarship organization, this year CEAF will give away more than 1,500 educational scholarships not just locally but throughout the state of Arkansas.

Becky and Adoption

The pastor’s message on abortion stuck with Becky. She and her husband David applied the message by becoming foster parents of a biracial boy. When the boy left six weeks later, their hearts were broken. Becky developed a deep compassion for birth mothers.

She connected with Bethany Christian Services in central Arkansas (which Fellowship helped start), which provides adoption alternatives for mothers who are unable to care for their children. She combined her passion with her college training in social work to become a full-time counselor to birth mothers. She also counsels mothers throughout Arkansas and helps distribute information in the public schools.

Certainly it can be heartwrenching for a mother to place her baby for adoption. But Becky experiences a deep joy and satisfaction knowing that God has used her to match a beautiful baby with a loving home.

CBS

three keys to multiplying INFLUENCE

History’s most tragic bridge disasters could have been prevented. Lack of competence was not the problem. The main causes of collapse were working in isolation, competition, and the pursuit of reputation. This truth serves as a haunting reminder to those churches desiring to expand the i² concept. There are three major keys essential to multiplying influence.

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THREE KEYS TO MULTIPLYING INFLUENCE continued from page 6

Partnering with Other Churches

How can a church ever influence a whole city for the kingdom? It can't...alone, that is. Even a mega-church represents only a small percentage of the body of Christ. But what could happen if churches ventured together in efforts to build bridges to the community?

The churches in Little Rock discovered that nothing brings congregations together better than prayer and good works. Through these two change agents, members of many churches began to see themselves as one church~the Church~working and praying together for kingdom impact.

What began as a reluctant participation in a four-day prayer retreat has resulted in a genuine movement of the Spirit of God among the pastors in the greater Little Rock area. Through these and other prayer events pastors learned to respect and demonstrate genuine love for one another.

“Whereas prayer became the catalyst for a new unity between our churches, good works have become a catalyst for building a new credibility with our community.” Through continued prayer events, area pastors agreed that they needed to strengthen the prayer ministry, assess the needs of the community, and provide a visible demonstration of God’s love. Sharefest became the catalyst God used to help churches focus outward to neighbors, new partnerships, and real needs.

There were several objectives to which we devoted our focus for a one-week period in November. First, each church committed to a significant service project of its choice. Second, on Sunday afternoon, in a cooperative effort, each church participated in “Sharefest Village” where church members “blessed” pre-selected social agencies. Third, on the Sunday evening, each church canceled its regular evening activities and met together

for worship and prayer. Fourth, each church provided in advance financial assistance to underwrite future Sharefests.

The results went far beyond our wildest imagination. Sharefest was not just an event. It became a movement.

Equipping Leaders for Ministry

Without progressive leaders, bridges can never be built with lasting success. These leaders must possess a vision that extends far beyond the growth and success of his own congregation.

“Everywhere the church is suffering from a dearth of competent leaders, especially the kind of leader needed to turn the church outward.”

Ideas are great. But they are useless and even create tension and divisiveness if no leader exists to make the dreams happen. There is not a lack of good ideas; there is a lack of good leaders. For the sake of the future of the Church and God’s kingdom, every church should be making huge investments in young leaders, especially those who sense some type of call into Christian ministry.

To address this need, we implemented a mentoring ministry called Fellowship Associates. This ministry grew out of a firm conviction that young leaders need more than formal theological education. They also need mentoring in the field and leadership development.

Fellowship Associates is a one-year residency program for young seminary leaders. They gain prac-

tical skills for implementing i² ministries wherever God calls them.

Creating a Community Strategy

As excited as we were about how God was using our members to build bridges to the greater Little Rock area, we found ourselves being more thrilled with unleashing people for ministry than actually determining what the greatest community needs were.

To address this dilemma, we designed a three-phase survey. First, we analyzed and compiled data that was already available to determine the genuine needs.

The second phase focused on group feedback. Two focus groups consisting of 22 community leaders from multiple public sectors interacted with the findings from the first phase. Then they prioritized the needs and offered suggestions on the ones they felt the church could give attention to.

In the final phase, surveys were mailed to 633 area churches asking for their membership demographics and the types of ministry programs in which they were already engaged. Then objective assessments could be made to determine how connected congregations are to the real community needs.

This extensive research, financed by Fellowship Church, revealed five facts. First, the perception that our geographical area is highly church-ed is erroneous. Second, two dominant issues are still race and education. Third, there is a wide gap between community needs and church ministries that are addressing those needs. Fourth, churches are investing very little money in local ministries. Fifth, the community welcomes any efforts that churches can provide.

The research provided recommendations for how the churches could connect with their communities. Only time will tell if we successfully implement the strategies.

where do we go FROM HERE?

People today will not take interest in the gospel until they are convinced that the church is relevant and Christians are credible.

A House Divided

Most of twentieth-century Christianity might be characterized as liberal versus conservative. Like the Hundred Years' War, both sides have been severely crippled. Each has had its moments in the sun. Liberals in the 60s successfully promoted many social causes. Conservatives have experienced significant increases both in number and in popularity.

Liberals have suffered because of their compromise of spiritual truth. Their budgets have shrunk, and their memberships have dwindled. The result has been moral and spiritual confusion.

Conservatives have suffered as well. Their arrogant "monopoly" on truth has turned off the very people they are seeking to reach. The more the conservative message is shouted from the pulpit, the more repulsive they become in the public eye.

For the church to thrive in the twenty-first century, bridges must be constructed. Liberals must re-embrace orthodoxy. Conservatives must reconnect with the community by meeting real needs.

What Must We Do?

With repentant hearts, we must face reality and admit that we have not demonstrated to the world what it means to live authentic, biblically-based Christian lives.

Building churches of irresistible influence requires that we do three things. First, pastors must redefine success. As the pastors go, so goes the church. The church will not rise above the level of the leadership the pastors provide. Unfortunately, many pastors define success as size, growth, and numbers.

Pastors must redefine success as it relates to influence. They must strive to build churches of irresistible influence. They must lead

their churches to become the salt and light that Jesus envisioned. The result would be authentic people, a compelling witness, and community bridges.

Second, the Church must redesign its structure. Most church structures are actually holding tanks that inhibit growth and effectiveness. They might keep people from falling away, but eventually believers stagnate in these environments. Better preaching and big events are not the answer. Structures must be overhauled to equip and send people into strategic places of ministry. Only then will followers of Christ be on track to reach their God-given potential.

Third, laypeople must reconnect with a lifestyle of spiritual standards and service. Believers mistakenly think that their lifestyles are okay as long as they don't hurt others. But the truth is that undefined spiritual standards and impotent lifestyles undermine public confidence in the Church. Studies indicate that the average unchurched person sees no difference in the lifestyle of those who claim to be Christ followers. How tragic, especially in an age where people express interest in spiritual matters.

**"If we labor faithfully,
refusing to compromise or
go back, our churches will
slowly but surely transform
themselves from fading lights
back into guiding lights.
And in the process,
a bridge will appear..."**



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