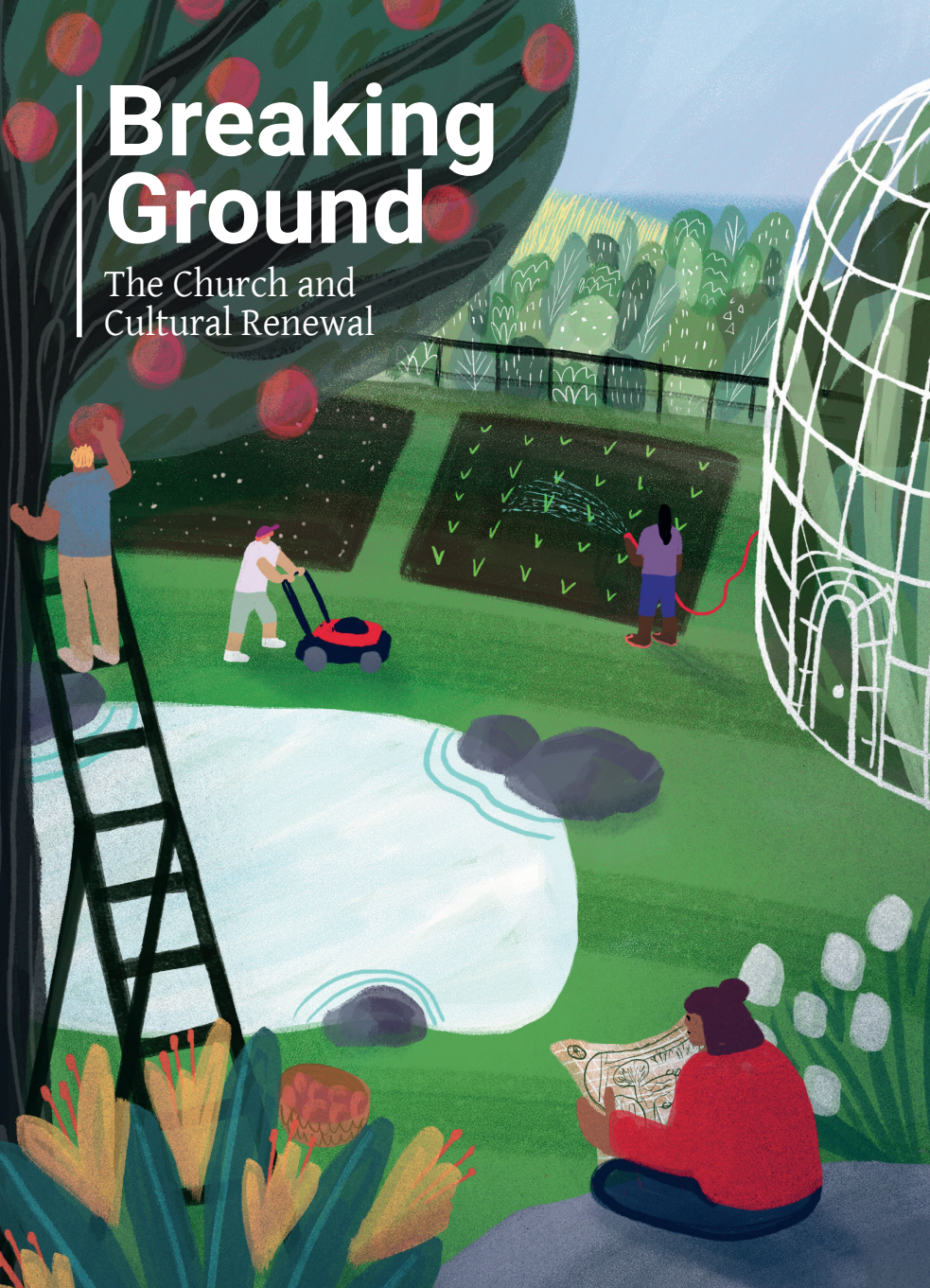# Breaking Ground

The Church and
Cultural Renewal

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Sow righteousness for yourselves, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unploughed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.
– Hosea 10:12

Breaking Ground: The Church and Cultural Renewal is the fruit of a 14-month research project on the Church and culture, which tries to help re-imagine, revitalise, and resource the UK Church in its endeavours towards cultural renewal.

The research process consisted of prayer, theological and sociological research, in-depth scoping interviews, and four roundtable consultations with over 50 Christian leaders, academics, artists, and entrepreneurs working in different areas of Church, culture, and broader society.

A word on definitions:

Church: In the report, the term Church is used primarily in its theological sense, and refers to both the Church's "gathered" or collective expressions – i.e. communities of worship, discipleship, and mission – and the "scattered" dimension of Church – followers of Jesus dispersed and active in different vocational settings, networks, and organisations.

Culture: For the purposes of the report, culture is taken to be primarily a framework of understanding and moral meaning, and consists of prevailing ideas, symbols, and narratives, which are expressed through rituals, habits, cultural artefacts, or objects. While ultimately distinct, culture and society are closely intertwined. Culture is both expressed through, and shaped by social institutions and sectors like law, technology, advertising, business, and entertainment.

Chapter 1 offers a synthesis of four influential theories of cultural and social change.

1. The first model focuses on **the disproportionate role of densely networked and well-resourced elites, institutions, and structures of power in cultural change.**

2. The second draws particular attention to **the role of material conditions**, such as security and economic

opportunity, **in producing cultural and social values change**.

3. The third employs a distinctive emphasis on **activism**, **leadership,** and the importance of **networks** in achieving change.

4. The final model draws attention to **the dynamics of complex systems, and the intricate distribution of power within these systems.**

Key insights from the four theories are as follows:

—   **Material conditions and institutions matter** in producing change. An approach focused only on ideas or a narrow focus on changing "hearts and minds" is misguided on anthropological and sociological grounds: humans are complex creatures, which are not motivated only by rational factors; also, institutions play a decisive role in catalysing or, indeed, resisting change.

—   **It is important to understand culture as a "complex system"** with multiple variables and feedback loops, where power takes many forms and is unequally distributed.

- **Cultural change is generally a top-down process**, which begins with highly networked and well-resourced elites situated close to the centre of cultural production, power, and prestige.

- **The most consequential level of cultural change is at the level of the imagination, common knowledge, and perception;** as James Davison Hunter notes, penetrating the "mythic fabric" of society is key to effecting durable change.

In short, cultural change is generally a slow and unpredictable process. Planning to change culture as a whole is misguided – culture is too complex, dynamic, and unpredictable to change as a result of intentional action. Those seeking change in specific contexts and on specific issues should recognise they are working in live, complex, overlapping systems, and therefore train to be skilled improvisers who use whatever the moment or setting they are in "throws at them".

Chapter 2 offers four examples of specific cultural and social changes to test the theories from Chapter 1. These case studies are: (a) the shift to free-market, neoliberal capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s; (b) the achievements of the gay rights movement; (c) Brexit, with a focus on the messaging of the Leave and Remain campaigns; and finally, (d) the rise and (partial) successes of the environmental movement. The case studies broadly support and helpfully illustrate some of the key features of the theories of change laid out in Chapter 1. Specifically, they highlight:

- The importance of **institutions** which incubate **seminal ideas.**

- The necessity of **networks** which overlap and intersect with systems of power.

- The importance of **emotional resonance** and **imagination** (and consequently, the disproportionate cultural influence of **the arts and entertainment industries**).

- That the most successful **change-makers work collaboratively** as much as possible, **plan for the long term,** and are thus able to **improvise skillfully when the key conditions for change emerge.**

Chapter 3 moves from the descriptive to the prescriptive, and offers a brief theology of cultural engagement. Theologian Richard Niebuhr's influential models of "Church and culture" are briefly presented at the

start: Christ against culture; Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture in paradox; Christ transforming culture. We note that these models are helpful in framing some of the broad, historically consequential options available to Christians – but they are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, let alone binding.

The rest of the chapter advocates for employing models and frameworks that are more clearly and explicitly rooted in Scripture. We especially note the prevalence and richness of gardening and agricultural metaphors as helpful models for the Church's role in culture.

The approach we ultimately put forward is incarnational and looks squarely to the example of Jesus – his identity, patterns of relationships, and actions – to guide the Church's work in culture. The approach suggested is also contextual, and involves being attentive and responsive to the particularity of cultural contexts.

A Christlike engagement of culture will include:

— **Taking a self-sacrificial (*kenotic*) approach** – *recognising* one's power – i.e. one's resources, networks, and capabilities – and the privileges that come with it, and self-sacrificially *redirecting* this power for the flourishing of others (Phil. 2:5–8).

— **Acting as "cultural gardeners" in culture,** who *care, cultivate,* and *co-create*, with Christ, towards the Kingdom.

Biblically rooted gardening and agricultural metaphors particularly illuminate the posture Christians should take towards culture (as above), and a set of fundamental tasks that will guide this engagement: seeding, planting, nurturing, fertilising, as well as shielding and protecting cultural goods.

Drawing on the theology of Abraham Kuyper and Lesslie Newbigin, we note that the Church is a *foretaste*, a *sign*, and an *instrument* of the Kingdom of God in the world. The Kingdom, we argue, should be the fundamental imaginative framework and orienting vision for the Church's witness and work in culture.

The final part of Chapter 3 draws attention to the interdependence between the "gathered Church" and the "scattered Church", and shows how worship is the primary site of formation for Christlike "cultural gardening" and Kingdom-oriented work in culture.

Chapter 4 puts forward a series of top-down and bottom-up recommendations for making the Church's work in culture more fruitful and effective.

These are based on the roundtables and interviews with Christian cultural analysts and academics which formed the consultative phase of the research. They are informed by the sociological insights from Chapters 1 and 2, while being embedded in the theological vision cast in Chapter 3.

Top-down: strategic interventions

— **Eyes:** cultivating prophetic attentiveness to culture, and constantly asking: *What is decaying or dying? What are the signs of life? What needs pruning, protecting, and special care?*

— **Heart:** financial support for Christians working or seeking to work professionally in the arts (literature, fine art, performing arts, etc.), creative and entertainment industries, and patronage for organisations and projects that offer training, mentoring, and peer support for them.

— **Head:** long-term support, coaching, training, and funding for emerging Christian public thinkers and journalists: undergraduates, post- and recent graduates – as well as patronage of more established Christian public thinkers, including academics, writers, public theologians, and public theology think tanks.

— **Hand:** funding, and other forms of support, for "faith and work" organisations ("greenhouses", as the report calls them) to provide (a) vocation-relevant theological training, including what we are calling "cultural and political literacy" (i.e. the ability to understand in a theologically informed way the ideas, narratives, ideologies that prevail in a specific sector or cultural setting); (b) spiritual formation in the context of community; (c) industry coaching and upskilling; (d) peer support and professional networks.

For the purpose of cultivating the scattered Church's "cultural and political literacy" we are recommending the creation of an "Alpha Course" type of resource that would combine engaging video presentations, concise and well-illustrated introductions to the key ideologies, cultural narratives, and ideas that prevail in culture (e.g. capitalism, liberalism, techno-solutionism, expressive individualism, transhumanism etc.), reading lists, and discussion guides.

— Specifically for Christian social and business entrepreneurs, we are recommending the creation of an institution, like Praxis Labs in the US, that would combine the elements listed above and embed them in a durable, sustainable institutional form. Such an institution, facilitating explorations between *practitioners* in different fields of culture and society (e.g. business, technology, fashion, entertainment), relevant *social theorists and sociologists*, and *theologians* in a systematic, intentional way over the long term, and in the context of community, would be a powerful arrangement towards cultural renewal.

— We recommend organising and funding sector-specific and cross-sector retreats for Christians with a specific calling towards cultural renewal. A more developed version of this idea would see establishing new urban or rural retreat and community-based study centres.

— We are asking Christian investors, investor groups, and asset owners to consider investing only in sectors and businesses firmly committed to sustainability and de-carbonisation.

— A new fund for "redemptive investment" in entrepreneurial solutions and ventures that especially address the problem of accelerating climate change should be explored with some urgency. Alongside its "climate investments", the fund could invest in faith-based social enterprises. Its philanthropic arm could sponsor some of the other projects suggested in this report.

Bottom-up: evergreen priorities

The priorities listed below are about the Church's work of fertilising its own soil and "creating compost" out of which the more targeted, strategic interventions listed above can develop organically and be sustainable over the long term. They also have in view raising and nurturing fully formed "cultural gardeners":

1. **Discipleship and formation:** strengthening and scaling whole-of-life discipleship in the Church is essential to redemptive and sustainable cultural witness. "Cultural gardeners" should have:

   a. A firm grasp of the biblical metanarrative and the

mission of God in the world and their role within it.

b. A "prophetic imagination" – the ability to see and interpret the world through the lens of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

c. "Cultural and political literacy" – as above, the ability to understand in a theologically informed way the ideas, narratives, and ideologies that prevail in their specific vocational settings.

d. Spiritual practices and healthy life rhythms.

2. **Theological education** needs to shift away from technocratic, narrowly scholastic, or subtly secularised models, towards an integrated approach orientated towards the formation of whole-of-life disciples and whole-of-life disciple-makers (as per the vision above) who live out of a Kingdom-saturated imagination in the totality of their lives.

3. **Community**: the Church's loving, practical commitment to place and people can slowly change the cultural narratives about the Church and the role of faith in society, thereby aiding and strengthening the Church's wider "cultural witness". We note again how the gathered and the scattered Church are interdependent and mutually reinforcing in their "words", "social", and "cultural" witness.

a. Community projects – we note the Church's growing social footprint and encourage further social action as a practical expression of the Church's loving commitment towards its neighbours and as a means of deepening its discipleship in its own right.

b. We encourage churches to consider engaging in "community organising" as a practical way of working for the common good and deepening their witness at the local level. We suggest organisations that help the Church engage in this work should be considered for funding and other forms of support.

The Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are co-workers in God's service.

– 1 Corinthians 3:5–9