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MY WIFE, CHERYL, ONCE SAID, “If God had not called Hugh to plant churches, he’d never go to church.” As a church consultant and a missionary with an organization that is totally committed to missional leadership for the church (culturally savvy, deep in character, clear in calling, and committed to incarnational ways of life and church), I have lived most of my adult years in great tension. If there’s one thing I’ve learned as a trainer and consultant, no one trusts you unless you share your wounds, so I think it’s right that I talk a little about mine. I hope that as you begin to understand my saga, you will sense God’s invitation to trust him wherever he may take you.

Since I mentioned in the “Invitation” that I enjoy starting new churches, you may have some perspective on my initial misery: No money, no external respect, very little denominational support, and the personal conflict of never finding much meaning in church. I didn’t like to sing, I didn’t feel I could integrate my non-Christian friends into the Sunday experience, and it seemed to take up time that I thought would be better spent with “normal” folks. Add to that, a deathly fear of public speaking and my propensity for introversion, what you get is a tough week . . . over and over again.

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So why do I plant churches? Why do I train other church planters? Why not be a lumberjack or park ranger and hide out in the seclusion of a deep, dark forest? There are several reasons.

First, I believe in the church. I believe God loves his church, and that he's quite ticked that his bride looks like "Fiona the ogre" instead of Cameron Diaz. I believe he desires a beautiful bride—one the world looks to with awe and amazement, with intrigue and longing.

Second, and more personal, I believe that God, with his unique sense of humor, designed me with evangelistic antennae. They've been there since I was in the eighth grade. I've always wondered about people who didn't know Christ. For the most part, I've tended to feel much more drawn to them than to my Christian brothers and sisters. Those outside the faith have been my best friends. I worship to the tune of U2, Switchfoot, and Peter Gabriel instead of KLUV; I often find myself inspired by the selfless compassion non-Christians have for the world without knowing the Creator of it; I'm regularly amazed at the way so many "pagans" accept all people and, quite frankly, seem to be a lot more fun to hang out with. As I've talked hundreds of times with a veritable plethora of "Sojourners" (spiritually disoriented God seekers) about their views of Christianity, God, the Bible, the church, I have to admit: I not only understand why they aren't attracted to any of it, but I've also become a bit repulsed by certain strains of our evangelical tribe. Sure, I see these Sojourners' ignorance and selfishness, their vice and frailty, but it doesn't seem any worse by degree than what I see in my own life or the lives of those I've rubbed shoulders with in the pews, throughout the past couple of decades.

In some ways, I think I've always wanted more for Sojourners than what I had personally experienced in church. I guess I always wanted more for myself, as well.

When I walk into Starbucks, I don't think about coffee. That's predetermined . . . tall black Americano. I ponder the lives of everyone I see. I wonder about their spiritual journeys, their highs and lows . . . and where they look for direction in their search. My initial assumption is that in any room full of people, very few know Christ. I ask myself how I could get into their lives or how a conversation might begin. I don't see them as projects—that wouldn't go very far. I see them as souls the Lord loves who simply haven't seen or heard an accurate message about the Kingdom. I always feel confident that I may one day be talking with them about life and God. Oddly enough, this seems to happen all the time.

I've accepted that God has gifted me this way, and I don't expect that everyone will understand or feel the depth of my passion for the spiritually disoriented, nor that my habits of life and engagement will fit

everyone. However, I do believe that since you're reading this, you may share something I rarely say out loud: I can't picture any of these people, or my friends, or your friends, going to church . . . any church . . . *ever!*

It was just after I resigned from our first church plant five years ago that this doubt about church reached a high point. We had pioneered a good little community out of the metro corridor in Portland, Oregon. It was our vision to help a diverse group of people come together in worship and mission to the city. To model our seriousness regarding multiethnic issues, we merged our predominantly white congregation with an African American congregation. Because of our missional bent and focus on those outside our church, this community did well and became quite effective in helping people who had not been among our ranks find a home with us. All went well, especially for those outside the church who found in us a reflection of what they had hoped church could be. It grew, and we sensed great favor with God, the city, and the people.

We thought we had thoroughly prepared our leaders for the inevitable problems; and yet, tragically, underneath the surface of this beautiful church—in spite of our best efforts—an invisible tension evolved within the leadership. Issues began to arise over who should preach and how we should preach; whether or not the ushers should be allowed to wear white gloves; how to integrate the traditional black choir with the untraditional worship team; how to break up the salaries based on the perception of who's in charge; whether or not we should continue the tradition of "pastor appreciation week"; and other assorted "how to do church" issues.

Despite all the prayer, fasting, and even the attempt to bring in outside consultants to help us work through these issues, eventually insecurity, tradition, pride, churchiness, and fear not only crept in but stood up and loudly declared they were going to have their way. It was like watching the weather channel describe a hurricane that's coming directly at your city, and you can't do anything to stop it.

In the end, my worst fears were realized: This match that we had thought was made in heaven would break up due to irreconcilable differences. My previous memory of another good church gone bad was watching my cell phone fly over our kid's swing set and a 20-foot rhododendron tree, finally smashing into a hundred pieces . . . this after my last conversation with the remaining leader of said church. Plastic, metal, and all my phone numbers (including my ESPN satellite link) smashed and scattered, just like my vision, my friends, and my hopes of a perfect church.

Cheryl, my wife, who always seems to catch me in these situations, whispered through the screen window, "Nice throw. Now what are you going to do?"

The next week we stood up and blessed the congregation, resigned, and exiled ourselves to a town two hours south in hope that the church would survive. I wish I could tell you that God taught me something, or that there was a deep biblical lesson in all this, or that the church eventually roused itself and did great, but I can't. People were hurt—badly. I cried more than I ever cried before. I doubted God internally and verbally as I vented my frustrations. In the end, I realized the problem with church is simply church and Christians (present company included), our usual failings as human beings, and a lot of evangelical dogma we have blindly believed in, and accommodated by our behavior, for many years.

It was at this point that I became a card-carrying member of what I call the “jaded” denomination. You know, people who have a hard time finding coherence between their faith in God and their experience in the church; people who are sick of that same old song, same lingo, same methods, same discouraging results, and same spiritual emptiness. No, I didn't leave the church entirely, like 25-million-plus-and-growing, other dechurched Christians are doing in America. But I wanted to.

My dream church became my nightmare church. The resulting tension became so bad that I decided the only way to avoid reliving another similar experience but still retain my ministerial credentials was to become a church consultant. In Greek, church consultant—*Ecclesia Consultia*—means “one who has paid his dues and has the scars to prove it.”

After we resigned from the church, God threw us a life preserver by linking us with Church Resource Ministries, a unique mission's organization that was committed to training missional leaders for the church. In the interim, I agreed to help a friend by taking an associate pastor role in his congregation. I saw this as a way to get out of Portland and dull the throbbing memories of my most recent church implosion as well as get set up for this new season of consulting.

Besides all the agony related to ministry, we were dealing with my son's health problems. Ryan has had severe epilepsy from birth. He has a handful of grand mal seizures a day, every day. His fight for life and quality of life has made this journey harder than skateboarding uphill on a gravel road, but somehow we seemed to keep the wheels rolling. Now, however, I figured it would be a great time to use this situation as the final justification to tap out, call for a sub, adopt the loser limp, and justify coming off the field. I handed the missional ball back to God and took what I felt was a much deserved breather.

We packed our bags quickly and drove two hours south to Eugene, Oregon, to work alongside our dear pastor friend and a beautiful church plant that had grown to about a thousand people. My job description was to “just be there.” No kidding! No specific tasks, no specific goals, just

provide support for my friend and anyone who needed some nonspecific help. *Perfect*, I thought. I get to enjoy hanging out with my buddy, help him out a little, and have the bonus of playing golf with him. I won't have to carry any major burdens, I won't have any pressure, very little speaking to do, no one knows me in this town, and I have a consistent paycheck! Sweet!

This delightful new season began beautifully. I would hop on my bike every morning and ride along a lovely river to the church, check in with dear Julia, the secretary, and then do whatever I could to help out. Then it was back on the bike to home. On my way back, I'd often pull my Cabella five-piece fly rod out of my backpack and try to land a nice rainbow out of the McKenzie or Willamette river. Never caught one, but I sure enjoyed living the dream. Once home, I could shut off my mind and open my heart and focus on my family. Even my closest friends thought the break was good for me.

About three months into my nonspecific utopia, Cheryl and I were having coffee, and as she stirred some vanilla creamer into her coffee, she made this observation: "You're not going to make it."

"What are you talking about?" I replied, taking another swig of java.

"Just doing the church thing."

"No, we'll make it. The stability is great, we're paying the bills, we have a beautiful home with a five-spout jetted bathtub, a microwave that knows exactly how long to pop popcorn, and I'm hardly ever stressed. . . . You better believe we'll make it."

You can assume the rest: Wives are always right.

That same week, I was booked to do a church plant training seminar in New York City. It was just five weeks after September 11, 2001, and we were one of the first airplanes to land when LaGuardia Airport reopened. Each evening after the training sessions, we headed out to grab dinner and ended up frequenting an Irish pub in Queens. Unlike LA or Nashville, where an Irish pub can be run by either Englishmen or Koreans, in New York, the staff are from Ireland. They are my people (Irish red-haired toughs who enjoy a good fight). Over several nights we got to know a few of the waitresses and some of their stories about growing up in Ireland.

One young waitress, Fiona, shared about her religious upbringing in Northern Ireland. As you can imagine, she seemed to have some faith in God, but she wasn't too fond of Protestants, Catholics, or the church. After our training event was over, all my fellow staff flew back home, but I had one more night to stay in NYC. About midnight I decided to go back to the pub for one final pint and a chance to say good-bye to my new friends.

The Yankees were in the playoffs, and the place was packed. I walked in and headed toward the bar looking for a seat. As I made my way deeper into the crowd, I heard Fiona calling two bartenders over to meet me.

“This is the guy I was telling you about,” she said. “You’ve got to hear how he talks about God.”

Suffice it to say, you don’t get that type of enthusiasm from most church members. At that introduction, the room split to make room for me, a scene not unlike when Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday enter a mangy tavern in the movie *Tombstone*.

Over the course of the next few hours, I got to share a bit of my story and listen to theirs. As the bar thinned out, the bartenders invited me to help them clean up. Eventually, everyone was gone except Fiona, a few other waitresses, bartenders, and the owner. We all sat around one table as they asked one question after another. Their questions were so sincere, their anger so justified. Yes, they were jaded, too, but their intrigue with me seemed honest and open. I knew I couldn’t talk about church. I knew I couldn’t share the four spiritual laws or tell them I was a pastor. I just talked about the only thing I knew they might like: Jesus and the alternative world he called the “Kingdom of God.” They loved it just as much as I did, and lapped it up like hungry pups. When it was time to part, they all hugged me and let me pray for them, and then I left.

It was just before 6:00 a.m. as I opened the heavy pub door to head back to my hotel. The sun was just starting to creep out above the buildings.

As soon as the door slammed behind me, I met God again.

In the same way that Aslan breathed on the frozen characters in Narnia, melting them back to life, so my heart that had been on hold started to thaw and ache again. I began to cry. Harder than I’ve ever cried. Heaving tears, shaking uncontrollably. I had to sit down on the dirty curb and put my hands over my head so no one would see me. I’m sure I looked like a drunk puking in the street. I suddenly knew what God was doing. I knew he was saying I could trust him again with my son’s health, that I could trust him with our finances again, that he’d just been in that pub with me, and therefore, there was no better place for me to be.

The call was clear.

The Twin Towers had just gone down; the world seemed fragile at best. Golf, fishing, the comfort of my custom home, perfectly popped popcorn, and shifting the burden of people onto someone else seemed like luxuries I would gladly give up for this feeling of being fully alive and fully engaged.

The call was to get back in the game. To enter the tension again!

The voice was about his church again.

The challenge was to stop being jaded long enough to crack the wardrobe open to view God's Kingdom again, God's story again, God's mission again.

I know there are millions of the jaded here in the States, likely millions more throughout the world. I empathize. But the truth is, we all have to get beyond our cynicism so we don't end up watching *Oprah* or *Larry King* for spiritual guidance. (That's a joke, but there is some sad reality to it.)

On the way home I called Cheryl. I tried to soften the edges of my experience, but I muttered out something about how "God was messing with me again." She seemed prepared and even whimsical in her acceptance of another challenge. Once home, I was able to share the details, and then I asked her what city she'd like to go to. In less than thirty minutes, she picked Denver. I wish I could say it was a divine leading, a result of hours of prayer and fasting. But it wasn't. She picked the Mile High City because she loved John Elway. Not exactly the Star of Bethlehem, but I took it as a sign from God anyway. Just ten months after we'd left our hometown of Portland to lie low in Eugene, we painfully resigned from my friend's church, packed up the U-Haul and headed to the Rockies, still somewhat jaded but willing to let God revive my hopes again—a vision for the greater church and maybe another small church that someday could be an easy and relaxed home for searching souls like Fiona and her friends . . . and myself.

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Reflection

- Describe some times in your life when you've wanted to tap out on God and the activities of the church.
- Describe the last time your heart broke for someone.

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