

Mark Glanville. *Improvising Church: Scripture as the Source of Harmony, Rhythm, and Soul*. IVP Academic, 2024. 224 pages. \$29.00.

What is the church supposed to be? What is the church supposed to do? What is the nature of pastoral ministry, and why would I want to give my life to it? These are some of the core existential questions that Mark Glanville seeks to address in his book *Improvising Church*. Noting the prevalence of these questions among clergy and laypeople in post-Christian cultural contexts, Glanville proposes the concept of improvisation as a dynamic framework for faithful ministry in incarnational communities (his preferred term for churches). Drawing from his extensive experience as a jazz musician, Glanville provides twelve “notes” to guide missionally minded leaders in developing an improvisatory ministry. Just as the twelve notes of an octave serve as the raw material from which musicians select as they craft their tunes, so these twelve principles serve as the framework for improvisatory ministry in post-Christian contexts.

Methodologically, Glanville locates this work at the intersection of missiology, Old Testament studies, and personal reflection on pastoral experience. The book has a somewhat improvisatory feel, weaving together strands of biblical theology, ministry principles, and numerous real-life stories drawn from his own and others’ experience in congregational ministry. Rather than proposing and developing a single argument or thesis, Glanville presents something closer to a series of jazz lessons that, when combined, help the reader to develop greater improvisatory fluency. This writing style may present a challenge to some readers trying to gain conceptual clarity about the core claim or claims of the book. Yet Glanville seems to have made this choice deliberately, aiming not to present an academic proposal on “what a community could potentially be” but rather “to discern and describe what God is already birthing in real, lived, incarnational communities” (5). Thus, the twelve notes presented here read somewhat like the titles of episodes in a series, unique yet interconnected. There is an attempt (unsuccessful, in my view) to group these twelve tones into three sections of four, but this does not seem necessary, as Glanville’s twelve notes form a whole that is like the musical whole formed by a chromatic scale’s twelve notes, even apart from further subdivision.

One theme that comes through clearly in this book is the essentially communal nature of ministry in 21st-century post-Christian contexts. Gone are the days when churches revered a solitary up-front leader who could perform the tasks of a ministry expert. Instead, faithful ministry in incarnational communities involves skills in collaboration, development of other leaders, cultivation of communal conversations, and prayerful discernment. Pastors still bring expertise, to be sure—especially knowledge of the Bible and of church tradition. Yet the more important qualities of leaders in incarnational communities are relationally oriented, centered around collaboration and facilitation.

Another theme that stands out in this book is the essential connection of ministry and place. Churches need to engage and invest in their local communities. While this idea is not new, unless pastors grapple with the damage done to local communities by the attractional model of church, they may fail to grasp the difference it can make to belong to a place and care for God’s creation in that place. Cultivating a deeper sense of belonging to place should also prompt predominantly White churches in North America to reckon with the colonial past—what Glanville calls “the sins of our kin.” Devoting an entire chapter to this theme, Glanville demonstrates how far ahead many Canadian churches are, compared to US churches, in doing reparative work with Indigenous neighbors.

Glanville provides only a small glimpse, in an appendix, of how this vision for ministry would shape preaching. His subsequent book, *Preaching in a New Key: Crafting Expository Sermons in Post-Christian Communities* (IVP Academic, 2025), develops a more substantive homiletical method. Apart from longing for more details about Glanville's homiletical method, I wonder also how viable this vision for ministry would be in cities or regions where secularism is not as advanced as it is in Glanville's location of Vancouver, British Columbia. I also wonder how viable this model is for ministers who have different personalities or different levels of rootedness in particular ecclesial traditions, which bring with them their own models and theologies of ministry. To what extent can this model be integrated with various ecclesial theologies of ordained ministry? Those questions notwithstanding, *Improvising Church* offers a thick and compelling model for pastoral ministry that seeks to meet the challenges of post-Christian culture with the tenderness of God in Christ, a healing-oriented scriptural concept that Glanville emphasizes and models well throughout this book.

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