

ANGIE WARD

B E Y O N D
C H U R C H
A N D
P A R A
C H U R C H

FROM COMPETITION TO
MISSIONAL EXTENSION



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Beyond Church and Parachurch* by Angie Ward

Copyright ©2025 by Angela J. Ward

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com

CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY JERRY E. WHITE ■ 1

1

WHY THIS BOOK? ■ 3

An Introduction and a Road Map

2

WHERE ARE WE? ■ 16

The State of the Church, the Parachurch, and a World in Need

3

HOW DID THIS ALL START? ■ 30

Church and Parachurch in the Apostolic/Catholic Tradition

4

HOW DID WE GET HERE? ■ 45

Church and Parachurch in the Protestant Tradition

5

WHAT IS THE CHURCH? ■ 63

The Meaning and Marks of the Church

6

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH DO? ■ 77

The Mission and Minimums of the Church

7

WHERE DO WE STAND WITH ONE ANOTHER? ■ 93

Mapping the Church/Parachurch Terrain

8

WHY DON'T WE ALWAYS GET ALONG? ■ 117

The Needs and Challenges of the Multifaceted Church

9

HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER? ■ 137

A New Paradigm for the Next Century

10

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? ■ 160

Practical Suggestions for Leaders and Laypeople

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ■ 176

NOTES ■ 180

BIBLIOGRAPHY ■ 191





WHY THIS BOOK?

AN INTRODUCTION AND A ROAD MAP

Cynthia is a forty-two-year-old mother of three sons, ages eight to fifteen. Each week she attends Sunday-morning worship services at House of Hope church, a non-denominational congregation that was planted thirty years ago by a group of Christians who left a mainline denominational church when their longtime pastor moved out of state for an assignment to another congregation. Cynthia's boys attend Sunday school during one of the two morning service times, while her two teenagers return on Sunday evening for middle-school and high-school youth group.

Cynthia is a regular volunteer in the children's ministry at House of Hope. She also helps lead a kids' Bible study at her youngest son's elementary school. All three boys grew up going to Bible Club. The oldest son, now in high school, attends Fellowship of Christian Athletes on Thursday mornings. Every September, he and his middle-school brother spend one Wednesday morning praying for their classmates at See You at the Pole.

On Monday nights, Cynthia attends Bible Study Fellowship (BSF), which is held at another local church. She and her friends from BSF regularly attend an annual women's conference at the professional sports arena downtown. And whether on her way to Bible Club, BSF, House of Hope church, or to her job as an office manager for a landscaping company, Cynthia listens either to worship music on the local Christian radio station, or a podcast or an audiobook by a well-known Christian speaker or author.

Cynthia is a typical evangelical Protestant Christian in the United States today. You probably know a number of Cynthias, or people quite like her. Perhaps you *are* a Cynthia.

Or perhaps you are more like Lucas, the senior pastor at House of Hope church, now in his sixth year there and his fourteenth year in church ministry. Although House of Hope is not part of a denomination, it is a member of a national network of churches focused on reaching their communities with the good news of Jesus Christ. Lucas is also a member of a monthly coaching group provided by a different national network.

In addition to weekly worship gatherings and its regular in-house activities, House of Hope runs a teen ministry in a local trailer park as well as a thriving youth soccer ministry, including leagues and coaching, on its ten-acre property. These ministries are staffed primarily by volunteer college students from the nearby university, although most of these students don't attend House of Hope because they are involved with the student ministry organizations that meet on campus. Some of the full-time staff from these organizations, as well as from the local pregnancy center, attend House of Hope church. Lucas

was recently asked to join the board of the pregnancy center, and the church gives some of its income to this ministry.

The House of Hope congregation also sponsors several overseas missionaries through a variety of agencies focusing on various parts of the world. Lucas receives repeated requests for House of Hope to support the college ministries and other organizations around town, which he has learned usually means a desire for regular financial contributions, promotion of their programs, and/or announcements about the volunteer needs in those ministries. Lucas, however, wishes House of Hope had enough volunteers for its *own* programs, including Sunday school and the nursery.

Then there's Jasmine, a twenty-something staff worker with ULife, one of the campus ministries at the university. Jasmine came to Christ through her organization's influence on her own college campus and has a passion for reaching students with the gospel. Jasmine attends a different church in town. She sometimes wishes she could be more involved in her church, but her work with college students means that evenings and weekends are often dedicated to activities on campus, including a weekly large-group worship gathering. Jasmine gives some of her limited income—which she must fundraise for herself as a campus “missionary”—to the church, and some to support her own campus ministry. Can you identify with her?

Welcome to the complex world of Christian life and ministry in the twenty-first century. Cynthia, Lucas, and Jasmine are amalgamations, but they are not anomalies. The snapshots of their lives give us a glimpse into a vast collection of churches

and Christian organizations that are both connected to and competitive with one another.

Yes, I said *competitive with*. Those of us who work in Christian ministry may say or even believe we're all on the "same team," but the reality is that all of our organizations have their own agendas, and those agendas often contend for the same people and resources. In the day-to-day struggle for market share, or just for simple survival, precious little time is spent on considering how all of us—churches, Christian organizations, the pastors and leaders of these organizations, and the people in the pews—relate to one another, much less how they *should* relate. I believe this is because the people of God suffer from a fundamental deficit in ecclesiology—that is, a theological understanding of what the church is, what it should be, and what it should do.

Why does this matter? Lest you think that *ecclesiology* is just a ten-dollar word, a seminary term, or a purely academic concern, let me make this bold claim: Jesus' teaching, indeed all of the New Testament, makes the case that our ecclesiology—our understanding of "church"—is central to our very *identity*.

You see, as followers of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures clearly teach that we are not just individual believers—we are members of Christ's body, the church (1 Cor. 12:27). In other words, "church" is not just a building we visit, an event we attend, or a group of people we hang out with. It is *who we are*—a collective *identity*. Let me say it another way: you and I *are* the church, the body of Christ.

Read that again, slowly: You. and. I. *are*. the. church.

WE. ARE.

It doesn't get more central than that. Church, and our belonging in it, is a state of *being*, not just a behavior.

And yet we are more inclined to argue over the style of music in a worship gathering, the role of women in ministry, or the events of the end times than to spend time seeking to understand who we are and the significance of this identity for our lives both individually and corporately. Meanwhile, whether or not we are aware of it, this lack of understanding affects our work *and* our witness. How could it not? An understanding of our identity is critical to everything we as the body of Christ say and do in his name. It affects not only our ministry, but also our unity, and Jesus' prayerful plea for the church was that it would be marked by unity.

I think we can do better. I think we *must* do better.

We live in a world in desperate need for the good news of Jesus Christ. There are millions of people far from God and millions more who claim the name of Christ yet live nothing like Christ commanded his followers. Just five minutes scrolling through the day's headlines—or for that matter, five minutes spent driving around our communities—reminds us of the realities of mental illness, violence, abuse, poverty, disease, death, and broken relationships with God and with one another. Whether close to home or across the globe, the needs are evident and abundant, even overwhelming. Come, Lord Jesus.

Yet we also live in a world, particularly a Western world, where there are more churches and Christian ministries than ever before in history. More efforts than ever, yet statistics and

our own experience tell us that much of the world is moving farther from God, not closer.

Even Christians are becoming less “Christian” in terms of both beliefs and behaviors. Evangelicalism is increasingly fracturing. By any measure, the primacy of the Western church is in decline. Individual Christians of all ages are deconstructing their faith and rethinking the nature, purpose, and necessity of the church. Many people stopped attending church during the pandemic and didn’t come back. Christians are disillusioned with abusive church leaders and have given up on organized church. Christian higher education is facing demographic shrinkage, as fewer kids in youth group means fewer students in Christian colleges and seminaries.

As a result, a greater number of organizations are competing for a continuously shrinking pool of human, financial, and material resources. The urgency of unmet needs combined with a scarcity of resources leads to a nagging sense of anxiety that can make pastors and ministry leaders feel defensive and territorial.

It would be easy to blame all sorts of outside factors for this continued decline: secularization, the wrong political leaders, the culture, the media, the entertainment industry—pick your enemy. Yet I think that blame is misguided. You see, after nearly a decade of reading, researching, thinking, serving in, observing, teaching, and talking about this thing called “church,” I am fully convinced that our problem is that the church—and by that I mean the global collection of believers who the Bible says comprises the body of Christ, but in particular the Western, and more specifically, the United

States church—does not have a clear sense of what it, what *we*, should be and do.

In other words, I believe the calls are coming from inside the house.

More than fifteen years ago, Darrell Guder presciently wrote, “The answer to the crisis of the North American church will not be found at the level of method and problem solving. . . . It has to do with who we are and what we are for.”¹ Today, the need for redefinition is more urgent than ever.

When I bring this up with other men and women serving in churches and Christian ministries, I am met with wholehearted affirmation, often accompanied by frustration or sadness. No matter their affiliation or role—church or Christian organization, leader or lay volunteer—there is a sense that something isn’t working, that we need clarity, that the whole does not currently equal the sum of its parts, that it could and should be better.

Our lack of clarity and unity leads us to what I described at the start of this chapter. We spend a lot of time, energy, and money—most of it for wonderful causes, and for some progress, sure; but still, overall we operate in and from our own silos. At best, we are wasting or duplicating our efforts. At worst, we are actually laboring at cross purposes. But what if the church had a clear understanding of its identity and its mission and the whole church worked together for the whole world?

CHURCH AND PARACHURCH

Much of this conversation has historically been framed in terms of the relationship between two entities: the church and

what is often known as the “parachurch.” We’ll talk about that term a lot more throughout this book, but for now suffice to say that the parachurch generally refers to the constellation of dozens of types of Christian organizations, including the ULife ministry that Jasmine works for, the pregnancy center on whose board Lucas sits, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter that Cynthia’s son attends. The true-to-life descriptions of Cynthia, Lucas, and Jasmine demonstrate how intertwined these entities are. But you likely already know this from your own experience, as I do.

I was literally born into the church, or at least into a church-related entity: a Catholic hospital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A few days later I was picked up by representatives from Catholic Social Services, to whom my biological mother had turned when she decided to give me up for adoption. I was placed into a Catholic adoptive family and baptized into the Roman Catholic Church as an infant. When I was old enough, I began attending CCD, the Catholic Church’s religious education program for children.

My parents left the Catholic Church just before my First Communion (age eight) to attend a Protestant evangelical church. This was the late 1970s, and my mom went all-in on that church and the attendant evangelical subculture of the next several decades. Our house was filled with the voices of Chuck Swindoll and Charles Stanley on the Christian radio station; the television featured Jimmy Swaggart and *The 700 Club*. Our tables displayed the latest books by Christian authors such as James Dobson and Tim LaHaye. Every Wednesday, for decades, my mother hosted a Friendship Bible Coffee group at our

house. Just before I entered sixth grade, my parents decided I would start attending a Christian school. In middle school, I also got more involved in our church youth ministry, but I didn't stop there. I went to church youth group *and* Campus Life. I attended winter retreats at area Christian camps.

After high school, I attended a Christian college where a bunch of us would carpool nearly an hour every Sunday to attend an up-and-coming church called Willow Creek. I majored in youth ministry and went to work at a year-round Christian camp right after graduating. I then moved to Denver for seminary where I met and married a guy who had been very involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship during his college years. Over the next twenty-five years, his pastoral ministry took us to five churches in three states. Meanwhile, I worked in church and parachurch youth ministry and eventually earned my doctorate from another seminary. I then taught at several Christian colleges and seminaries where my students were involved with every type of church, camp, denomination, educational institution, evangelistic organization, student ministry, missionary agency, and social service organization imaginable.

I now work at Denver Seminary as the director of our Doctor of Ministry program, continuing to encourage and equip women and men for all types of ministry around the world. I've even published a few books with Christian publishers. In other words, I have impeccable Christian credentials. (Please notice my tongue planted firmly in cheek.)

It's true, though, that I've been immersed in the world of the church and in Christian ministry for decades. Within it, I've

seen and experienced almost everything you could imagine. Yet, quite miraculously, I'm still in love with the church. And it's because I love the church that I believe this book is essential for our day and age.

FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In 1983, Dr. Jerry White, at the time a staff member with The Navigators, wrote a book titled *The Church and the Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage*. In it, he described the tensions he observed between the world of the church and the world of the parachurch along with recommendations for resolving the problems and issues he saw. White would go on to become president of The Navigators, serving for nearly twenty years before retiring into the active position of International President Emeritus.

The Church and the Parachurch was part of a series of "Critical Concerns" books, indicating the topic's perceived importance when it was published. And while people who have read White's book over the years have raved about it and articulated the need for an updated follow-up volume, no one picked up the baton for forty years.² Yet during that time, the concerns first raised by White have become even more critical, as the church and culture have dramatically shifted and evolved.

I first read *The Church and the Parachurch* when I was preparing for a new course I had designed for my doctoral students, "Reclaiming Ecclesiology: Faithful Foundations for Effective Ministry." My boss at the time wasn't sure the course would attract enough students to be able to make it go. To the surprise of both of us, the course drew the largest enrollment

of the semester and has become one of our most popular electives. Some of my students were so impacted that they changed the course of their doctoral research or even the focus and methods of their ministry. This just underscored to me the tremendous need for teaching and conversation on this topic.

After my first time teaching this course, I was able to meet Jerry White in person and thank him for his seminal book and his ongoing work. That conversation led to additional conversations and connections, which then led to Jerry and I working with several others to convene a Church and Parachurch Leaders' Summit in Denver. More than thirty leaders from around the country, their ministries spanning the globe, convened to foster understanding and further the conversation. Once again, it became clear that we had touched a nerve and tapped into a need.

At Jerry's encouragement and with his blessing, I am committed to continuing what he started. Although church and parachurch organizations impact every believer, every leader, and every location around the globe, few up-to-date resources comprehensively examine the nature of and relationship between these entities, and their significance for the kingdom of God, the local church, and the individual believer.

Our missional moment demands that we engage this conversation more urgently. Yet we must do so from a posture of humility and a desire for cooperation for the good of the kingdom. The next generation of Christians and ministry leaders must chart a path for the future of the church for the world. It is to those ends that I have written this book, and I invite you to embark on this endeavor with me.

WHERE WE'RE GOING

Each chapter in this book is organized around a guiding question. Over the course of ten chapters, we will look at the current state of the church in its various forms, explore the history and theology of church and parachurch, and examine models, relationships, and challenges. Once we've done that, I will set forth a comprehensive new way of thinking for the church for the twenty-first century and beyond. This suggested paradigm recognizes and incorporates multiple organizational expressions while challenging leaders of these expressions, as well as everyday Christians, to both theological faithfulness and generous partnership in order to meet the world's greatest needs.

This book combines my passion for the church with my training and bent as a scholar and teacher. I approached this project from my own curiosity and the desire to be an open-minded learner, and I encourage you to do the same. Other authors have written about these issues as apologists within a particular organizational context—usually missionary agencies or local churches—or from a singular external perspective, whether historical, organizational, sociological, or theological. Here I have attempted to describe the overall landscape and integrate all of these perspectives into a comprehensive new framework. Although I have a lifetime of ministry experience, I learned a lot as I researched and wrote this book. I hope you make new discoveries and connections as well.

Whether you are a pastor or church leader, a staff member at a parachurch organization, a lay volunteer, or a member of the body of Christ who faithfully fills the pew each Sunday, I hope

that this book will be provocative, but not toward conflict. Rather, I pray that it will provoke reflection and conversation, a deeper love for and sense of connection to the church in all its various expressions, and ultimately, changes in the way we “are” and “do” church.

Imagine a world in which Cynthia, Lucas, and Jasmine—along with the leaders and partakers of the Christian radio station, the children’s ministry, Bible Club, FCA, See You at the Pole, BSF, youth group, the trailer park teen ministry, the soccer ministry, ULife and other college campus ministries, the missionary agencies, the pregnancy center, and *you* and *your* ministry—all saw themselves as part of a larger, interconnected ecosystem.

And what if this ecosystem was not just a theory or a purely cognitive framework, but the foundational paradigm that drove everyday practice for *every* member of the body of Christ? Think of how it might change how we view other parts of the body, from individuals to organizations. Think of how it might force us to change our own programs, participation, and postures. And think of the lives changed: not just those impacted by these ministries as they forged meaningful partnerships, but especially our own as we truly embraced our identity and calling as the church!

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/beyond-church-and-parachurch