



IX 9Marks

FOREWORD BY BRIAN FIKKERT

CHURCH IN HARD PLACES

HOW THE LOCAL CHURCH BRINGS
LIFE TO THE POOR AND NEEDY

Mez McConnell
& Mike McKinley

“Two pastors from opposite sides of the Atlantic come together to share their stories of pastoring people in hard places. Mike McKinley and Mez McConnell care about what the Bible says, they care about people, and they care about the local church. Their stories communicate love, joy, humor, and wisdom. I pray that this convincing and compelling book encourages others to labor for the spread of the gospel where today there is no witness.”

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington, DC; President, 9Marks

“Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley have written a book that we need. *Church in Hard Places* is timely and will instruct a generation serious about taking the gospel to and seeing the church planted in difficult contexts and situations. Those with the highest views of God and grace ought to be most passionate about seeing the church gathered in the hardest places. Mez and Mike spur us on to this task.”

J. Ligon Duncan III, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological
Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

“McConnell and McKinley have done us a great service in collaborating to write this accessible, passionate, and important book. Seldom have I read something with such a mixture of gospel ambition and hard-nosed realism. That’s probably because it is written by practitioners rather than theorists. May God grant a plethora of such practitioners to be birthed by this book for the vital task of reaching those neither easily nor often reached.”

Steve Timmis, Executive Director, Acts 29 Church Planting
Network

“Finally—a book on this vital aspect of the gospel mission that is Bible-rich, gospel-centered, and church-focused! And it’s written for the average Christian by two guys with skin in the game. *Church in Hard Places* is a gift to the church.”

Jared C. Wilson, Director of Content Strategy, Midwestern Baptist
Theological Seminary

“If your heart is moved with compassion for the weak and the suffering in the world, then you will want to pick up this book. But I must warn you, it’s not the book you think you’re getting. Instead, it’s the very book you need to read. Mike McKinley and Mez McConnell argue that while it is heartless to ignore the needs of the weak and suffering, the greatest need they have is the same need we all have—to turn away from sin, embrace Christ, and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ in a healthy fellowship of believers committed to one another under the faithful leadership of caring pastors who will equip the church for ongoing ministry. Apart from that, we are merely meeting temporal needs and offering no hope for a changed life now.”

Juan R. Sanchez Jr., Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church,
Austin, Texas

CHURCH IN HARD PLACES

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- The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive*, Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop (2015)
- The Pastor and Counseling: The Basics of Shepherding Members in Need*, Jeremy Pierre and Deepak Reju (2015)
- Why Trust the Bible?*, Greg Gilbert (2015)
- Who Is Jesus?*, Greg Gilbert (2015)
- Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd edition, Mark Dever (2013)
- Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, Thabiti M. Anyabwile (2012)
- Am I Really a Christian?*, Mike McKinley (2011)
- What Is the Gospel?*, Greg Gilbert (2010)
- Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*, Michael Lawrence (2010)
- Church Planting Is for Wimps: How God Uses Messed-up People to Plant Ordinary Churches That Do Extraordinary Things*, Mike McKinley (2010)
- It Is Well: Expositions on Substitutionary Atonement*, Mark Dever and Michael Lawrence (2010)
- What Does God Want of Us Anyway? A Quick Overview of the Whole Bible*, Mark Dever (2010)
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- 12 Challenges Churches Face*, Mark Dever (2008)
- The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, Mark Dever (2007)
- What Is a Healthy Church?*, Mark Dever (2007)

Building Healthy Churches

Edited by Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman

- Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus*, Jeramie Rinne (2014)
- Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus*, J. Mack Stiles (2014)
- Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today*, David R. Helm (2014)
- The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*, Ray Ortlund (2014)
- Sound Doctrine: How a Church Grows in the Love and Holiness of God*, Bobby Jamieson (2013)
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- Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, Jonathan Leeman (2012)

CHURCH IN HARD PLACES

*How the Local Church Brings Life
to the Poor and Needy*

Mez McConnell and
Mike McKinley

Foreword by
Brian Fikkert

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Church in Hard Places: How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover Design: Mark Davis

Image Rights: Open Street Maps, Open Street Map contributors,
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First printing 2016

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4904-5

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4907-6

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4905-2

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4906-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McConnell, Mez.

Church in hard places : how the local church brings life to the poor and needy / Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley.

pages cm.—(9Marks Books)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-4904-5 (tp)

1. Church work with the poor. 2. City churches. I. Title.

BV639.P6M43 2016

261.8'325—dc23

2015018978

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Series Preface

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize. We at 9Marks believe that a healthy Christian is a healthy church member.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him. By this token, the reader might notice that all "9 marks," taken from Mark Dever's book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 3rd ed., 2013), begin with the Bible:

- expositional preaching;
- biblical theology;
- a biblical understanding of the gospel;
- a biblical understanding of conversion;
- a biblical understanding of evangelism;
- a biblical understanding of church membership;
- a biblical understanding of church discipline;
- a biblical understanding of discipleship and growth; and
- a biblical understanding of church leadership.

More can be said about what churches should do in order to be healthy, such as pray. But these nine practices are the ones that we believe are most often overlooked today (unlike prayer). So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. These volumes intend to examine the nine marks more closely and from different angles. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

Foreword

One of the most significant trends of the past two decades has been the renewed commitment of evangelical Christians to fighting against poverty. An avalanche of books, conferences, and ministries is mobilizing and equipping Christians to heed the biblical mandate “to do justice, and to love kindness” (Mic. 6:8). This trend is truly exciting, since caring for the poor is one of the central tasks of Jesus Christ and his followers (Luke 7:18–23; 1 John 3:16–18).

Unfortunately, there has been a second trend as well: a declining commitment to the local church. Although this trend is widespread, it seems to be particularly pronounced among Christians who are the most passionate about social justice. Indeed, it is all too common to hear those who are working full time in poverty alleviation to express not just frustration but outright disdain for the local church. This trend is a profound tragedy with manifold implications, one of them being that the renewed efforts to help the poor are doomed to fail. Those are strong words, so let me explain.

Poverty is a profoundly complicated problem to solve. As we argued in the book *When Helping Hurts*, poverty is rooted in people’s broken relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. These relationships are broken due to a complex combination of the individual’s own sin, exploitive

people, systemic injustice, and demonic forces. There is a lot more going on than meets the eye, so the solutions need to move well beyond ladling soup, dispensing clothing, and handing out food stamps, as important as those activities can be. Indeed, the problem of poverty is so complex that it takes a miracle to eradicate it.

The good news of the gospel involves King Jesus using his power and authority to conquer the individual's own sin, the exploitive people, the systemic injustice, and the demonic forces that are at the root of poverty (Col. 1:15–20). It is King Jesus alone who can do all of this, so the poor—a group that includes all of us—need a profound encounter with him. By “encounter,” I do not mean a one-time meeting. Rather, I mean a deep, organic connection to the very person of Jesus Christ, who saves individuals from their sins and ushers them into a new world in which there will be no more exploitive people, systemic injustice, or demonic forces . . . and no more poverty (John 17:20–23; Eph. 1:2–23; Rev. 21:1–4). The poor need to be united to King Jesus, and he is present—mysteriously but truly—in the church (Eph. 1:23).

It is simply impossible to alleviate poverty—in its fullest sense—apart from the local church.

Thus, if we want to alleviate poverty, we need churches in the “hard places” where the poor live. Unfortunately, many churches are located far from the poor, and those that are in close proximity are often unprepared for effective ministry. And that is where this book steps in.

Drawing upon their personal experiences both as poor people and as pastors of churches in “hard places,” Mike McKinley and Mez McConnell provide practical advice for using the ordinary activities of the church—the preaching of the Word, prayer, accountability, and discipleship—to draw poor people into a transformative encounter with King Jesus. These “rou-

tine” activities work because God has ordained them to work! They are the primary techniques that God has established to draw people into a transformative relationship with King Jesus and to nurture them in that relationship. Hence, the authors are rightly passionate in their desire to keep these activities on center stage, rather than relegating them to a sideshow.

You might not agree with every word of this book. Indeed, I wish there were some things that were stated differently. But do not let that deter you. Mike and Mez are addressing a profoundly important—but increasingly overlooked—issue that is absolutely crucial for the advancement of the kingdom of God and for the alleviation of poverty: How can we plant thriving churches in hard places? As one who has dedicated a lifetime to addressing poverty, I cannot think of a more timely or important topic.

Brian Fikkert

Coauthor of *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*

Founder and President of the Chalmers Center at Covenant College

Introduction

I (Mez) was fifteen years old when two things happened to me: one of my friends was stabbed to death in the street, and I became aware of the church for the first time. A local church hosted the funeral for my friend.

The church building was big, imposing almost, and built from bricks as red as my friend's blood as he choked to death on the way to the hospital. I'll never forget that church. It had arched wooden doors and reinforced steel protectors over stain-glassed windows. Its steeple loomed overhead. And it sat proudly in the middle of our council estate (Americans call them "housing projects"), surrounded by a sea of drab, gray, pebble-dashed terraced housing.

The church was open only when somebody died. Now somebody had died. I recall standing outside that building in the pouring rain as people carried my friend's coffin inside and committed him to a God none of us believed in. After that time, I associated churches with dead people.

Sometimes we would see the local minister walk up to the shops. We would usually throw stones and flick cigarette butts at him. Of course he always smiled. That's what ministers did, didn't they? Turning the other cheek and all that? Religion and that church in particular were irrelevant to us. We would talk

about it only to mock it. The only thing that a church was good for was as shelter if you wanted to have a smoke out of the rain.

As I got older, our little estate got worse. In the late 1980s and early '90s, drugs began to take a serious hold on all of our lives. Lifelong friendships turned sour as greed took over. Houses grew steadily more derelict as decent people looked for a way to escape. Flowers and shrubs were replaced with motorbikes and car parts. Rows of houses were boarded up, with litter, weeds, and dog muck strewn about as a symbol of a deeper degeneration.

But I always remember that church building—red and proud with beautifully manicured grass, seemingly untouched by the disintegration of our lives. It was always empty and as dead to us as the graves surrounding it, but it was also a place of mystery to my friends and me. Years later when I was living in a crack den, dealing drugs and getting into trouble, I would stare out of my eighth-story window and look out at that building. Through my drug-induced haze I would wonder about God: Did he even exist? Did he care about people like me? I would wonder why the building was there with nobody in it. Maybe it was just there to tease us about how pathetic our lives were. I pondered on why they would build a place like that just for the dead. If you had told me then that the local church would save my life in years to come, I would have laughed at you. I was sure that the only time I would find myself in a church would be in a coffin. Thankfully, I was wrong.

Who Are We?

This is a book written by two men who genuinely believe that the Scriptures teach that the gospel is good news for the poor and needy, and that the church is for all people in all places whatever their status in life. Yes, many churches are dead, like the one that held the funeral for my friend. This is tragic. How

critical it is, then, for those churches who are alive to the gospel to pursue the poor, the down-and-out, the hard-pressed! We write this in the hope that the Western church will get better at bringing light to the dark and neglected places too often found in their own backyards.

These are my own roots. I was abandoned at age two and raised in the foster system. By age sixteen I was on the streets full time. But God smashed my hard heart through the persistent witness of several Christians who visited me in prison, and he saved me. Since 1999, I have been a pastor/planter involved in full-time church ministry. In that time I have been an associate minister of a middle-class Baptist church, served as a youth pastor for an inner-city evangelical church, founded a street children's charity and planted a church for street children in one of northern Brazil's poorest cities, and overseen the revitalization of a church in one of Scotland's most deprived housing schemes, Niddrie Community Church. I am short, opinionated, passionate, and desperate to see this kind of work modeled and magnified throughout Scotland's housing schemes and the rest of the United Kingdom. I am more than happily married to Miriam and have two young girls.

What Is a Scheme?

A Scottish housing scheme is a cross between an American trailer park, an American urban housing project, and an American Indian reservation. Schemes were originally built as low-income housing for the "new" working class (after the Industrial Revolution), replacing many slum tenements. Today, they are a mixture of social housing and homeowners.

Mike McKinley is the lead pastor at a Sterling Park Baptist Church, a church revitalization in Virginia. Unlike me, Mike is tall and not really all that opinionated (except for matters relating to American football and punk rock music). He has written

several books and is a member of the board for Radstock Ministries, an international network of church-planting churches. Mike and his wife, Karen, have five unusually good-looking kids (or so he tells me).

The great thing about writing this book together is that we come from completely different backgrounds and ministry experiences. Mike's church is in a wealthy suburb of Washington, DC, but Sterling Park Baptist has found fruitful ministry inroads among their neighborhood's homeless, the working poor, and illegal immigrants. I am presently pastoring a church in one of my country's toughest schemes and overseeing work in several others through 20schemes, the church planting ministry of our church. 20schemes exists to revitalize and plant gospel churches in Scotland's poorest communities. If everything goes according to plan, my group will plant churches in twenty other housing schemes in the next decade.

Our contexts are different. Mike works in a multicultural context, whereas I work in a comparatively monocultural context (although that is changing). Couple that with the cultural differences between Americans and Europeans, and we are an interesting mix.

However, both of us are committed to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as the good news for a dying world. Both of us are committed to the local church as the platform and voice from which that news is proclaimed, where converts are discipled, and where we practice all the elements of church discipline and membership. We not only believe in their importance but we also assert their necessity for our work.

What Is a “Hard Place”?

We have decided to call this book *Church in Hard Places*, but recognize that we're using the term “hard” advisedly. In Brazil, I worked with children as young as five years old who sold chew-

ing gum to make ends meet. When that failed—and it did—they were pushed into prostitution by unscrupulous adults. It was a horrendous life, and still is for untold millions. In some ways, yes, this is a “hard” place to minister.

But that’s a one-dimensional assessment. I notice that when I tell stories like these to other pastors, they often pat me on the back and say something like, “Well done, mate. I couldn’t do what you do. It sounds so hard.” Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate the sentiment, and it’s nice to get a pat on the back once in a while. But here’s my dilemma. In some ways, it is not hard at all. I would even say living and working among the poor can be very easy. Sometimes I feel like I need to come out officially as a pastoral fraud, and say to my friends pastoring in wealthier areas, “Well done to you, mate! Yours is the harder ministry.”

When I listen to pastors battling away around Europe and the States in well-off areas, I break out in a cold sweat. How do you evangelize in an area where everybody has a decent paying job, a nice place to live, and possibly a car (or two) in the driveway? How do you break through the intellectual pride of a worldview that thinks religion is beneath them and that science has all the answers? How do you witness in an area where the average house price is more than \$400,000? How do you talk to a guy who feels no need for Christ because he is distracted by his materialism? How do you make it work in an area filled with nice, law-abiding citizens, who don’t cheat on their wives, beat their kids, and spend their evenings stoned on the sofa watching reality television? Now that’s hard. In some ways, it’s harder. Brutal even!

In the Scottish housing schemes where I now pastor, I can have a conversation about Jesus any day of the week. I can call a man a sinner, and he will probably agree. I rarely meet atheists among the poor. People also have more time to stop and chat. They have more of a sense of community, because they

all live in close proximity. It is not a commuter culture. If you take the time to show an interest in them, they will come to an event even knowing you will preach at them. Of course, there are many who don't. But my point is that I operate within a culture that is comparatively open to the gospel. Any hostility here in Scotland is to the *church as an institution* because it is seen as a *posh person's club*. The hardest part of ministry comes in discipleship and discipline. In effect, you might say it is easier to get people in the front door. The real problem is in keeping the house tidy once everyone's inside.

Our point in all this is to say, yes, we're calling this book *Church in Hard Places* because it quickly communicates the idea that we are talking about planting, revitalizing, and growing churches that reach the economically and socially down-trodden. We have no desire to claim exclusivity on who has it toughest in terms of Christian ministry. Whoever we are, and wherever we find ourselves serving King Jesus, let's rejoice in the shared privilege we have.

Why This Book?

This, then, is a book that seeks to share our conviction that church work in these difficult places is necessary. Sure, there are plenty of lost people in wealthy places, and we are all in favor of more and better churches in those areas. But if you are born and live and die in a wealthy place in America or Scotland, you are far more likely to have access to some kind of gospel witness. The schemes of Scotland and the housing projects and trailer parks of America are filled with people who have the same relationship with the church that I had as a young man; they view it as a place to get an occasional handout, but not a place that has the words of life. The church in these kinds of places is largely absent. When it is not, it is usually so unhealthy that it becomes a net loss for the cause of Christ. That has to change.

So if you are a Christian wondering whether you might be able to help take the gospel to a hard place, we hope this book will excite you for what the Lord can do through ordinary believers in faithful churches in these communities. If you are a church leader and you want to mobilize your people to take the gospel into a hard place near you, this book will give you some practical “must-dos” and “don’t dos” to help you along the way. If you are a church planter thinking about starting a new church in a poor community, this book will give you an idea about how to get started and what really matters most. Whoever you are, we hope this book inspires you to sacrifice your comfort in order to minister to the poor on your doorstep or further afield.

20schemes

Gospel Churches for Scotland's Poorest

20schemes exists to bring gospel hope to Scotland's poorest communities through the revitalization and planting of healthy, gospel-preaching churches, ultimately led by a future generation of indigenous church leaders.

"If we are really going to see a turnaround in the lives of residents in our poorest communities, then we have to embrace a radical and long-term strategy which will bring gospel-hope to untold thousands."

MEZ MCCONNELL, Ministry Director

We believe that building healthy churches in Scotland's poorest communities will bring true, sustainable, and long-term renewal to countless lives.

THE NEED IS URGENT

Learn more about our work and how to partner with us at:

20SCHEMES.COM

TWITTER.COM/20SCHEMES

FACEBOOK.COM/20SCHEMES

INSTAGRAM.COM/20SCHEMES

IX 9Marks

Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- 1 Expository Preaching**
- 2 Biblical Theology**
- 3 A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4 A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5 A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6 Biblical Church Membership**
- 7 Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8 Biblical Discipleship**
- 9 Biblical Church Leadership**

**Find all our Crossway titles
and other resources at
www.9Marks.org**

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY—IN ITS FULLEST SENSE—APART FROM THE LOCAL CHURCH.

In recent years, Christians have shown an increased commitment to helping the poor. But this renewed interest in poverty alleviation is doomed to fail if it is not rooted in the local church—God’s established means of drawing downtrodden people into a transformative relationship with himself. Emphasizing the priority of the gospel, Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley, both pastors with fruitful ministries among the poor, offer biblical guidelines and practical strategies for planting, revitalizing, and growing faithful churches in hard places—in our own communities and around the world.

“I pray that this convincing and compelling book encourages others to labor for the spread of the gospel where today there is no witness.”

MARK DEVER, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC; President, 9Marks

“*Church in Hard Places* is timely and will instruct a generation serious about taking the gospel to and seeing the church planted in difficult contexts and situations.”

J. LIGON DUNCAN III, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

“Finally—a book on this vital aspect of the gospel mission that is Bible-rich, gospel-centered, and church-focused! *Church in Hard Places* is a gift to the church.”

JARED C. WILSON, Director of Content Strategy, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

MEZ MCCONNELL (BA, Moorlands College) is senior pastor of Niddrie Community Church in Edinburgh, Scotland. He is the founder of 20schemes, a ministry dedicated to planting gospel-centered churches in Scotland’s social housing areas.

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