

*The New Conspirators -
Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time.*

Tom Sine, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press. 2008.
304 pages. \$15.00. Paper.

Gary B. MacDonald.
Director of Advanced Ministerial Studies.
Southern Methodist University
Perkins School of Theology. Dallas, Texas.

At the mention of the emerging church movement, those of us in the so-called traditional church may often respond by dismissing it as a fad for self-indulgent members of the Millennial generation or seizing upon it as the latest church growth scheme to bring in the 20-somethings to Sunday morning worship. Theologian and futurist Tom Sine in his latest book, *The New Conspirators*, takes aim at such narrow viewpoints, broadening conceptions of the movement's alternative "streams," and deepening the understanding of the place of the "conspirators" in the ongoing life and future of the Christian Church. Through the text Sine invites his readers to consider the reform of the church for the new and coming realities of the 21st century.

Sine, co-founder of Seattle's Mustard Seed Associates community and author of *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld* and *Living on Purpose*, spends the bulk of the text exposing the cultural, theological and economic realities as he sees them in a series of "conversations, overlaid first with five questions regarding the accuracy and efficacy of the church's historical response, and, second, with examples of the work of leaders within the four "streams" of the "quiet conspiracy." He asks his readers to consider that the church might have been wrong in its theology and practice around issues of eschatology, discipleship, stewardship, ecclesiology, and mission, and suggests that the growing group of mission-minded Christians at the fringe of the church are at work to seriously engage these areas in response to new global realities. This fringe conspiracy, while

popularly labeled as “the emerging church,” is not so easily compartmentalized. In Sine’s analysis, it comprises four distinct but cooperative streams – emerging, missional, mosaic (or multicultural) and monastic – that are working to build postmodern Christian communities around a Gospel narrative liberated from Constantinian and Enlightenment shackles.

This narrative includes an expanded vision of the realm of God, asking readers to reconsider the ethical question of what constitutes the good life as shaped by the Gospel over against that defined by the “global mall.” This culture of multinational corporations and western consumerist machinery is the new empire to which traditional Christianity has surrendered and against which the conspirators attempt to resist. Like empires of the past, this imperial mall demands allegiance, presenting a secular eschatology that the church has all too willingly accepted and, at times, even dressed up as its own. Sine writes, “A central characteristic of every empire, from the military empire of Rome to the cyber-empire of the global marketplace, is the need to fashion ‘powerful myths’ about the nature of reality and human destiny. ... To counter the imperial colonization of our imaginations, we need poets, prophets and artists to help us create subversive imagery that challenges the reigning reality” (91).

Sine points out that in his 1981 work, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, he predicted the increasing influence of the political and religious right in the United States, as well as a widening gap between the wealthy and poor. In *The New Conspirators* Sine adds warnings of the continuing decline and death for the historic Protestant denominations in the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, as mission giving plummets and institutional structures become increasingly irrelevant to new generations. Sine, who sees himself as a member of the “traditional” church, does not see its death as inevitable, but change is necessary. Church leaders must reimagine and reinvent what it means to be church, reaching out to those who identify as “spiritual” but not “religious,” reorganizing top-heavy and hierarchical corporate-style polity, and imagining “new forms of discipleship, church and mission that more authentically reflect

the biblical faith that we claim and that place God's mission purposes at the center of our lives and congregations" (208). The mainstream church must embrace "the new generation of conspirators," not as the latest church growth scheme, but as a response to God's call to be compassionate to a suffering and needy world.

Sine spreads throughout the text examples of creative efforts from the "conspirators," as well as from the more traditional church, that demonstrate the early church authenticity he envisions, although one could certainly take issue with the biblical and theological implications upon which he draws. In highlighting these church innovators, Sine delineates between the more "pragmatic" efforts that he generally observes in established churches in general and megachurches in particular and the "embodied" intimate neighborhood- and community-based ministries that he highlights as the future of the church. One such church featured is Minneapolis' multicultural and inner-city Sanctuary community, begun by pastor and author Efrem Smith. Along with its worship gathering in a neighborhood middle school, Sanctuary has established a community development corporation using space rented in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. The corporation provides mentoring, tutoring and employment assistance to church and community members, part of a church budget that allocates 50 percent of its funds for external service.

For those unfamiliar with or suspicious of this reforming movement, *The New Conspirators* is a helpful entry into the discussion. Sine's continuing effort to observe, chronicle and engage these church movements through his work in Seattle, his extensive travel and his even more extensive web-based networking provides for church leaders a helpful portrait of what the larger emerging church is, as well as a cogent diagnosis of what the established church has and has not been that has made the movement possible and necessary. Writing for a popular audience, Sine provides questions at the end of each section to provide thoughtful conversation starters for pastors and laypersons. He also includes an index of organizations involved in various ministries, complete with current

websites, so that readers can continue the exploration on their own. A more traditional index to the text is not included, however.

The book joins the larger discussion in the church and academy around issues of the relation of the Christianity to imperial power from Rome to today's global economy. The text draws on scholars including N.T. Wright to explicate the church's supposed post-Constantinian apostasy, but does not necessarily engage with classical voices or those from the contemporary liberation stream that are writing on the issue today. The imperial issues facing the church in the 21st century are legion and complex, but they are not necessarily new. Placing the emerging movement within the larger history and scholarship of church reform in response to perceived imperial influence could be helpful not only in understanding the movement, but in advancing its goals of mission and discipleship.

In its attempt to return to eschatology its prophetic edge for social, economic and political transformation, the text sometimes borders on idealism, suggesting the historical defeat of evil and the eradication of poverty, for example. A discussion on or examples of the practical aspects of working with the realities of systems of power on this side of the eschaton could benefit those hopeful of any historical transformation. Furthermore, while Sine acknowledges the post-Christian context in which the church operates today, little attention is given to the necessity and challenges of ecumenical, interfaith and secular dialogue and interaction.

These issues do not blunt the book's impact or import, however. Pastors and leaders interested in the leadership challenges of the contemporary and future church must contend with the analysis and portrait Sine provides. *The New Conspirators'* aims a light on an often dark and hidden postmodern labyrinth that the church ignores at its own peril.