

A person wearing a blue and yellow jacket and dark pants stands on the peak of a mossy mountain. The background is a misty, hazy landscape of rolling hills and valleys. The overall tone is serene and adventurous.

EARL CREPS

OFF-ROAD Disciplines

SPIRITUAL Adventures
of Missional LEADERS

A LEADERSHIP ✕ NETWORK PUBLICATION

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Spiritual Adventures
of Missional Leaders

Earl Creps

Foreword by Dan Kimball

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 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

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Foreword

For as long as the current “emerging church” discussion has been going on, the name Earl Creps keeps coming up. Earl is very much a scholar, and he has his Ph.D. and is a professor at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (AGTS). But in addition to his academic credentials and experience in that world, Earl is no stranger to the reality of being a leader in the local church. He has served as a pastor three times and knows well the daily struggles and ups and downs of the real world beyond seminary. So with Earl you get an alloy of academic skills and knowledge with a background in actual pastoral ministry—a rare combination.

It doesn’t end there. Earl has been listening, dialoguing, traveling, visiting, and studying churches and leadership the whole time. I have often gone to his Website (<http://www.earlcreps.com/>) and blog (<http://www.xanga.com/Coffeedrinkinfool>) to glean from his vast exposure to what the Spirit of God is doing within the church in our emerging culture. He has incredibly broad experience as a scout who sees patterns in churches and leadership. As a well-traveled explorer of the church over many years, Earl offers more than description of the latest cool topics in leadership; we see instead what the Spirit of God is doing that is lasting and bearing fruit, that transcends any methodology or trend in church leadership. This broader and more creative view is what we all need to seek.

In your hands you have a book that has been simmering and brewing over all these years of Earl’s scouting and learning. You hold something that is rich, cured, and aged to sink into your mind

and heart in a way that couldn't happen without breadth of experience behind it. This isn't a book about a quick fix to break an attendance barrier, or bringing in new music or a new design for a worship gathering. It isn't about how to give better sermons. Earl writes about the most important thing he has discovered in all his exploring of the church: the life of the missional leader and its effect on a missional organization.

Leadership is critical. I believe what we need in the church today is not just leaders but *missional* leaders. Not every church rises to Jesus' charge to reach out to the world. Not all church leaders respond to such a mission. Many of them fall into the trap of striving only for bigger and better programs or music, or whatever, for the already saved. Being a missional leader is entirely different. We need to prepare for the mission by developing patterns and disciplines in our lives and ministry that the Spirit of God can use to sustain us while we serve Jesus on His mission. This book is a readable and understandable exploration of the patterns of discipline that missional leaders need in their lives. More than theory or nice thoughts, this book is written from being in the depths of missional leadership and from observing and watching what the Spirit of God is doing in churches and leaders in many places, over many years.

I am excited about the impact this book will definitely have in changing leaders' lives. It is also written for the people Jesus loves and cares about who will follow and be changed by leaders practicing the disciplines Earl speaks of. My prayer for this book is that God may use it missionally—and as I type these words I pray for those who may never even read it themselves but instead be influenced by the life of those who do.

Dan Kimball, author of *The Emerging Church*
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Introduction

Kevin left his job as an environmental consultant to become an entrepreneur. Sensing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity at hand, he set up the coffee shop he had always wanted to own and operate with his family, in a suburb on the south end of our city. A few months into his venture and wanting his business somehow to help people connect with God, Kevin contacted local churches about the possibility of partnering with them to touch the city. Because we had worked together in a local church, Kevin knew of my interest in this subject and e-mailed me about the response of the congregational leaders.

Of course, there are the obvious differences in superficial stuff: style, denominational background, and so on. But I found the difference in definition of and approach to their mission even more interesting. I recall some who are passionate about making ways for the culture to come to Christ, while others were, let's say, less passionate; still others just didn't see much benefit in talking about it with me. Some of these meetings have been electric, while others have seemed pretty empty. Some meetings have been entirely about how we could work together, while regarding others people either didn't respond or were coldly polite. The responses did not follow variables of style or labels.

Kevin's informal sampling of church cultures revealed, in just a few weeks, two key dynamics that scholars of the church have labored for years to discover: (1) leaders with a missional heart find a way, no matter how unconventional, to connect to culture; and

(2) this heart is present (and absent) in every conceivable model of ministry.

Missional leaders see the world through the eyes of Jesus and see Jesus in the world. They assume the role of helping the body of Christ understand itself and make of it much more than a missionary sending agency, as if the “mission field” existed only somewhere else to be reached by someone else. Rather, these leaders cannot conceive of the church apart from living the mission of God to touch the world with redeeming love in Christ. “The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei*,” explains missiologist David Bosch, “as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit, [is] expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”¹ For missional leaders, then, mission does not refer to a framed paragraph hanging on the wall in the lobby and printed on all the staff business cards; it refers instead to the church’s very reason for being. To remove it or replace does not just make the church less effective; it changes the church into something else, something that does not resemble the New Testament account of our identity as a sent people.

In practical terms, it is not difficult to demonstrate the vital role that mission plays in the vibrancy of Christian ministry. Studies of denominations and surveys of individual Christians find a leader’s vision to reach a community indispensable to the growth and health of the church, regardless of the specific philosophy of ministry involved.² But references to academic scholarship are hardly necessary. Any church member on any Sunday can tell you that either mission lives in the heart of leaders or it does not live at all. So, how is such a heart developed?

Off-Road Disciplines

This book argues that missional leadership derives not from methods or strategies but from the work of the Holy Spirit to rearrange one’s interior life. This work is accomplished by rigorous application of what I call *spiritual disciplines*. You will find that my list of

disciplines bears little resemblance to most of the practices traditionally thought of in this way. Although Richard Foster's classic *Celebration of Discipline* includes what he calls "Outward" and "Corporate" disciplines, the average leader that I know mainly thinks in terms of prayer and Bible reading.³ These two pillars of spiritual growth entail several dilemmas:

- *Scarcity*: despite their benefits, they are not practiced enough.
- *Practicality*: they tend to operate in isolation from real life, serving as the "national anthem" before the ball game that starts whenever we go to work.
- *Performance*: they cannot be correlated to ministry "success" in any consistent way; in other words, unspiritual people accomplish a lot while more spiritual people labor in obscurity.
- *Character*: to speak for myself, I've met too many bad people who practice these disciplines rigorously and are unchanged by them.
- *Mission*: churches are filled with people who are committed to prayer and Scripture but either have no concern for mission or actively resist the changes that it requires.

Most of these dilemmas spring from the way observing prayer and scripture study are isolated from the rest of the Christian life. As Foster contends, "the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our normal daily activities. If they are to have any transforming effect, the effect must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life."⁴ In other words, our practice of the disciplines tends to be undisciplined.

However, if we do indeed meet God at the sidewalk level, then perhaps a missional heart can be formed in the same way by practicing what I call "off-road" disciplines, ones that seldom appear in more formal catalogues. In other words, the on-road practices of prayer and bible reading should be supplemented by the other kinds of encounter with God that occur unexpectedly—complete

with the bumps and bruises that are part of any other form of off-road experience. I contend here that an experience is a spiritual discipline if it has the *potential* to form God's heart in me, and if it *functions* as one because I embrace it as such. So, for example, death (Chapter One) represents a spiritual discipline when the collapse of my ministry paradigms creates the opportunity to crucify my longing to be the center of everything. In the end, the off-road disciplines, both personal and organizational serve to *decenter* me and my ideas by freeing up the place where Christ rightfully belongs in my life, my leadership, and my organization. As John the Baptist described it, "He must become greater; I must become less."⁵

This book is organized into two main sections, one personal and one organizational. Part One depicts six disciplines that shape the interior life of missional leaders as individuals, while Part Two offers the same number for the organizations we lead. In truth, this division was never part of the plan for the book. I only realized after the fact that the chapters fell into this alignment, perhaps subconsciously reflecting my belief that organizations are fundamentally spiritual, possessing an *interior life* of their own and requiring spiritual disciplines every bit as much as individual people do. I understand Christian leadership as spiritual direction for the interior life of organizations. On both levels, the off-road disciplines serve the function of making space in our lives so that Jesus assumes the central position within us and the Spirit conforms us to the mission. The alternative is to reduce mission to evangelism, evangelism to a program, a program to a strategy, and strategy to a technology we can control. Mission is everything Jesus came to do; it calls us to co-labor in the things we cannot control. A missional leader, then, lives under the often painful influence of these disciplines for the sake of forming the church into a sent people. I conclude that living a missional life of any kind is quite difficult, given the punishing experiences that seem to be necessary to maintain it. I want, with every fiber of my being, to be the center, and my natural longing for the central position does not die easily. It takes a cross.

Deconstructing Myself

Having spent years in relationship with natives to postmodernity (one element of our cultural “perfect storm”), I have learned the value of deconstructing myself, of letting others know that I am aware that my point of view is just that: a view from a point. They are already aware of these dynamics, but it is important that they realize that I am aware of them as well. So even though this book features some quotes and notes, these materials are not really its sources. These are the wellsprings of my work:

- *My life*: I am a middle-class, Anglo, male baby boomer who grew up a Lutheran pastor’s son, joining the Assemblies of God as a refugee from the 1970s Charismatic renewal in my denomination of origin.

- *My beliefs*: I am almost painfully orthodox doctrinally, but with a Pentecostal identity bundled with a Mainliner’s open-mindedness.

- *My research*: I have spent several years traveling North America on behalf of my seminary, interviewing younger leaders in particular, and anyone who is doing anything different in general. I quote them using pseudonyms (sometimes), not at their request but out of respect for the risks some of them took to talk to me.

- *My experience*: I have pastored three congregations, all Assemblies of God: one boomer, one builder, and one gen X.

- *My sins*: much of this book is informed by my own shortcomings. Some friends are uncomfortable with this aspect of my writing, but I feel that the only way to rob these issues of power is to tell their story and convert them to learnings.

- *My friends*: you will sense at once that this book is really the story of the people I have met in my travels who have been kind enough to share their lives with me. I owe them everything, especially the young ones such as Mark and Kevin, who made me a guest in their world. I hope I have been good company. Whenever I refer to an interview, I am quoting their remarks verbatim from

transcripts. However, when I just bracket their comments with quotation marks, I am reconstructing their words from memory, probably making our exchanges a little better than they actually were.

- *My love*: In a small seminar several years ago, someone asked me how I had been influenced by all my field work. The answer: “I love the Church more.” In the end, this book is born out of that love, and out of the conviction that we must love the Church more than our interpretation of it.

Taken collectively, these sources have conspired to produce both my list of off-road disciplines and my belief that they hold one key to forming leaders who will measure success by how effectively they live out Jesus’ charge: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”⁶ These leaders will be glad to work with Kevin in his coffee house.