In-tensional

Intensional: from the Latin word *intênsiõ,* meaning to have strong feeling or tension between two people, objects or ideas.

In-tensional

A way forward for the church

Justin Duckworth

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Garside
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Introduction

Getting on the Same Page

We've written this book because the western world is in crisis: a crisis of bewilderment and confusion and a loss of believable movements of hope. Many are crying out for help, help that we passionately believe is to be found in the life of Jesus and his church. And yet, at this opportune moment when the world is seeking answers, the church in the west is haemorrhaging people, has lost its compelling voice in our culture and shows little sign of gospel life or Kingdom hope. Despite this desperate situation, we see signs of life re-emerging within the body of Christ that can bring deep hope. These signs are desperately and urgently calling us to respond! Before we unpack this hope, let us introduce ourselves.

Justin is Anglican Bishop of what is arguably the most secular diocese in the world, but he is also a multidecadal intentional missional leader. Alan was senior pastor of one of the bigger and most well-known mission minded churches in New Zealand. He is also a sociologist of religion who twenty years ago was writing books on church decline and the faith of church leavers.

We are not here to bash churches, state the obvious about people leaving the church, or repeat the content of other church decline books. While we have both studied theology, church history and sociology in depth, this is not a theory book. Nor does it rehash the emergent forms of church variously described as missional, intentional, emergent, fresh expressions or alternative church. This is something quite different. We want to introduce an in-tensional conversation with traditional church leaders and structures and new forms of living the gospel that we see as life-giving and able to speak prophetically to the cultural angst of our time. Thus the title In-tensional. Yes, tensional is a word. It speaks of a dynamic tension. Drawn from the Latin word *intênsiõ,* meaning to have strong feeling or tension between two people, objects or ideas, In-tensional describes a tension in which there is strain, stretch and tautness between two people or ideas or objects. We intend naming, creating, and encouraging exactly this tension between two important parts of the Christian church.

In that sense we are attempting something we don't believe has been done before. We want to host a conversation between two sets of people who would not normally read the same book. That is centre-church leaders and edgy missional pioneers. This is not an easy task; we know that what will inspire the edge – people like Justin – will terrify the centre. Equally, what seems like wisdom to centre-church leaders – people like Alan – won't get the radical Jesus followers past the first page. We envisage a conversation between a theologically trained pastor who is comfortable with elders' meetings, sermons, PowerPoint, and pastoral work, and a volunteer pioneer leader who is passionately developing neighbourhood relationships, advocating, protesting and working towards much needed societal change.

It won't be easy to keep both groups reading and engaged with our findings but we are utterly convinced that God's renewal cannot come without this conversation. We are asking you, even daring you, to stick with us and discover more about yourself and what you have to offer the church in the reshaping of its future. But we also need you to listen to 'the other' and see what you can learn from them and how, together, we can move forward in a constructive re-shaping and re-founding of the church in the west.

We want to introduce you to this in-tensional conversation, pointing you to the in-tensional dynamic necessary for our churches to reshape for the needs of our time. We know there will be strong feelings, opposing energies and vigorous critiques. We need to hold these tensions together and see what comes from an in-tensional dialogue that encourages you to foster in-tensional conversations and relationships where you live and work.

We invite you into this critical, in-tensional conversation between the edge and centre of church life, knowing this dynamic will always be uncomfortable, often stretching, and at times contradictory. There will be conflict. This relationship is intense because so much depends on it. We are pushing for a conversation that identifies and normalises the necessary tension between the established centre of church life and its edge because we think the future of the church in the west depends on it.

We believe we have something important to say. Born from our 60-plus years of combined Christian leadership experience – as full of mistakes, failures, and scars as it is of fruitful growth and hope – we

can see fresh life coming in ordinary churches across post-secular New Zealand.

We are white male church leaders speaking into a context that is wary of voices like ours, and expect that critiques will come in response to this book because of our ethnicity, gender and social privilege. We welcome critiques because they will further enhance the conversation begun here. We hope to hear alternate voices arise, bringing richer conversations which foster more robust communities of faith.

Reassuringly, while our contemporary context brings unique and immense challenges, God's renewal work has a traceable pattern. Throughout history, when things got desperate, God turned up with a new invitation. If we ever needed a miraculous and transforming God turning up, then it is right now. As we face multiple global crises and a dwindling church, we need to hear a fresh invitation of God's Spirit. We wrote as the COVID-19 pandemic was raging through the world, with an economic crisis surfacing in the pandemic's wake. Now an even greater global crisis – climate change – is bearing down. Covid was a disruptive event, accelerating existing societal trends. As the pandemic died down, some talked of getting back to 'normal' but we all knew there was no return. What lay ahead was a 'new normal'. Now, after the pandemic, we can be certain life and church will look distinctly different.

Alan was living in the city of Christchurch in 2011, when a series of devastating earthquakes hit, destroying the central business district and large areas of the wider city. These earthquakes were a disruptive event propelling trends of church decline and bringing forward necessary decisions in many churches. Small congregations had to make tough choices – did a congregation of 40 to 70 people need or justify the cost of a church rebuild? Would they choose or be forced to combine with a nearby church?

It is true that immediately after the earthquakes some people turned to the church, became Christians, and others returned and became more involved in their church community. However, after this initial response, the trend was towards less frequent attendance, reduced commitment, and many leaving the church. As some moved from their pre-earthquake church to new, independent, trendy alternatives, many more quietly slipped out of regular church engagement altogether.

Today we not only face the aftermath of a global epidemic, another global financial crunch and climate change, there are also deep new cultural disruptions shaped through identity politics and culture wars, expressed, for example, in Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the rise of LGBTQI movements. The church's response to such movements is often polarising and includes those who rush to shut discussion down and a conservative deafness to any voice but their own.

At the same time, we in the western world face an unprecedented mental health crisis expressed in rises of anxiety, depression, medication rates and endemic loneliness that further weaken already fragmented communities. In the face of these physical, cultural, and mental health crises we are deeply aware we are standing in a unique moment in history. One from which we believe God is calling us to lead with courage, faithfulness and hope.

Thankfully, God is as gracious as God is powerful and we have a reasonable hope. We can take heart that the church has been through crises before, and these have brought significant change and opened new opportunities. God's invitation at such points in history is demanding. Alan remembers disaster experts predicting that following the Christchurch earthquakes most civil and church leaders would leave their positions, relocate, burn out or give up over the next ten years. The few that survived would be significantly scarred and depleted. Looking back, those experts were right. Today we are entering a new cultural terrain that far exceeds the demands of a series of localised earthquakes. A new cultural moment which calls for courageous, dedicated and wise leadership.

We can only respond to this call of God with the help of His Spirit. So, we say: don't despair God is at work. Equally, don't miss what is required in the face of this challenging crucible of change. This era of church life will cost us everything we have: the best from our innovators on the edge, trying new things but perhaps drifting from the rest of the church body; and the best of our centre-church people working tirelessly, yet likely resistant to the new things God is doing. This challenge requires the whole body of Christ to function at its best and we need each other as much as we need God right now.

We have many churches with strong, established, balanced structures and services and we have para-church groups: energetic pioneering-initiatives and edge mission communities with radical ideas, a counter-cultural approach and innovative community connections. We lack language and means to bring these two together in mutually beneficial ways for the reshaping of the church.

We will talk a lot about centre-church and edge-church because we propose a critical conversation between these two equally essential components of 'church'. They bring different strengths, roles and experience and have different rhythms of life and mission; but they are both worshipping communities of faith centred on Jesus, nourished through scripture and active in God's mission to their communities.

While the word 'church' carries multiple meanings, when we talk of centre-church we mean the established, organised community of people who gather regularly for worship in a particular place. The centre-church generally has regular institutionalised practices and is aligned to a bigger body, a denomination, or is responsible to a structural entity like a group of trustees in the case of an independent church. Edge-church is often seen as radical or fringe and can form as the result of dissatisfaction with centre-church. Edge-church tends to form in smaller groupings with a focussed, whole-of-life commitment to a cause or specific cultural angst. They are characterised by prophetic voices and a sense of call to the marginalised.

We are not promoting one style of church over the other. We are not saying one is the answer for the future. Quite the opposite; we are claiming that both centre and edge are church. Both are essential to the future of the church in the west. The table below lists some names we will use to distinguish the centre and edge.

Centre	Edge
Centre-church	Edge-dwellers
Congregation	Community
Centre-leaders	Edge-leaders
Focused more on Pastors and Teachers	Focused more on Prophetic and Apostolic leaders

Before continuing, we need to name a widely accepted way of thinking about edge and centre within churches, mission agencies and theological colleges, which is based on Ralph Winter's 1973 paper on the dichotomy of modalities and sodalities. While the Catholic church and social historians had identified this dynamic at work for centuries it was Ralph Winter who introduced the terms modalities and sodalities, into protestant mission language and understandings. In his dichotomy modalities reflect the established church and sodalities the more missional groupings. Modality and sodality describe different roles, energies and focuses, but both are integral parts of the church. We have called these centre-church (modality like) and edge-church (sodality like). From our perspective, both are part of, and necessary to, the church. The sad demise of the church in the west has been enhanced by the separation of the modality and sodality energies when the two become disconnected from each other. For example, when what are often called 'para-church groups' (sodality) become separated for long periods from the wider church (modality).

We believe centre-church and edge-church need each other, and neither holds the hope of the future by themselves. They need to engage in this in-tensional conversation in order to be the church and follow God's calling.

Our stories of centre and edge

Justin, it's fair to say, is naturally an edge-dweller. Most comfortable without shoes, haircuts or new clothes, he finds church services and vestry meetings horrendously boring. Growing up in a working-class neighbourhood he loved being a youth worker. He spent a decade working with kids outside the church, created a home for kids without one and lived life in the dirtier end of the city, making friends and being family with homeless guys and sex workers.

Leaving city life, Justin and his wife Jenny spent the next decade transforming an old campsite into a refuge for those needing a rural retreat, or those trying to make it fresh from prison or a mental health crisis. Justin and Jenny tried to call the church outwards by inspiring them to put a gospel theology into action in the world. The resulting Urban Vision community is their primary tribe of belonging and they couldn't survive and minister without them. This community has a passion for justice, a highly committed, living

faith in Jesus and a deep corporate belonging as they live together in small teams of believers.

These days Urban Vision people live in ten teams, typically in neighbourhoods where people find themselves on the margins of society. They try to respond as good neighbours, rather than professionals or service providers, sharing life and working for transformation at personal and communal levels.

Ten years ago, in some wacky combination of God's prophetic humour and creativity, coupled with the courage of the Anglican church, Justin was called to lead the Anglican diocese as the Bishop of Wellington. The diocese was aware of its rapid decline in numbers, its growing distance from the surrounding culture and a dread that, without something fresh and new, it was in big trouble. They knew they had plenty to offer the world and a deep faith that God was not finished with them yet. So, they asked Jenny and Justin to come and live among them, bringing their passion for the neighbourhood, their concern for the planet and their lifestyle of community building and pioneer mission.

Justin had never done paid work for the church before and it has been a big transition adjusting to the traditions and structures of a diocese and getting his heart around a culture that is very different to his roots. In this new context, he has sought to hear God's invitation to the church in this rapidly changing culture. His journey has taken him from residing happily on the edge of the church to needing to discover the gifts of the church's very centre.

Alan has spent 35 years smack in the centre of Baptist church life: as centre-church as it gets. Growing up in a middle-class family, he attended an evangelical church that was powerfully influenced by the charismatic movement of the late 1970's. Later he moved from being an Air Force officer to train as a pastor in a large Baptist church in Christchurch, New Zealand; a shift downward in pay, social respect, role and opportunities and a step up in work hours, study and people's expectations. He loved this dynamic, innovative and missionally focussed church and enjoyed preaching and teaching, studying theology and sociology, and developing the next generation of church leaders.

Arriving at Central Baptist in Wellington, in time Alan became the senior pastor in a church committed to social justice and

innovative mission. In this mix were the founders of Stillwaters, a place for the city's street community. Stillwaters offered weekday lunches and a social drop-in space on Friday nights. The church's Stillwaters ministry later partnered with Urban Vision, led by Justin and Jenny Duckworth. The Duckworth family had moved into Stillwaters' community house in the inner city, along with many of their friends. It was a very tight fit. This was not an easy relationship. The Central Baptist ministry team liked to keep set hours, tidy spaces and workable rosters. The Urban Vision crew tended to be untidy, unpredictable, operated an open-door policy and were critical of Sunday church! But the church leadership were up for the challenge of hosting this diversity and saw the potential gifts that both the edge and the centre had to offer.

After ten years in Wellington, Alan was called to be senior pastor in the Christchurch church where he'd trained: a complex church with many ministries and a strong global focus. With the associated trusts, church staff, and global teams there were hundreds of employees and many more who called the church home. Two years later when the earthquakes struck, leading a large, diverse church became very stretching. Two things became clear: firstly, the western church, with its present form and focus, was in serious decline and losing engagement with people and culture; secondly, two small, local intentional communities (similar to the Urban Vision crew), who had been part of the church for some time, were offering a new, energising way of being.

One of these intentional communities had all recently moved into a poor city neighbourhood, cramming into several small houses and engaging with their neighbours by sharing everything from time and meals to gardens and spare rooms. Houses in this neighbourhood were cheap, so the group pooled their savings to buy an old petrol station and create a café. Twelve years on it employs dozens of people including locals from their neighbourhood. Eighty percent of the profits from the café and associated businesses – laundromat, fairtrade coffee roastery and gift shop – are donated to local community development initiatives, and to business and community work in Kolkata, India.

Alan found himself pastoring two groups within this one church: the first group were critical of 'the church', demanding more engagement with the poor, with neighbourhood projects, and social issues; the other was the stable congregation who believed

in community-focused ministries without the need for intentional personal community living. Taking up the missional challenge presented to them, Alan, and wife Sandra, committed to greater neighbourhood engagement and local community building.

Fast forward 10 years and the church had several groups living intentionally in their respective neighbourhoods. These local groups worked together, prayed for and offered hospitality and friendship within their respective neighbourhoods. The church leadership encouraged these local communities to share their passion and expertise for intentional, missional, community-based life with the wider church. It created a fascinating learning tension. Recently Alan started a new role leading the Baptist Churches of New Zealand's global work, which is giving him a view into denominational structures, established churches and new missional endeavours on the global scene. His journey in Christian leadership has taken him from the centre of church life and leadership to finding the necessary gifts for church renewal on the prophetic edge.

Hosting the courageous conversation that might reshape the church

We have both observed, studied and experienced the repeated tensions that characterise life between the edge and centre of the church. We have heard the critiques of centre-church leaders and edge-innovators. Sadly, we have watched centre-church and edge-church pull apart at times, missing their desperate need for each other. We have both lived inside this relationship with all its tension, heartbreak, and frustration, alongside the life, energy and joy it can bring. We have seen the hopeful creativity and renewing power possible through edge and centre working together and learning from each other.

In chapter 1, we will outline the reality of the global crisis facing our generation, as well as the state of our western church. It's a challenging reality as we summarise the state of an insipid church, unfit for the task of bringing sharp insight and life-giving alternatives in our world. Edge-dwellers will say 'I told you so' as we briefly outline these stark realities. Centre-church leaders will no doubt feel defensive, or despair at the starkly depressing state of the church in the west.

In chapter 2, we will outline the prophetic calling on the church to offer a feasible alternative and a hopeful, exciting future. We will point out that the charisms and callings necessary for our current generation can be most sharply seen lived out in fragile missional groups who find themselves on the edge of church life.

Then we'll get practical with models of how this relationship works at its healthiest. We will compare a healthy relationship tension with times when the intensity blows out and becomes destructive. For three decades we have lived in this relationship, experiencing the best and worst of it, in several different churches and cities. We know this territory well.

If you are a centre-church reader, be reassured that we are not asking you to move to an undesirable neighbourhood or quit work to live in communal flats with ex-prisoners and psychiatric patients. We are asking centre-church leaders to listen to edge-pioneers and their prophetic communities to inspire, inform and influence your life and priorities and those of your churches.

If you are part of an intentional mission endeavour, we are not asking you to be at a Sunday service every week, to join the vestry or sing on stage. However, you will need to recognise the enduring and significant role of the established church and its leaders and what they bring to the reshaping of the church for tomorrow. You can't do it without them.

Next, we will point out how the church has been reformed and found new life through the centuries. Hopefully this will inspire you to stick with us as we see the same themes unfolding again in our own contexts. We will point to moments in church history where, in seasons of church decline and societal irrelevance, God called and raised up small prophetic groups. These groups were accepted and supported by the established church, and were living a particular gospel charism, needed for that time. A charism that eventually called the church on to greater faithfulness and fruitfulness.

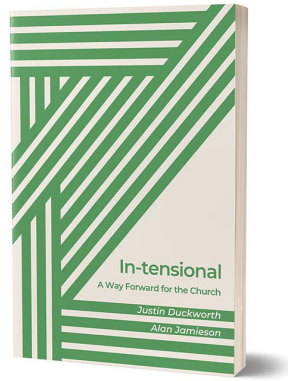
If we can keep you reading, there are things edge-dwellers will need to know about centre-church leaders, and vice-versa. Equally, there are things for centre-church leaders to reflect on together and things groups of edge-dwellers need to reflect on and re-orient around.

In chapter 4 we will tell the imaginary story of Mia, a young radical who has become a follower of Jesus and has a heart for people like her who are searching for truth and hope but dismiss the church as irrelevant to them. Having introduced you to Mia we outline two divergent paths she could travel depending on the advice, support and encouragement she receives from key leaders around her.

Chapter 5 describes what edge and centre respectively can bring to an in-tensional relationship and the typical life cycle of edge communities. If you want to jump to the heart of this book, read the summary of chapter 5 and focus on chapters 6 to 8, describing the three stages of the edge-community life cycle: radical to sustainable to influential. Finally, in chapter 9, we bring the whole argument together and ask: could God be at work through centre and edge bringing a reshaping and reinvigorating of His church for a new cultural context?

Summary

- Justin speaks the language of the edge and knows well their heart and function but has learnt to converse in the language of centre-church and to appreciate the gifts they offer. Alan has learnt to understand the edge but remains fluent in centre-church life and leadership and understands the best and worst of it. We are all called differently, and we respect God's different callings on our lives. We ask you to allow each other's gifts and insights to speak into your reality and to foster in-tensional relationships across centre and edge church.
- While it's repetitive to constantly use the terms 'edge' and 'centre', it encapsulates a vital point. Without the 'edge' western churches will continue to die; their buildings will increasingly become cafés and boutique furniture shops and their communities will miss out on the passionate renewal God wants to bring to the western church. Worse still, we will be complicit in the ongoing destruction of the world through continuing to mirror the values of our time. Values which at their core are idolatrous to God and destroy people and planet. Without the centre, the edge, in their fragility, will not sustain themselves for the long haul. They are in constant danger of bitterness or pride undermining them. Without belonging deeply to the wider body of the church these edge groups will remain small and peripheral, their prophetic voice lost or muted.
- We argue that without this conversation between edge and centre the western church will spiral further down the track of irrelevance, failing to grasp contemporary culture, unable to align with God's calling to this generation. We believe our union is necessary for the re-shaping, re-vitalising and re-founding of the church in the west. Only centre and edge united can speak to the deepest angst and questions of our time.
- We can't keep isolating the edge from the centre of the church. We believe in unity and working in harmony and other important biblical values, but this is also about the future shape and life of the church. Your church and your community desperately need the fruit of this vital conversation. Through this book we want to give you working models of how these differently gifted groups of the church can and must work together.



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