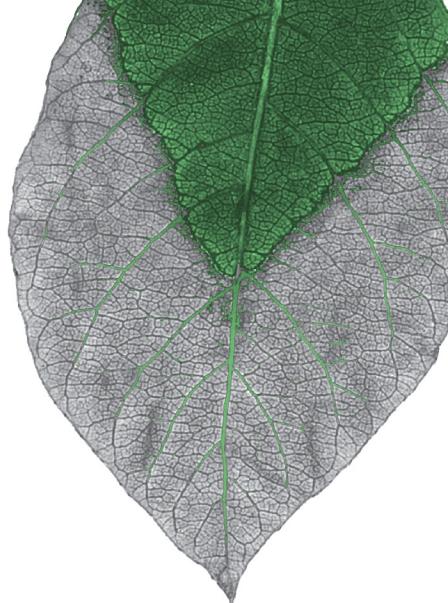


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## CHAPTER ONE

# IMPROVISING THE ONLY TRUE STORY



Tell someone to do something, and you change their life—for a day; tell someone a story and you change their life.<sup>1</sup>

—N. T. WRIGHT, THEOLOGIAN, 1992

Every community needs a big story, a story that frames our lives and our understanding of the world. . . . Therefore, before we set out to accompany the transformation of others, we need to be sure we are clear on the biblical story that has the final say on our individual stories.<sup>2</sup>

—BRYANT MYERS, DEVELOPMENT EXPERT, 2011

**A**bsco has had enough. For generations, his ancestors have scraped and clawed, begging the soil in rural Kenya to yield a harvest. When the weather is good, life is bearable. But when the rains don't come—he shudders to even think about it. Absco has already lost one child, her malnourished body too weak to fight off the malaria. Enough is enough. It's time for a change.<sup>3</sup>

But change is largely a foreign concept in Absco's village. Life there is about loyalty—to the ancestral spirits, to the tribe, to the family, and to the land. So when Absco announces that he will migrate to the city to seek a better life, he is viewed as an arrogant traitor. "Do you think you are better than the rest of us? What about your responsibilities here?" The questions hurt, and Absco is torn, but he's determined that no more of his children will die.

So off he goes to the city, leaving his wife and kids back in the

village until he can get established. Unfortunately, things don't go as well there as Absco had hoped. Day after day, he knocks on doors looking for work, but there are far more job seekers than jobs available. With little education and no connections, Absco is unable to find work that pays enough to support his family. Lonely and discouraged, he longs to return home, but how can he face his family and village? In addition to being an arrogant traitor, he is now a failure as well.

Each night, Absco joins thousands of others like him in a slum on the edge of the city. Exhausted from another day of looking for work, he collapses on the dirt floor of the shack that he's made from scraps of wood. There, he sleeps until the sun comes up, signaling the start of another day of fruitless job searching.

One night, Absco is particularly lonely and depressed. Seeking to deaden the pain, he ventures out of his shack to try the local brew concocted by some other slum dwellers. With his inhibitions lowered, Absco then succumbs to the invitation from one of the prostitutes loitering on the corner.

Three months later, a clinic gives Absco the bad news: he has HIV.

## THE SHAPING POWER OF STORIES OF CHANGE

Imagine you want to design a ministry to help the many people like Absco in this Kenyan slum. You will need to answer many questions:

- **What type of assistance will be provided?** A feeding program? Job training? Health care? Improved farming techniques in the village? Evangelism? Biblical discipleship?
- **Who will provide the assistance?** A local church? An existing parachurch ministry in Kenya? A government agency? A new organization you will start?
- **How will the assistance be delivered?** One on one? Group setting? Radio? Smartphones?

- **Who will pay for the assistance?** Western donors? Kenyan donors? Program participants?
- **What will be the metrics for success?** Greater consumption? Improved health? Strengthened families? Less migration? Spiritual growth?
- **Who will decide the answers to all these questions?** You? Donors? Local churches? Program participants?

A poverty alleviation ministry is fundamentally about promoting change. It's about helping poor people and communities move to a better situation than their present one. So, effective poverty alleviation requires us to know where we are trying to go and how we can get there. In other words, we need a sound "story of change" or, as it is often referred to in the social services sector, a sound "theory of change." At its core, a story of change is your ministry's answer to two fundamental questions:

1. What is the goal of life?
2. How can that goal be achieved?

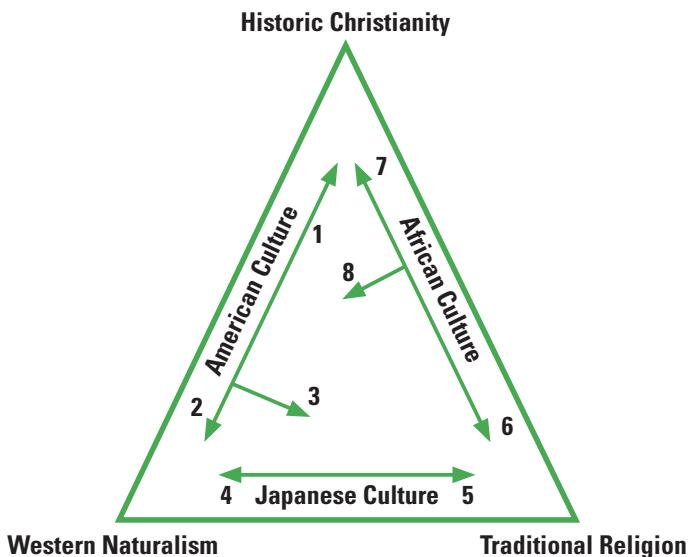
Take a moment and reflect on these two questions. It is possible that you've never consciously answered these questions before, but you have answers to them nonetheless. Most of us have unknowingly internalized our surrounding culture's story of change, conditioning us to *automatically* and *subconsciously* think, feel, and act the ways that we do as a matter of *habit*.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, even though it's often unarticulated, our story of change dramatically impacts every aspect of our lives, including the way we design our poverty alleviation ministries. *If we want to help without hurting, we've got to get our story straight.*

## COMPETING STORIES OF CHANGE

Our story of change reflects our "metanarrative"—our understanding of the nature of God, of human beings, and of how the world works.

As we discussed in *Becoming Whole* chapter 2, some scholars argue that there are three foundational religious perspectives in the world: *traditional religion*, *Western Naturalism*, and *historic Christianity*, the other religious perspectives being blends of these three (Figure 1.1).<sup>5</sup>

**FIGURE 1.1**  
Three-Part Model of World Religious Perspectives



- 1) American Christians; 2) American Secularists; 3) New Agers in North America;
- 4) Western-influenced Japanese; 5) Shintoists; 6) African Traditional Religionists;
- 7) African Christians; 8) Secular influences radiating out of Christianity.

Adapted from Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Animism, Secularism, and Theism: Developing a Tripartite Model for Understanding World Cultures," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 10, no. 4 (October 1993): 171.

Traditional religion, which is common among poor people in the Majority World (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), believes that the material world is controlled by spiritual forces. In this perspective, human beings are not really in charge of developing creation; rather, life is about hunkering down to avoid disharmony with one's family, tribe, nature, and the spirits.

Western Naturalism, which has had a tremendous influence on Western civilization, believes the world is fundamentally material in

nature. Consistent with this, it views human beings as highly individualistic, materialistic creatures that derive happiness from obtaining greater and greater material consumption—the American Dream is the story of change, which we discussed in *Becoming Whole* chapter 3.

In chapter 4 of *Becoming Whole*, we showed that the Western church has largely mixed Western Naturalism with historic Christianity to create Evangelical Gnosticism, a metanarrative that separates the spiritual and material realms (point 1 in Figure 1.1). This has produced a story of change in which the goal is to get one's soul to heaven for eternity and, as in the case of Western Naturalism, live the American Dream now.

When Westerners attempt to alleviate poverty, they bring their religious perspective to the design of their program. As a result, poverty alleviation typically involves an encounter between Western Naturalism or Evangelical Gnosticism and the religious perspective of the materially poor people.

Sadly, it has become increasingly clear that there is something terribly wrong with the stories of change of Western civilization and the Western church, for despite our unprecedented wealth—perhaps even because of it—we are not flourishing. Disillusionment and cynicism are rampant, families and communities are breaking apart, measures of overall happiness are declining, and mental illness is skyrocketing. Many of us have reached the goal—we've achieved the American Dream in this life—but somehow this dream is far less satisfying than we thought it would be.

The tragic irony is that the implicit assumption in most of our poverty alleviation efforts is that the goal is to make poor people just like us. We try to turn Uganda into the United States and America's impoverished inner cities into its affluent suburbs. Though we are increasingly dissatisfied with our own lives, our message to poor people is “come join us!”

We need a different story of change from Western Naturalism or Evangelical Gnosticism because they aren't working. Unfortunately, most of us have been trying to live for so long in a world in which

the spiritual dimension is irrelevant to our daily lives that the real world—the world of Christ’s kingdom—seems quite unbelievable to us. In *Becoming Whole* chapter 5, we refer to this as Flatland—an imaginary country in which the residents’ perspective is so limited to two dimensions that they can’t even believe the real world has three dimensions.<sup>6</sup> What is a fairy tale seems real, and what is real seems like a fairy tale. As a result, we have a hard time embracing biblical principles of human flourishing and of how to achieve such flourishing. We need the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our hearts and to infuse us with His power so that we can live into the biblical story of change, for it is the only story that really works, because it is the only story that is actually true (see Eph. 1:18–19).

Table 1.2 summarizes the different religious perspectives and stories of change of the three foundational perspectives and of Evangelical Gnosticism.

### GOD’S STORY IS ALREADY COMING TRUE

Absco’s diagnosis leaves him dazed and hopeless. He stops looking for work and relies on petty theft to support his growing dependence on alcohol. His story of change isn’t working, but he knows of no alternative.

One day, a fellow slum dweller named Moses invites Absco to a meeting at Crossroads Church, located right in the heart of the slum. Moses explains that Crossroads has a health ministry to assist people with HIV/AIDS and a microfinance program that enables people to save and borrow money. Absco is skeptical, but he figures he has nothing to lose. So he agrees to attend the meeting at Crossroads.

When Absco and Moses enter the church, they are warmly welcomed by a group of about fifty people and offered a place to sit. Absco can tell from their accents and clothing that these people are from different tribes—tribes which don’t get along with each other. Moses whispers to Absco, “This is Crossroads’ savings and

**TABLE 1.2**  
Summary of Stories of Change

		TRADITIONAL RELIGION	WESTERN NATURALISM	EVANGELICAL Gnosticism	HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY
THE NATURE OF:	<b>God</b>	Good and evil personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces control the physical world	Does not exist	Distant and largely disconnected from affairs of this world	Sovereign, loving, personal, and relational Being who is the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of all things
	<b>Human Beings</b>	Similar to rest of natural world; deep spiritual connection to family, tribe, and nature	Autonomous, purely material, highly intelligent animal	Autonomous individual with separable body and soul	Highly integrated mind-affections-will-body-relational being
STORY OF CHANGE:	<b>What is the Goal?</b>	Harmony and prosperity for one's family or tribe	Material consumption	Get the soul to heaven for eternity and enjoy material consumption in this life	Serve as priest-kings whose entire being lives in right relationship with God, self, others, and rest of creation
	<b>How is the Goal Achieved?</b>	Manipulate the spirits to gain power	Handouts or economic growth	Evangelism to save the soul plus handouts or economic growth for the body	Through the gift of the Son and Spirit, the triune God accomplishes our reconciliation to God, self, others, and the rest of creation
THE INDIVIDUAL'S RELATIONSHIP TO:	<b>God</b>	Spirits are to be feared, appeased, and manipulated	God does not exist	Primarily legal	Intimate, loving community and worship
	<b>Self</b>	At the mercy of spiritual beings and forces, so has little power to effect change in world; no different from trees or animals	Center of the universe with the capacity to control the world to increase one's consumption	Soul is so valuable that Christ was willing to die to save it from eternal punishment	A priest-king uniquely created to extend the reign and worship of God
	<b>Others</b>	A potential threat to the harmony and prosperity of one's family or tribe	Competitors for control of material world	Other individuals who are loved at arms-length	Intimate, loving community that is served sacrificially
	<b>Rest of Creation</b>	Live in harmony with it rather than try to develop it	Closed machine that can be used to increase personal consumption	Closed machine that can be used to increase personal consumption	Open to actions of both humans and spiritual beings; humans should protect and develop it for God's glory

credit association. These people are just like you and me: they have migrated from different parts of the country seeking work, but now they all have HIV/AIDS.” Far away from their homes, some of the group members had given in to temptations, just like Absco; others were victims of unsanitary health practices in the local clinics. Regardless, each of these people now had HIV/AIDS. As such, they are believed to be cursed by the gods, so they are treated as social outcasts.

After a time of joyful singing, the group members share their experiences.

One lady stands and says, “Hello, my name is Eunice. Jesus is my Savior. When I get my loan, I buy beads and make jewelry. I use the profits to feed my five children and to pay my rent.” She sits down and then another lady speaks . . .

“Hello, my name is Margaret. I use my loan money to crochet purses out of plastic bags.” Margaret then cuts several plastic grocery bags into narrow strips and crochets the strips like yarn, slowly transforming them into attractive souvenirs for tourists.

Next a tall, gaunt man stands and speaks. “When I got my loan, it was 140 Kenyan Shillings (about \$2). I am an artist, and I use the fibers of the banana trees to make art. With my loan, I bought glue and I made pictures, which I sold for 3,000 Kenyan Shillings (about \$43). I have two children, but my wife passed away. My profits help me to pay for my children’s school expenses. I believe we should encourage one another in this program to share our talents so that our talents don’t die with us.”<sup>7</sup>

Absco stares in disbelief. Yes, in many ways these people are just like him, but in other ways they are not like him at all (see 2 Cor. 5:17):

- even though they have HIV/AIDS, they seem much healthier than others who have this deadly virus (see Luke 7:18–23)
- rather than sitting around in shame and despair, they are full of dignity and joy (see Isa. 61:3)

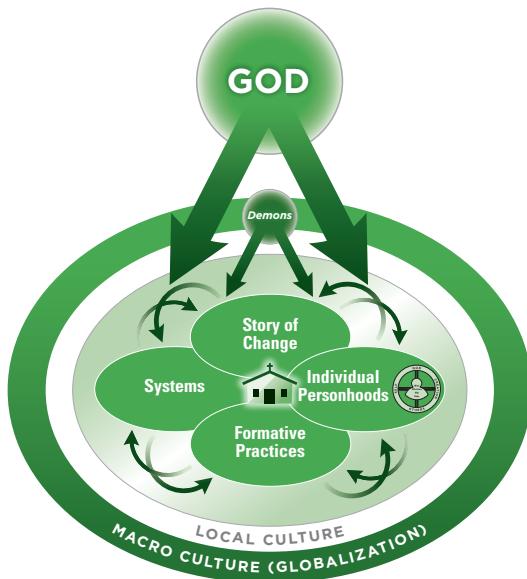
- instead of drowning themselves in alcohol, they have a sense of responsibility and purpose (see 1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 5:10)
- while they are from different tribes, they are putting aside their differences to form a new kind of family (see Rev. 7:9)

But to Absco, the strangest thing of all is these people's relationship with their God. Back in Absco's village, worship rituals were always a fearful attempt to appease a host of petty, self-absorbed spirits. Conversely, the people at Crossroads seem to actually enjoy being with their God, and it sounds like He wants to be with them. They praise their God for His loving care and even pray to become more like Him. *Who is this God?* Absco wonders.

The whole scene seems almost otherworldly to Absco, and indeed it is. For unbeknownst to him, he stands on holy ground. Crossroads Church is the breaking forth of the kingdom of God inside this Kenyan slum. It is the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21, the place where God Almighty dwells with His people, transported back from the future into the present. Absco has literally stumbled into the new creation, which is pushing its way up through the slum's filth and squalor, just as it did in a smelly manger two thousand years earlier. Partially, yet really, the story is already coming true.

As depicted in Figure 1.3, Crossroads embodies an alternative to the cultures of this world by creating a community whose story of change, formative practices, systems, and members reflect the kingdom of God. In the process, this community is necessarily engaged in poverty alleviation, for it is applying the power of Christ's death and resurrection to address the five causes of material poverty summarized in chapter 10 of *Becoming Whole*:

**FIGURE 1.3**  
A Community that Embodies God's Kingdom



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no.1 (Spring 2017): 106



**FIGURE 1.4**

Stop and look at the list in Figure 1.4 for a moment. Is this how you think of poverty alleviation? Many of us think that poverty alleviation is about wealthy Westerners digging wells, ladling soup, or distributing backpacks. To be sure, there are circumstances in which those activities can be helpful. But the provision of these material resources usually has a lasting impact only if done in the context of the far less tangible activities in items 1 through 5 in the above list.

Crossroads' approach is working. The fact that these HIV/AIDS sufferers are operating businesses and are so full of joy is amazing to behold. But their productivity does not stop there, as each of them reports having started one to two additional savings and credit associations on their own, thereby spreading life-saving financial services, biblical teaching, fellowship, songs of praise, and prayer to roughly a thousand other people!<sup>8</sup>

Did you catch that? These fifty modern-day “lepers” are ministering holistically to approximately a thousand other people. And God is using these restored “lepers” to declare and demonstrate His kingdom to Absco as well. The recipients of the ministry have become the advancers of the ministry.

Most of us wouldn’t design a ministry this way. We wouldn’t expect the beneficiaries of the ministry to actually become the ministry! Because our story of change is rooted in human power and wealth, most of us look for staff who are well-educated or have access to financial resources. Such people certainly have a role, and Crossroads uses them wisely. But in God’s story of change, He uses “the foolish things,” “the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are” (1 Cor. 1:26–29). The kingdom of God is upside down, so at the very bottom—which is mysteriously at the very top—are lepers restored as priest-kings, new creatures in Christ who are spreading the reign and worship of God in the most unlikely places.<sup>9</sup>

## WHAT'S THE SECRET FORMULA?

The remainder of the book articulates the underlying principles that the Chalmers Center uses to design ministries like the one we helped Crossroads Church start. The hope is that these Ministry Design Principles can provide at least some help to pastors, elders, deacons, boards, ministry leaders, staff, volunteers, and donors to promote more effective poverty alleviation ministries at home or abroad across a wide spectrum: health care, education, human trafficking, clean water, homelessness, jobs preparedness, and so on.

It is with much trepidation that we put forth these Ministry Design Principles. Neither we authors nor the Chalmers Center as a whole have this all figured out. Poverty alleviation is extremely complex, and there is considerable mystery to how God's world works. Many times, we are just completely wrong. Moreover, even when we do have the right ideas, a gap always exists between the theory of what we are doing and the actual practice on the ground. Like all organizations, the Chalmers Center and its ministry partners are full of broken and finite people.

Even when we do get it right, we don't claim that these principles are unique to us. We stand on the shoulders of many others who have influenced us through their research, experience, writing, speaking, mentoring, and partnership. Hence, what follows should *not* be considered as "the Chalmers Center's answers." Rather, they should be treated as a diary of our imperfect gleanings from the wisdom of many others who have helped us along the way, gleanings that we hope will be helpful to others.

While these principles reflect the insights of many wise people, they are not a magic formula. *There simply is no one-size-fits-all recipe that is guaranteed to move people out of poverty.* Readers will need to pray for godly wisdom to know how to apply these principles in their particular contexts.

It is extremely likely that the ministries with which you are involved already incorporate some of the Ministry Design Principles in this *Field Guide*, but it is also quite possible that some of the concepts presented here will be very new to you. In fact, some of the principles may sound downright strange to you, so strange that you may wonder whether they actually work. The good news is that these principles have been used by ministries to improve the lives of millions of poor people just like Absco, and scientific evidence supports many of them. But ultimately neither practical experience nor scientific research is the ultimate standard. Rather, we believe the Bible tells us much about human flourishing and how God is working to achieve such flourishing. While we can observe some of this process,

most of the biblical story is spiritual, unmeasurable, and incomprehensible. So, ultimately, we must accept this story by faith—faith that God is real, that His Word is trustworthy, and that He always keeps His promises, including His promises to use His means to make His people whole.

It is important to emphasize that the Chalmers Center did *not* make the HIV/AIDS ministry work. Far more credit goes to Crossroads Church, which is the primary manifestation of God’s kingdom in the Kenyan slum. It is this church that provided the vision, resources, and wisdom needed to launch this ministry; and it is this church’s faithful sacrifices that keep it going.

And ultimately, all glory goes to God. Poverty alleviation is not fundamentally about correctly applying principles, techniques, and methods, as important as those are. Rather, successful poverty alleviation depends on God to supernaturally intervene in His world, and He is not subject to human manipulation. God is the central actor in His own story of change.

Our dependence on God does not imply that we do nothing, passively waiting for God to act. Rather, because we have been restored as the royal priesthood and the holy nation, we are called to faithfully live into God’s story of change, dynamically working with Him to advance His kingdom. And because God hasn’t given us a detailed script, we need to improvise our roles in His unfolding drama.

Our hope is that this *Field Guide* will serve as a prompt for this improvisation, providing some direction for all of us as we experiment with the best way to apply God’s story in our various contexts. Although we should take care not to hurt others, the reality is that we will make all kinds of mistakes along the way. This reality should not paralyze us. Rather, we should move forward in both humility and joy, knowing that—despite our failures—the triune God will make His story break forth into this world, both for materially poor people and for ourselves.