

HOW BEAUTY WILL SAVE THE WORLD

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WINFIELD BEVINS

HOW BEAUTY WILL SAVE THE WORLD

RECOVERING THE POWER OF THE
ARTS FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

FOREWORD BY W. DAVID O. TAYLOR



OAKS PRESS

How Beauty Will Save the World

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“Many confuse beauty with sentimentality or marketability. In this book, Winfield Bevins shows us what beauty really is, and what it really does. This book will help you to see past an often-ugly age to a gospel that is not just good and true but also shockingly beautiful.”

Russell Moore, editor-in-chief, *Christianity Today*

“In *How Beauty Will Save the World*, we’re invited into a prophetic and urgent call to recover beauty as a vital component of our faith and witness. This book is a journey—a border-stalking pilgrimage—where art, faith, and mission converge to reveal how beauty transforms, disrupts, and renews. It’s not just theory; it’s lived theology. The creative expression of faith is no longer optional in our fragmented world. This is a manifesto for a new renaissance, compelling us to embody the gospel through imagination and creativity. Winfield Bevins delivers a timely vision we cannot afford to ignore.”

Alan Hirsch, award-winning author of numerous books;
founder, Movement Leaders Collective

“Winfield Bevins has not only founded what is now a flourishing organization (Creo Arts); he has given us a book as well, and one that is readable, probing, and perceptive. It will doubtless inspire and energize any who feel drawn to be a part of the renaissance of faith and art in our time.”

Jeremy Begbie, Duke University

“Beauty is everywhere, but we need trustworthy guides to help us see, teachers who help us get the beauty deep inside us. Winfield, through his words and his own artistry, carries us into the sacred, healing wonders.”

Winn Collier, director, The Eugene Peterson Center For Christian Imagination; author, *A Burning in My Bones* and
Love Big, Be Well

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STEEPLES AND STUDIOS

"The Church needs artists because without art we cannot reach the world."

— TIM KELLER

I love walking through the great cities of Europe, whose streets are filled with the timeless beauty of centuries-old cathedrals. Their steeples still rise above the skylines, reminding us of a day when Christianity and the arts were intimately connected. Many of these great buildings were the direct result of the relationship between Christianity and the arts during the Renaissance.

These historic sacred spaces were built to inspire awe and wonder in people's hearts and minds. Whereas more recent low-church Protestant traditions have focused primarily on the Word as experienced by the individual through the sermon, for traditional liturgical churches the buildings and decorations were designed to proclaim the gospel through visual details. The sacred art and architecture of these ancient churches and cathedrals were designed with high ceilings and ornate designs to help worshipers recognize their part in something greater than themselves as they prepared to encounter the transcendence of almighty God.

Even after centuries, the work of the artisans continues to exude a deep sense of spirituality and mystery. The architecture and symbols have a defined function within the experience, bearing rich meaning and functioning in harmony with the sermons, prayers, songs, and words that tell the story of the gospel. The physical symbols communicate this without uttering a single word.

These great sacred spaces can inspire us to imagine how the influence of a new renaissance of Christianity and the arts would look in today's churches. Many Christians find it hard to visualize what it would look like for their church to embrace the arts in their local congregational setting.

I am often asked by sincere church leaders, "How can my church engage the arts?" Many of us don't even know what it would look like, which is why I wrote this chapter. In this chapter, I want to help provide practical answers to this question by giving real examples of churches that are engaging the arts, as well as ways churches can embrace the arts. I'll also share real-life examples of churches across the nation who are engaging in the arts in meaningful ways to enrich the lives of their congregations and to impact their communities. As we shall see, there are many great examples of how communities of faith across the United States have made the arts a normal part of their everyday lives.

Pastors and Artists Together

If churches are going to engage the arts in an impactful way, it must not be left to the artists alone. Christian artists need the church, and the reality is that the church needs the arts too. The body of Christ will not be complete without the amazing gifts and creativity of Christian artists.

If we are going to see a renaissance of Christianity and the arts, it will require pastors and artists to work together in reclaiming the arts in the life of the church. Let me say: pastors and church leaders, it should begin with you. As shepherds and gatekeepers, you must be the ones who have a desire to love and support Christian artists. When churches don't know what to do with their artists, it leaves the artists feeling alienated. Pastors and churches need to think of creative ways to disciple, encourage, and empower artists as ambassadors of beauty in their local communities.

Many people are familiar with Eugene Peterson's beloved books and his poetic Bible translation called *The Message*. Peterson appreciated the arts and loved artists. In an essay on pastors and artists, Peterson wrote, "Everyone needs artists. Pastors especially—and especially this pastor." He went on to encourage all pastors to "make friends with the artist. Let him rip off the veils of habit that obscure the beauty of Christ in the faces we look at day after day."¹ Yes, I believe that pastors need artists to help them see God's beauty in the church and the world.

Churches must think of ways to disciple, encourage, and empower artists.

There should be a symbiotic relationship between artists and pastors. Artists need the church to love and support them, and the church needs to receive the creative gifts of her artists. Pastors need artists to help spark their imaginations and to help them think creatively about sharing the gospel with a new generation. Church leaders need to become champions of the arts, and they need to encourage artists in the same way they would any other Christian vocation. Artists need cheerleaders who will encourage them in their artwork and who will support them in their faith.

When I pastored the church in the Outer Banks, I regularly met with visual artists and musicians to encourage them to use their gifts and talents for God and in the service of the church and the world. As a result, artists thrived in their vocation and were empowered to use their gifts within the church. Then they were sent out to bring hope and healing to our community.

Another example of a pastor who has partnered with artists in his church and community is Reverend Gary Ball, who planted Redeemer Anglican Church in Asheville, North Carolina. Like me, Gary is both a pastor and an artist. When Hurricane Helene's floodwaters ripped through Asheville, it destroyed an estimated 80 percent of the town's River Arts District, which included twenty-six galleries where over three hundred artists displayed their work. Gary and his church immediately engaged their community through humanitarian efforts.

As a result of their love for artists and their community, God gave them a vision to open a community arts space that would help the town recover and would bless local artists. The space will provide artists with a place to restart after losing their studios. It will be open to both artists who are members of their church and from the local artistic community. The space will provide artists with a place to showcase and sell their work, as well as to hold monthly artist gatherings and other events.

Healing the relationship between artists and the church begins with leaders like Gary who are willing to open their hearts, minds, and imaginations to bless and support artists in their church and in their local communities. Church leaders, take the first step. Reach out to the artists in your church and community with open arms and dream with them about how you can work together to spread the gospel's healing power to the world through the arts.

Cultivating Community for Artists

Another way that churches can nourish the arts is by forming local art communities where artists can thrive and be encouraged to create works of art that give glory to God and edify the faith of others. God has given artists gifts and talents that can be used for the kingdom. Forming artisan communities is one method churches can use to help artists feel welcomed and understood.

Valarie Grimes of Radiant Church in Savannah, Georgia, recently started the Radiant Church Artist Community. Her vision is to create a vibrant, multicultural space where local artists can express their creativity while engaging with spiritual themes and values. In an interview Valarie told me, “The vision is to become a center for faith-based creativity in Savannah. We aim to nurture a community where art and spirituality intertwine, celebrating diversity and fostering unity through the shared experience of creative expression.”

Radiant Church Artist Community seeks to integrate faith, community, and the arts, offering both emerging and established artists a platform to showcase their work while fostering a deeper connection to their identity in Christ. The community is rooted in the belief that creativity is a divine gift; it encourages artistic expression that speaks to the heart of their multicultural congregation and the larger community.

One of their core goals is to build bridges between different cultural groups within the Savannah area by highlighting the unique artistic expressions of each, encouraging collaboration and understanding as well as providing mentorship opportunities, where experienced artists can guide younger creatives in their artistic and spiritual development. Grimes and Radiant Church are a beautiful example of what it looks like for how a

church can use the power of the arts to impact their local community with the light and love of Christ.

It's time for the church to reimagine what it looks like to cultivate community for Christian artists. The formation of art communities can begin reconnecting church congregations with art and Christian artists, which can have a dual purpose. On one hand, they help artists deepen their faith and feel more affirmed in their vocation. At the same time, these guilds contribute to local congregational renewal through the cultivation of art appreciation among parishioners and serve as a missional outreach to local communities.

Some art communities will start in existing churches, while others will begin in the marketplace, which is the intersection where everyday people work and live. Some are made up of Christian artists from various churches and denominations. Some art communities can be small, while others might be larger depending on the context. Each one can have a strong missional focus to use the arts to impact the local community. Each one can be unique and will exist to bring beauty, goodness, and truth to the world through the arts.

Let me share a personal example of an art guild. We formed a local art guild in Wilmore, Kentucky, where I live. Our guild is made up of artists from various disciplines, including dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts. We meet on the first Thursday of every month to support and encourage artists. Each month a different artist presents their work, which is followed by a time of prayer and fellowship. Our guild regularly hosts art shows and events that serve as an outreach to the local community. We have a unique mix of professional and emerging artists, as well as young and old. We recently opened a local art gallery that is a place for our artists to show and sell their work in the community. The guild has become a place of discipleship and prayer for many artists in our local community.

When asked about the impact of the guild on her art and faith, one young artist said the guild helps give a channel for her creative process. She said, “I love to see what other artists are creating to gain inspiration and to have relatable conversation about being a Christian artist in today’s world.” Another member said, “Being a part of the guild has helped strengthen my faith, and it has encouraged me to grow in art.” Creating community for Christian artists through the formation of local art guilds can help artists grow spiritually and personally as well as professionally.

Reimagining Sacred Space

Local churches can also engage the arts by using existing spaces in their buildings for a variety of art programs and initiatives, including art galleries, art shows, and other art-related events such as workshops and youth programs. Imagine the thousands of church buildings with empty walls and stripped-down sanctuaries that are screaming to be used to display the glory of God through the arts! All it takes is a fresh imagination to open our church buildings up and create galleries that feature art. I want to encourage us to visualize how we can use church buildings to invite artists to proclaim the beauty of the gospel through the arts and the use of sacred space.

Church buildings are one of the most underutilized assets the church has. What if churches were known for being places of art and beauty in their communities? What if the church was a place where people could come and see the good news of the gospel demonstrated through the arts? A great example of a local church using their building to support the arts is St. Andrews in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. The church gathers artists and creatives in what they call “The Tribe,” which is a community of creators who support each other in creative endeavors. The Tribe

gathers artists for small groups and occasional forums, encouraging them to intentionally develop relationships with each other at all levels of skill and in all forms of artistic mediums.

What if churches were known for being places of beauty in their communities?

The church also designated building space to have an established art gallery called the Kairos Gallery, which features the art of both local and internationally known Christian artists. They also host an annual arts conference as a missional outreach, which draws people interested in the arts from across the nation. As a

church, St. Andrews embodies what it looks like to encourage and support local Christian artists, to promote art appreciation among members, and to utilize art as a means of reaching out to people in the local community.

Commissioning Artists

A further step churches can take to support the arts is commissioning artists to create works of beauty that reflect the glory of God. What if churches commissioned artwork to be featured in the sanctuary and to be used during times of worship? One illustration of a church doing this well is Trinity Anglican Church in Lafayette, Louisiana. At Trinity, rector Peter Johnston commissions artists to create works of art to go along with the themes of their sermon series.

Over the last few years, Trinity has grown a significant collection of artwork that includes more than three hundred works and is growing in number and depth each year. I recently spoke at Trinity, and as I walked into their church building, I was amazed to see the walls filled with beautiful artwork that they had commissioned. Artwork is not just a side interest but central

to their church's mission and vision to bring beauty, goodness, and truth to Lafayette, Louisiana.

Another great example of a local church investing time and money to commission artists to create works of art in the service of God is Trinity Lutheran Church in San Pedro, California, near Los Angeles. The church recently converted their old bell tower into a prayer chapel. They call it the All Saints Prayer Chapel, and it is used for morning and evening prayer and for prayer ministry after Sunday services. The church also has a young adult internship program called Theta Community that uses the prayer chapel throughout the week.

The pastor, Nathan Hoff, had a vision to commission an artist to paint a colorful panorama of icons featuring saints both ancient and modern in the newly renovated prayer chapel. The reason I know about this project is because the church commissioned me to paint the chapel! It took me a year and numerous trips to California to complete the work (including two visits in which I brought my daughters Elizabeth and Anna Belle to help me). I spent an entire month of my life praying over and painting the chapel! Now, the All Saints Prayer Chapel is a beautiful sacred space where heaven meets earth, and sanctuary meets the streets.²

The belief that beauty will save the world is at the heart of the church's motivation for creating art for the All Saints Prayer Chapel. I asked Nathan why he is so committed to helping the church become a place of beauty. He replied by saying, "The gospel is inherently beautiful. We long to participate in God's ongoing work of creating, redeeming, and sanctifying, believing deeply that beauty will save the world." Nathan doesn't just believe this; he also lives it by leading the church in reaching their community with the beauty of the gospel through recovering the arts. The church recently turned their convictions about the arts into action and renovated an old doctor's office they

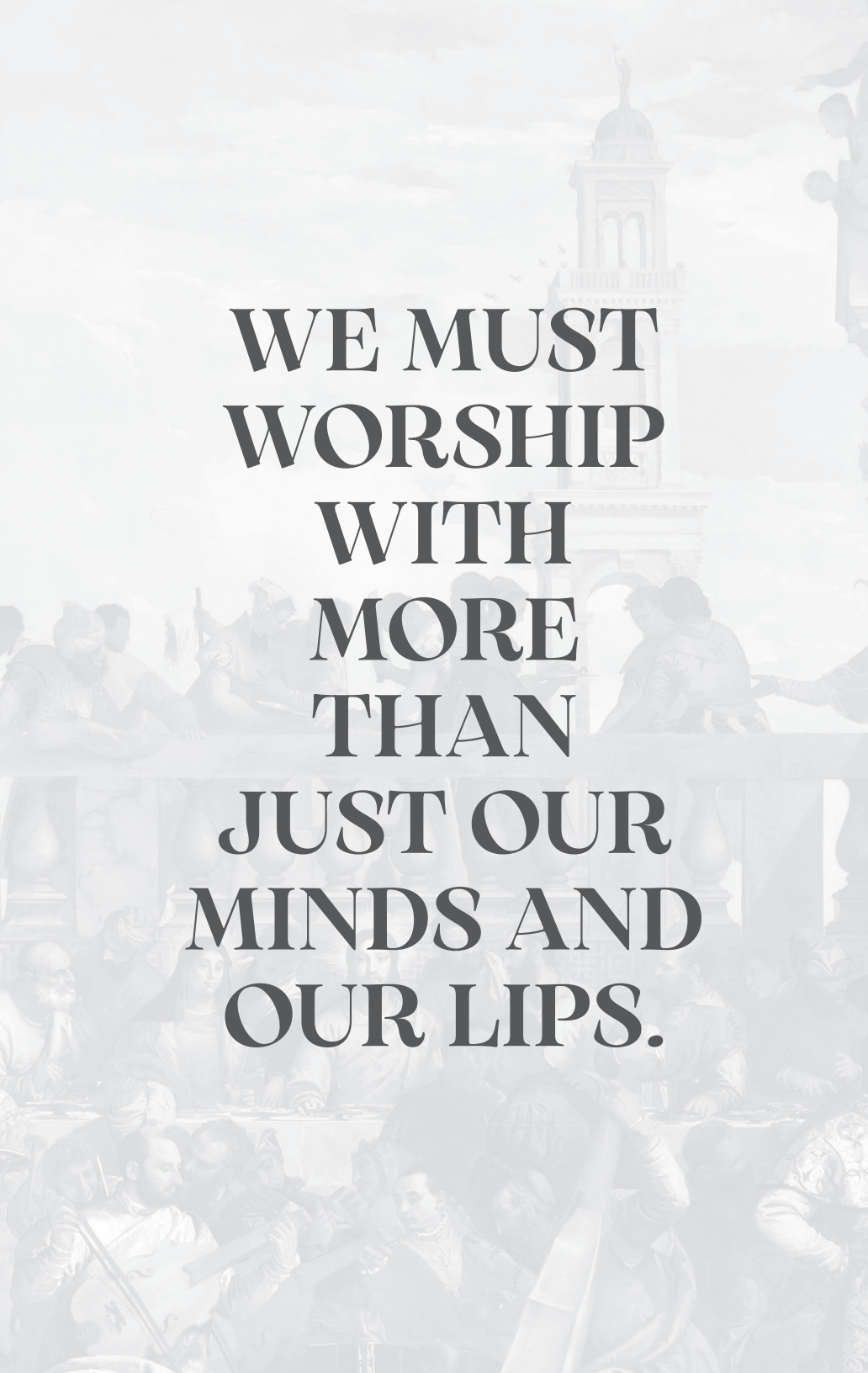
owned and turned it into a community arts center called Kipos Gallery & Studios. The word *kipos* in Greek means “the garden.”

According to Hoff, the church wants to plant and water Christian artists to be able to grow in their fields and bloom in their craft while being supported by the church and a community of artists. The arts center is a place for artists to cultivate community by hosting monthly guild meetings. The building also has studio space for artists to create art, as well as a storefront to share and sell their art with the greater community. I can’t think of a better example of a church that seeks to embody the words “steeple and studios”!

Embracing the Arts and Worship

The arts can also help aid our life of prayer and worship, both privately and corporately, by creating multi-arts worship experiences where people can encounter God through the arts. The history of Christian art reveals a fruitful relationship between the arts and the worship of the church. True worship of God begins in our hearts as we offer adoration, glory, and praise to him in a multitude of different ways. This worship is manifested as we lift up our voices to God in prayer, praise, and song. The arts can be a powerful way to experience the Lord in worship with all our senses, including our eyes, ears, and bodies.

It’s helpful to begin by broadening our definition of worship, but we must also move beyond a merely mental understanding of worship—instead thinking of it as an embodied state that engages our senses as well. By “embodied” I mean that we, as living beings, must practice worship with more than just our minds and our lips. Worship involves our senses, which include our eyes and our ears. God created us to worship him, and the arts can help us worship God with our senses in the “beauty of holiness” (Ps. 96:9, KJV).



**WE MUST
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WITH
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OUR LIPS.**

The arts can assist our worship by offering a rich, multisensory experience that engages the whole person through touch, taste, and smell. Psalm 27:4 says, “One thing I have asked of the LORD, and that I will seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple” (AMP). People are longing for more than a faith that gives them head knowledge. People want a faith that is also tangible, engaging both the seen and unseen realities of life.

The arts help us worship and deepen our devotion to God by engaging the senses and speaking to our hearts and our imagination. The late pastor Timothy Keller, in an essay reflecting on why the church needs the arts in worship, wrote, “We cannot praise God without art. . . . A great poem, an incredible piece of music or a marvelous painting—these are all ways to express our awe at the glory of God. Art is a natural vehicle for pouring out the praise we long to give God.”³

Last year Carol Anderson (whom we met in chapter 4) led a multi-arts Advent service at our church that featured song, visual arts, dance, and drama. Carol has a heart for bridging the arts and the Christian faith in the local church, especially in the context of a worship service. She has an incredible gift of navigating the complexity of bringing the arts into a worship context in a way that edifies others and brings glory to God.

The theme of the Advent service was “Waiting,” and the worship service began with a time of waiting on God. Each element incorporated the theme of waiting. Each individual expression of the arts was followed by moments of silence to allow the worshipers to contemplate and pray. It was a beautiful worship experience, and many people expressed their deep appreciation for how the church incorporated the various forms of art into the service, as well as making space for silence and reflection.

Whether music, poetry, theatre, painting, dance, or the use of film, the arts can be a powerful aid to help people enter into worship. Over the years, I have seen firsthand how the arts can be expressed in a worship service in a variety of ways. The arts have helped me experience God when praying in front of a painting, while listening to music, while watching a film, while reading a book—the list could go on. Can you think about a time when the arts have helped you encounter God?

Engaging the World with the Arts

In conclusion, churches can embrace the power of the arts to support the ultimate mission of reaching the world with the beauty of the gospel. Opening the doors of the church to host community art shows and events is an excellent way to reach people in the community who would never step foot in the church building otherwise. Over the years, I have personally seen how art shows and art events have the power to draw people in the community to come out and engage in the arts.

Churches can have quarterly art shows that are open to the public, or they can host an annual arts festival that features live music and space for artists to show and sell their artwork. These events can be an excellent way for churches to make significant connections with unchurched people in their local community. What would it look like if your church became known as a center for the arts in your community?

Let me introduce you to First United Methodist Church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, which engages their community through a Christian Arts Camp every year. The arts camp is a one-week immersive program for high school students, designed to inspire creativity, deepen faith, and foster community. It provides an interactive experience that brings together a dynamic blend of music, dance, acting, poetry, physical art,

and pottery. The program is led by Mitch Marcello, the worship director of First Church. Marcello told me, “Through this holistic approach, students will explore their God-given talents, connect with peers, and grow spiritually.”

This initiative is a part of the dynamic partnership between First Church and Saint John’s School of the Arts (SOTA). The program has flourished since its inception. SOTA has strong connections with over 250 families and extensive expertise in dance, music, and the arts. By offering this program, they aim to strengthen the bond between the arts and the gospel and to empower young people to become both creative leaders and faithful ambassadors in their communities.

Mitch believes in the power of beauty to save the world as they engage art to reach youth and young adults in their community with the gospel and love of Christ. According to Mitch, “We believe strongly that there is a theology of art, beauty, and play that must be part of the Christian worldview.” I believe that Mitch and First Church are on to something that other churches need to learn. What if beauty through the arts is the key to sharing the truths of the gospel and to reaching the hearts and minds of the next generation?

These are just a few examples of ways that Christians and churches can engage and support the arts in their local context and communities. These churches all share the belief that beauty will save the world, which is why they believe the arts matter.

Dream with Me

There are endless ways churches can engage and support the arts to enrich their local congregation and to reach their local communities with the beauty, goodness, and truth of the gospel. I want to invite you to dream with me for a moment, to spark our

imagination for the future of the church and the arts: What if Christians were known as the most creative people in the world? What if the church was known for being a place of beauty, goodness, and truth? What if the church was a place where people could come and see the good news of the gospel demonstrated in word, deed, and through the arts?

What if
Christians
were known
as the most
creative people
in the world?

W. David O. Taylor, whom I mentioned before, is both an artist and a theologian who served as a worship arts pastor before joining the faculty of Fuller Seminary. Taylor shares a similar vision for the church and the arts. He

says, “I do wish to see the arts become a normative part of the life of our churches. It will be a marvelous day when children will grow up with the mentality that sees art, in all its splendid variety, as a God-given, ‘normal’ part of our Christian faith.”²⁴

Like David, I want to empower you to reimagine with me how your church can engage the arts. Think of the tens of thousands of church buildings that sit empty through the week and have barren walls that look more like a school cafeteria than a creative picture of the kingdom of God. Imagine if those churches used their facilities to host art guilds, if they converted rooms or hallways into rotating art shows that invited church members to think deeply about their faith, and if they welcomed people in from the community to see the beauty of the Lord. Imagine if every church incorporated the various expressions of the arts into their worship service.

The pastors and the churches we have met in this chapter show us it can be done. All it takes is the belief that beauty will save the world and pastors and artists working together in a creative collaboration to bring the beauty of the gospel to impact their communities.

In the next chapter, we will explore how the quest for beauty is also linked to a calling to make our life a work of art and ultimately, to share beauty with the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Winfield Bevins is an internationally recognized author, artist, and the founding director of Creo Arts, which is a non-profit that exists to bring beauty, goodness, and truth to the world through the arts. Winfield is artist-in-residence at Asbury Theological Seminary and frequently speaks at conferences, seminars, and universities on a variety of topics. He is the author of several books, including *Liturgical Mission: The Work of the People for the Sake of the World*, *Ever Ancient Ever New: The Allure of Liturgy for a New Generation*, and *Marks of a Movement*.