

# IMAGINATION MANIFESTO

A call to plant oases of imagination

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**Ted**

For Carolyn, as beautiful and creative a soul as I've ever been  
blessed to know

**Ruth**

For Kenyatta, the most precious soul in my creative life



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# Foreword

Reading *Imagination Manifesto* is to be transported to the halls of a favourite gallery, captivated by a jazz concert or entranced in a Japanese anime. Indeed, Ruth and Ted's love of the arts is matched only by their sincere faith and intelligence in bridging the gaps between faith and arts communities.

I admit, when first asked to write a Foreword for this book, I hesitated. Does the world need another manifesto right now? In a global moment so marred by toxic politics, invasions, occupations and cultural striations, the very thought of a manifesto seemed unnecessarily didactic or divisive. Yet Ruth and Ted offer something very different to the aggressively pedantic prose I have come to associate with the language of manifesto. More fool me, *Imagination Manifesto* is a generously expansive conversation concerned with healing cultural rifts. It punches a fist to the air but an olive branch is clasped within. Placards of protest rise but their slogans are a banner of love. Indeed, *Imagination Manifesto* is deliciously paradoxical, demanding both exhortation and acceptance, aspiration and lament; a kind of hearkened resistance, witty, wise and practical in exploration of a timely subject, and a welcome addition to the ongoing conversation about faith and the creative arts.

This book is about creative cultural engagement, something Ruth and Ted liken more to a covenant of love than a strategy of war. It reads like a conversation between friends, moving between rhetorical argument, parable, words of encouragement, theological insight and anecdote. At times I welled with tears, being especially moved by Ruth's account of an art critic who sought reconciliation with a friend after viewing her photographs.

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In moments, it reminded me of Corita Kent's ten rules for art students and teachers, also developed through many years working with artists and understanding their needs. In other moments, it brought to mind the letters of Van Gogh to his brother Theo as he wrestled with his art in relation to his faith. At times, I felt as if I were reading a film script or letter from a mentor. In this way, Ted and Ruth speak to a broad demographic of practising artists, aspiring creatives, church leaders and those who wouldn't consider themselves artists but want to support those who do. The closing chapters are especially helpful in offering practical encouragement to both the artist and 'the rest of us', as Ted puts it. Each chapter ends with questions for further discussion, a helpful tool for students, book groups or personal reflection. I laid down my copy periodically to pick up my sketchbook and make notes or drawings in response to what I had read.

Ruth and Ted offer definitions for terms such as culture, engagement and imagination that are often surprising; culture is a jazz ensemble or a network of things that can bind us together or drive us apart. Imagination is a fish, or a pair of spectacles with coloured lenses, or an unruly kid who sits in the back of the classroom and doesn't always follow the rules.

Ted argues that culture is not optional because it is both God's command and human nature. As such, it is worth engaging because it may well be around for ever. He winsomely debunks often-held assumptions that God is angry with creative culture or will burn it up when Christ returns. We are reminded that Jesus calls us to be culturally active in every area of society, not just to be passengers in the world but called further into it, to be deeply resonant in the cultural fabric of creation.

*Imagination Manifesto* describes a kind of collective church aphantasia, where certain Christian communities have dismissed the imagination as something suspicious or irrelevant to mission. Yet, as Ted puts it, dismiss the imagination and you end up dismissing most of the Bible.



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As an artist, I have vested interest in all things related to imagination. Current research in cognitive science suggests that our imagination isn't solely connected to sight. The visual cortex isn't the only region of the brain that's responsible for powering imagination, and certain scientists hypothesize that imagination is the result of a wholistic neural network that coordinates activity across the brain, including our neural responses to touch, taste, feeling and even pain. In this way, imagination may not wholly exist in the mind. It may also be encoded in our bodies. This shouldn't come as too much of a surprise and evidence suggests that our ancestors imagined as such. The Hebrews imagined from their gut, the Greeks from their heart. A biblical understanding of the imagination encompasses body and mind, something more incarnate, even fleshy material. It is only more recently that we have come to consider the imagination an occupation between the brain and eyes. When I paint, I'm not merely engaged in a cerebral activity but one that involves my arms, hands, touch, sense, emotion, intuition, repeated behaviour, habit and improvisation. In this way, my imagination doesn't stand independent of my body but is profoundly interconnected from neural pathway to sinew and muscle. I don't just imagine from my mind's eye but through my entire body.

Imagination may also inform the daily rhythms of living, moving and navigating the world, through the regular rituals of moving across a room, driving a car, reading the Bible, playing guitar, preparing breakfast and even sitting in a pew. Each of these cultural activities is a form of embodied imagination that informs who we are and what we think and believe. Imagination matters because it informs every aspect of human life. If I am to take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ, I must submit my imagination to the Lordship of Christ as an act of daily devotion. In this way, Ted and Ruth do a great service to all who seek to understand how imagination can be consecrated in a life devoted to Christ.

## Foreword

Described in two aspects, creative and perceptive, *Imagination Manifesto* argues that the imagination shapes our experience of the world around us, and enables us to bring new things into the world with the power to shape us and how we perceive reality. Ruth and Ted invite us to nurture both a cross-shaped imagination that deals with darkness, and an empty-tomb-shaped imagination that helps us to live in the light, or indeed to embrace both in tension.

*Imagination Manifesto* is a bold, compassionate and empathic readdressing of an imbalance that has existed for many years. It reunites reason with imagination with such clarity of purpose and strength of vision that it cannot help but inspire. It will make you reach for your paints, march for injustice, pen a love song, write to your pastor and sing out a new song of praise. Ruth and Ted's vision is necessary because it's how we were intended to live. This manifesto matters because imagination matters and no better guides could be granted in this journey than Ruth and Ted.

Alastair Gordon

Co-founder of Morphē Arts and a painter and art tutor  
at Leith School of Art

# Introduction: why a manifesto for the imagination?

## To address the disconnect between church and world

People write manifestos when the world they see is out of kilter somehow. When there's a significant disconnect between the way the world is and how it ought to be, that's when you get out a pen (or laptop) and lay out an alternative vision, a change of direction.

There is a disconnect between church and world. It's a perennial problem, an age-old tension between Christians and the world they live in. But in the past few decades, it has got worse. You will no doubt have noticed the church change roles over the years, from a cultural authority and trusted friend to an irrelevance, even an enemy. This is not good news, for the ones estranged from the church need what the church has to offer: the true good news. The church's response to this new situation has itself been out of kilter in certain ways. Hence the need for a manifesto.

'Manifesto' is a scary word for some. It summons up visions of scruffy, long-haired, bespectacled students preparing for the latest revolution. Wild-eyed activists marching or building barricades. Violence. Weapons. Guillotines. Rest assured, this book is not that, though one of us *is* bespectacled (Ted) and the other rocks an amazing afro (Ruth).

We chose the word 'manifesto' because it is like an alarm clock, to awaken Christians to the problem and to a potential solution: the imagination and creativity that lies within the church community, right under our noses. If we ignore the life of the imagination, we will watch the alienation between the church and the surrounding

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culture deepen. We will look on, befuddled, as more and more Christian creatives grow discouraged and restless within the church, many heading for the exit. We need to pay attention to the imagination, for it holds the potential to heal the rifts that divide us. Cultivating imagination can help build bridges into the culture we all share. That is what this book is about: creative cultural engagement.

### **Harmony, dissonance and improvisation with the music of culture**

What do we mean by ‘culture’? Culture is a network of things, institutions, values and patterns of behaviour that binds us together . . . and sometimes drives us apart. Culture is like a jazz ensemble. It depends on many different contributors working in harmony – a family holiday tradition here, an architect there, a university prof. discussing issues with his students, a government official crafting policy, a nursery nurse caring for toddlers in a day nursery, a care-taker sweeping a hallway. All of them follow (more or less) a ‘score’, a set of agreed-on rules that determine the ‘key’ that they ‘play’ in, the rhythm of their lives. There are, of course, injustices, crimes, things that cause static and pain. But in any functioning society, the culture follows the score – a shared picture of the world that guides how we move and act in it. Oh, but then there are these creative types who – without breaking utterly away – play jazz. They *improvise* on the score, elaborate on it, deepen it, make it shimmer and vibrate in a new way. Sometimes, they intentionally add notes of dissonance, not because they are ignorant of the overall music of culture, but because they want to protest that which is dark, wrong, predatory to human dignity, an enemy of *imago Dei*. And sometimes, they can even end up rewriting the score a bit.

Once upon a time, the church was very much in charge of the score. It set the rhythms of life, set the standards for what counted

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as fair and good, and generally laid the order of the world out for all to see. That age has passed. The age of church-as-composer is over; we live in a post-Christian world. How did the church respond to this shift in the way that the orchestra functions? Well, some clung to dreams of past glory and tried to force their way back into the conductor's seat. And when they were rebuffed, they blew their horns from the sidelines, furious at and fearful of what was to come. Others decided that enough was enough and they left to form their *own* orchestras, carefully insulated from the mainstream. They tended to copy the mainstream a bit, but in a different key, and with tunes that grated terribly on the ears of those outside their own group.

We would like to suggest another way, a path that contributes to *and* challenges the mainstream, a path that does not glory in being out of tune with the mainstream. 'But shouldn't Christians aim to be out of tune? Isn't that part of our Christian distinctiveness? Our light before the world?' Yes, but play too far out of tune and you come across as hateful, as a musical vandal. Jazz, the quintessential improvisational music, is not vandalism. It was birthed in protest against oppression that distorted human dignity. But it did so in a way that made it impossible to ignore its creative contribution to the culture.

Christians who want to contribute and engage mainstream culture must learn to *improvise* new tunes that harmonize and sometimes artfully conflict with the orchestra, draw in others who don't share our faith, tunes that reveal a tension between the status quo and a new creation, music that opens up strange new landscapes for imaginations to explore.

## A parable about creative cultural engagement

Let us illustrate what we mean with a story, a parable.

## **The parable of the oasis that was really a portal to another universe<sup>1</sup>**

Once upon a time, there was a traveller who habitually trekked throughout a dry and hostile land. It didn't bother him much, for it was all he knew. One day he saw in the distance a patch of greenery. That much colour in a land of unbroken dust-brown enticed him, and he set out for it. As he drew closer, the patch of green revealed more detail to him. This was a place of tall trees, lush undergrowth, and wild flowers.

He entered into the shade. In the centre of the oasis, he found a still pool of crystal-clear water.

But he found he was not alone, for there was a man across the pool from him, staring intently down into the water.

The traveller enquired why the man was staring so. Perhaps he had seen a fish? 'No,' the man replied. 'No fish. Something more remarkable. See for yourself.'

The traveller stared intently, too, and saw something glimmering at the bottom of the pool. It might have been simply the shimmering sunlight refracted on to the rocks below. But no, it was something more. He couldn't see it clearly, but he found the light mesmerizing. It fascinated him in a way that he could not put into words.

He cautiously asked the man across the pool about the glimmering light, what he thought it was. They talked about it until the sky grew dark and it was time for the traveller to move on.

But he was so intrigued that he came back the next day, both to gaze into the pool and to continue his conversation with the stranger. The stranger had brought food, so they shared a meal together as they continued talking, sharing ideas and theories about the mysterious light at the bottom of the pool. The traveller

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resolved to return again the next day. And so he did. This became his habit for some time.

Gradually, he found that he had become more and more dissatisfied with the dry and hostile land. He much preferred the cool shade of the oasis and the company offered there. Eventually, the stranger lost his strangeness and became a trusted friend and discussion partner.

And all the while, the light at the bottom of the pool came more and more into focus, as if someone were adjusting a hidden lens. Whole cities full of light and life began to take shape before his unbelieving eyes. The traveller knew it was impossible, for cities do not reside at the bottom of ordinary pools. Nevertheless, he continued to study the image. He sensed in it a piercing beauty that entranced and drew him magnetically, almost more than he could bear. He loved his time gazing into the pool. And yet he felt a profound sadness, for the light stirred in him deep grief as well as deep gladness.

It became increasingly obvious that this was no ordinary pool. It was rather a doorway to another world, another way of being. It also became clear that the man who had been a stranger and was now his friend had in effect become his guide. It was only a matter of time before the traveller would take the plunge to the bottom of the pool to begin the most improbable, miraculous journey he could have ever imagined.

This is what good cultural creativity can do: invite Christians and non-Christians alike into a space where their imaginations can be refreshed, stretched, challenged and comforted. Creative works in the arts and entertainment can provoke conversations and exploration. Such works can build bridges and close the gap between churches and a deeply suspicious or apathetic world.

## Imagination as a fish

But to get there, we need a better understanding of the imagination.

The imagination is like a beautiful fish, lurking in the shadows of a kelp forest. You want to touch it, grasp it, hold it. But it's elusive. In a flash of sunlight and multicoloured scales, it evades your hand and swims away to lurk somewhere else. But smart divers know to bring bait – a defrosted prawn, a bit of calamari – so it will come to them. If you do this regularly, too, it will grow used to you, become a friend. You will perhaps be able to share its magnetic beauty with others.

Consider this manifesto as your defrosted prawn, a way to better understand and befriend this elusive, alluring thing we call imagination, so that the church itself will present a more alluring witness to a watching, suspicious and deeply needy world.

We have nothing to lose but the chains that bind our imaginations. We have a world to winsomely invite to Christ. Christians of the world, unite!<sup>2</sup>

## P.S. from Ted

This book is a companion volume to a bigger book I wrote called *Oasis of Imagination: Engaging our world through a better creativity* (IVP, 2023). It's rather . . . large. IVP thought that some of you might be put off by a thick book with a lot of footnotes. So they asked me to write a smaller, more accessible book and to bring in an artist who could contribute some personal experience and practical know-how that I lack. Ruth was my first choice. Not only is she an accomplished jazz vocalist, lyricist, composer and photographer, but she has also always struck me as having a heart that is wise, humble, generous and keenly focused on the glory of God.

I took the lead in chapters 1 to 6, the nerdier, more theoretical/theological stuff, and Ruth took the lead in chapters 7 and 8, where she could bring her practical wisdom about art to bear on the content.



## Why a manifesto for the imagination?

We shared the Conclusion. Throughout the writing process, we have made suggestions and tweaked each other's sections. Truth be told, Ruth has made this book better than I could ever have done alone.

If you read this book and want to see some of the arguments fleshed out more, you want to see the receipts, a deeper meditation on what the Bible has to say about the imagination, some of the science and philosophy behind what's being said here – in short, if you're kind of a nerd like me – then, by all means, grab a copy of the big book as well. It is my hope that your further questions will be answered there.

Enjoy!

## P.S. from Ruth

I was surprised and deeply grateful that Ted asked me to share in this book. His insight, intellect, research and experience make this book possible. I am fascinated by manifestos, particularly manifestos written by creatives and artists. This creatives' and artists' manifesto is here to define and critique the present-day art and culture and to provide a creative concept that can shift the current paradigms. This deeply resonates with me. If to create is to protest all that is wrong and unjust, then the imagination manifesto shows how artists and creatives can communicate about and persuade culture through the arts.

## Notes

- 1 This parable also appears in the companion to this book by me, Ted Turnau, *Imagination Oasis: Engaging our world through a better creativity* (IVP, 2023).
- 2 This is a riff on the famous ending of that most celebrated and condemned manifesto, Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*, <[www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch04.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch04.htm)>, accessed March 2023. Fear not – it's a parody, not an endorsement, of communism.

# *Imagination manifesto*

- 1 Jesus calls us into the world, so we should engage culture.*
- 2 Jesus calls us to love and serve our neighbours. Stop undermining this calling by fighting culture wars to impose 'Christian values'.*
- 3 Jesus calls us to seek the good of our communities, so we must build bridges rather than retreat into 'safe' Christian bubbles.*
- 4 We need to plant oases – creative works that invite Christians and non-Christians alike into conversation.*
- 5 Imagination is an important part of how God made us. We need to understand how 'the eyes of the heart' shape both how we perceive the world and how we create new worlds.*
- 6 A Christian imagination that plants oases in a post-Christian world must express the tension between the darkness and the light, and find a proper balance and resonance between shouting its message and mumbling incoherently.*
- 7 Christians are called to be witnesses, to bear witness both to darkness and to light, to the realities of life's joys and challenges and to our hope in Christ.*
- 8 Artists in our community bear witness, enriching our imaginations with their creativity. We, in turn, should bear witness to them by supporting and nurturing the artists and creatives among us.*
- 9 Christian artists need the church, and the Christian community needs artists. Christians of the world, unite!*