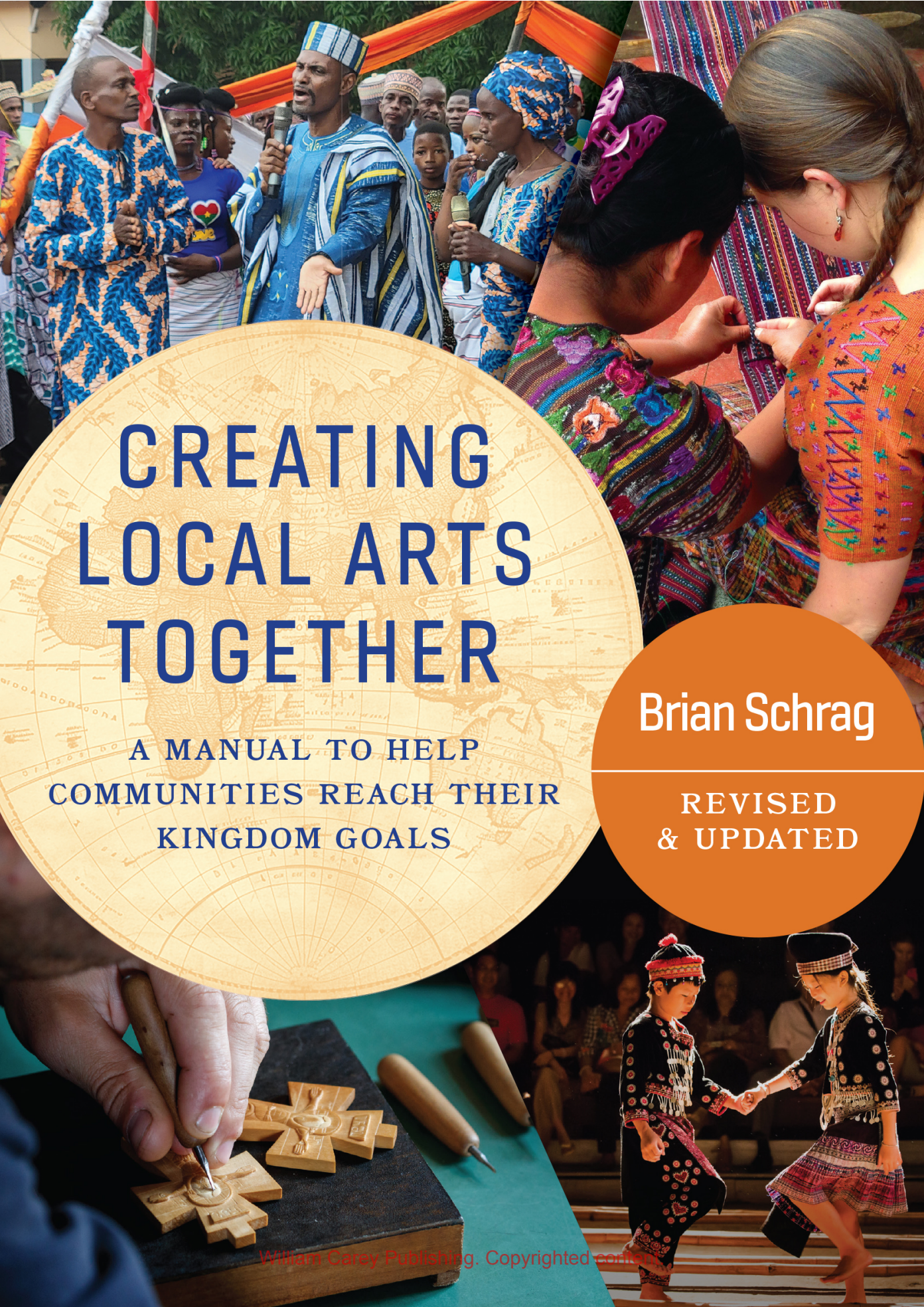


CREATING LOCAL ARTS TOGETHER

A MANUAL TO HELP COMMUNITIES REACH THEIR KINGDOM GOALS

Brian Schrag

REVISED & UPDATED

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Creating Local Arts Together (Revised and Updated): A Manual to Help Communities Reach Their Kingdom Goals
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1 FRAMING THE SEVEN CONVERSATIONS

ALWAYS TOWARD HEAVEN

We have chosen to organize our activities in the arts in terms of how they can move us toward the Kingdom of Heaven. What is this Kingdom? Jesus taught his followers to pray for the Kingdom of Heaven to come to Earth (Matt 6:10). He described it as centered on himself and his message (Mark 1:15), growing mysteriously but to great size (Mark 4), marked by values contrary to human social systems (Mark 10; 12; Luke 6), and connected in practice to healing and spiritual warfare (Luke 9–11). The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth mysteriously but concretely reflects the reality of life in Heaven, and God wants us to help it expand.

A basic, confounding characteristic of the Kingdom of Heaven is that it exists only partially on Earth now. At the end of time, Jesus will recreate the cosmos—including our bodies—as the New Creation without the all-infecting rot of sin (2 Pet 3; 1 Cor 15). Each community has aspects that are more like the Kingdom, and those that are less. No human culture fully expresses God's Kingdom, but because God created us in his image, there are glimpses of it everywhere, evidence that Heaven exists.

We live and work in the *now and not-yet* phase of Heaven on Earth. This means that we can know and increase Heaven in partnership with God, but the corruption of sin still undermines our efforts. "The creation will be made new from the old, just as happened to Jesus. Resurrection is a vision for both Jesus and creation."[1] Happily, we can nurture rock-solid hope in Christ in us and others based on the certainty of future unhampered relationships with God.

What would a community look like that was deeply shaped by the values and spiritual power of God's Kingdom? It would contain an expanding body of Christ-followers—the church—who worship God in spirit and in truth. Its members would be growing spiritually, socially, and physically healthier in fruitful harmony with their environments. Older members would be passing on God-reflecting aspects of their cultures to younger members. Everyone would have access to well-translated Scripture in the languages they understand best, so that young and old could remember and apply it to their lives. And the whole community would be marked by justice, honesty, health, joy, and care and love for people in their margins.

Until God makes the Not-Yet completely Now, we experience soul-deep pain, exerting every tendon, every muscle, every conviction to find relief and embrace concrete hope (1 Cor 8:18–30). And some of the truest, most fruitful producers of hope touching our suffering cores are our exquisitely, uniquely crafted forms of communication: artistry.

1 Wright, *Future of the World*. N. T. Wright develops a detailed description of this view in *Surprised by Hope*. See also Wright, *Simply Jesus*.

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Practically, locally available artistic forms of communication are powerful resources for anyone working toward all signs of the New Creation.[2]

Such systems are embedded in culture, and so touch many important aspects of a society. They mark messages as important, separate from everyday activities; they touch not only cognitive, but also experiential and emotional ways of knowing; they can help us remember messages; they increase the impact of ideas through multiple media; they often include the whole body; they concentrate information contained in a message; they instill solidarity in their enactors and experiencers; they often provide socially acceptable frameworks for expressing difficult or new ideas; they inspire and move people to action; they can act as strong signs of identity; and they open spaces for people to imagine and dream. Perhaps most importantly, local artistic communication exists and is owned locally; there's no need to translate foreign materials, and local artists are empowered to contribute to the expansion of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our approach is to help you work alongside communities as they explore what aspects of the Kingdom of Heaven they want to see flourish, and the artistic genres and events that might help in the accomplishment of those goals. We then describe activities that spark artistic creativity in ways that meet a community's goals in lasting ways.

ALL THE ARTS FROM ALL THE WORLD FOR ALL OF GOD'S PURPOSES

Important realities shaping our engagement with the arts include the following:

REALITY: Over eight billion people in the world communicate in more than seven thousand languages in innumerable social and geographic contexts. Within this extraordinarily complex milieu, we each belong to specific communities that convey ideas by everyday language, but also through singing, acting, dancing, painting, telling stories, making films, designing buildings, and other innumerable combinations of these and other artistic forms.

REALITY: All communities have nonexistent or imperfect relationships with God. We all struggle with social upheaval, violence, disease, anger, sexual immorality, anxiety, and fear.

REALITY: God gave every community unique gifts of artistic communication to speak Truth and bring healing and hope and joy in response to these problems. Many of these gifts, however, lie dormant, misused, misunderstood, or dying.

The purpose of this manual is to guide your involvement in working toward a new reality, one in which *all* communities are using *all* their gifts to worship, obey, and enjoy God with *all* of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:29–31). In other words, it will help you work with communities to inspire the creation of new artistry that increases signs of Heaven.

2 To situate our approach to communication among other conceptual frameworks, see Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks, *First Look at Communication Theory.*

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All?

The title of this section uses the word *all* three times. What do we mean? *All the arts* doesn't suggest that God wants to include every art form in its current state in his Kingdom. Rather, we want to approach every art graciously, not judging its worth or usefulness for the Kingdom until God judges it. All communities and their arts are marred by sin, but God can redeem all things. The process of integrating arts includes a winnowing, a remaking.[3]

For example, not all of a community's arts are equally appropriate for furthering God's goals at a given time. A particular dance might be so strongly associated with immoral or idolatrous activities that its use might pull new believers in Christ back to their old lives. We believe that God will renew everything for himself—see Matthew 19:28—but that it takes insights of local believers and the Holy Spirit to decide what actions are wise at any given point. Communities should not try to force Kingdom change.

From all the world refers to the thousands and thousands of ways people communicate artistically. Because each of us is a finite being with limited experience, we don't naturally recognize arts new to us, especially when they're part of a culture foreign to us. So one goal of this book is to both widen and sharpen our vision to see the myriad potential resources. We want to have a little bit more of a God's-eye view of the arts.

For all of God's purposes helps us remember that God does not limit his use of the arts to our categories. In Scripture we see examples of artistic communication involved in corporate adoration, teaching, warfare, celebration, ritual, correcting, individual growth, healing, confession, remembering, and many other purposes. We've crafted this manual to nudge each of us to think beyond any particular liturgical role of the arts we're used to.

What Are Arts?

In this manual, we treat the arts as special kinds of communication. Like all communication systems, the arts are connected to particular times, places, and social contexts. They have their own symbols, grammars, and internal structures. This means that just as you may have to learn how to ask directions in a language foreign to you, you must also learn, for example, how to move your arms and neck and eyebrows to tell a story in Thai dance. There is no one artistic language that communicates completely across lines of time, place, and culture. So to understand any art form, you have to interact with its practitioners and study it. Whether cultural insider, outsider, or some combination of both, getting to know local artists and their arts is our first job.

Artistic forms of communication differ from others in several important ways. First, artistic communication places greater emphasis on manipulating form than do everyday interactions. Poetic speech, for example, may rely on patterns of sound and thought like rhyme, assonance, and metaphor that a

3 We discuss our adaptation of a long-established approach to winnowing—Careful Contextualization (originally Critical Contextualization)—in Conversation 4D.

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simple exchange of information will not. Circling a drum while repeating a sequence of foot movements relies on form more heavily than simply walking from one place to another. Adopting the facial expressions of a mythical character draws on form to communicate more than allowing a person's face to remain at rest.

Second, arts often reveal their uniqueness as bounded spheres of interaction. Artistic events have beginnings and endings (no matter how fluid), between which people interact in unusually patterned ways. Ethnomusicologist Ruth Stone describes artistic events as "set off and made distinct from the natural world of everyday life by the participants."[4]

In this manual we help you use these and other characteristics to discover and describe the kinds of artistic communication in any community you enter, including your own. We keep our discovery parameters broad so that we don't inadvertently miss an important kind of communication that doesn't fit our existing categories. So our view of an artistic act might refer to a performance of a Spanish *flamenco* piece, rehearsals for a Broadway musical, a painting hanging on a café wall, a father speaking a proverb to his daughter, enactment of a *khon* masked dance/drama in Thailand, an expression of hybrid artistry reflecting one church's multiple liturgical backgrounds, or rhythmic wailing at a gravesite. There are tens of thousands of kinds of artistic communication that people use around the world, an amazing and too often undervalued resource.

Discuss examples of arts in a community you know that outsiders might not understand.

FROM CREATION TO NEW CREATION

The following episodes in God's cosmic story serve as crucial theological touchstones in this manual: God's Perfect Creation → Fall → Waiting → Jesus's First Coming → Now and Not-Yet of the Kingdom → Jesus's Second Coming. At his return, Jesus will recreate the universe without sin. Our final reality, then, will be life in the New Creation that flourishes into infinity.

Our approach places us in the company of a growing movement of churches, theologians, missionaries, and organizations embracing the Scripture-based New Creation model.[5] A foundational tenet affirms that,

> The eternal state is not a heavenly, timeless, non-material reality but a new heavens and new earth, such as in Isaiah 65, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21 and 22. The dwelling place of the redeemed in that new creation is not in Heaven but on the new earth.[6]

4 Stone, "Communication and Interaction Processes," 37.

5 Two publications explain the model particularly well, including long bibliographies: Vlach, *The New Creation Model*, and James, "Recent New Creation Conceptions." Several of C. S. Lewis's fictional works drew me into new creation narratives early in my life, including *Mere Christianity*, *The Last Battle*, and *The Great Divorce*.

6 Blaising, "A Critique," 122.

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As we'll develop more fully in Conversation Two, we see Christ-followers engaging with an all-encompassing reality—salvation, relationships, earth, culture, ethnic and national diversity, politics, technology, our bodies, artistic communication, and so on. The frustrations of the *now and not-yet* period we inhabit will give way to thriving in a universe in which sin has been utterly banished.

This narrative and model influence many concepts and practices in the manual. Their implications particularly affect how we define two important words, *kingdom* and *church*. As we'll see, characteristics of the New Creation spill into each, providing glimpses and whiffs of our ultimate home. Also, following some other authors, I often use *Heaven* as a short cut in referring to the New Creation.[7]

Kingdom of Heaven

The first section title ("Always toward Heaven") paints a picture of how Jesus envisions his Kingdom. Historically, however, terms like *Kingdom of God* and *Kingdom of Heaven* have sometimes been distorted to describe the Holy Roman Empire, the Holocaust, the genocide of indigenous peoples, the transatlantic slave trade, and current forms of Christian nationalism. But in the life and teachings of Jesus, these terms mean something profoundly different. They point us to God's action in the world to save humanity and restore all of creation to its intended forms and purposes. For Jesus, this in-breaking of God's Kingdom *is* the gospel! And that is why he launches his earthly ministry by proclaiming, "I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43).

The largely interchangeable expressions *Kingdom of God* and *Kingdom of Heaven* appear ninety-nine times in the New Testament. Always with the what-*will*-be of the New Creation in view, they announce God's triumph over evil, suffering, distortion, and death. Jesus employs artistic expressions in his ministry in part by teaching thought-provoking parables about God's Kingdom values (Matt 13; Mark 4; and Luke 13). He shares mealtimes with extortionary tax collectors (Luke 19), upholds the importance of visits to prisoners (Matt 25), lauds the generosity and healing art of the good Samaritan (Luke 10) and offers water and words of hope with an ostracized woman at Jacob's well in Sychar (Luke 4).

Some scholars point out that monarchies and kingdoms are not as prevalent today and suggest that we substitute new terms like the *reign* or *rule* of God.[8] One Cuban theologian, Ada María Isasi-Díaz,[9] reacted to the hierarchy of king-subject relationships and coined the term *kin-dom*, reflecting reciprocal, family-like relationships. Randy Woodley, a Native American theologian, wants to emphasize the cosmic nature of God's reconciling work (Col 1:15–20), and

7 See, for example, Alcorn, *Heaven*, and Alcorn, *We Shall See God*. Wright, in *Future of the World*, reluctantly affirms this practice about 29 minutes into the video.

8 See, for example, The High Calling's daily reflection, "The Kingdom of God Is Near."

9 Isasi-Diaz, "Kin-dom of God."

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