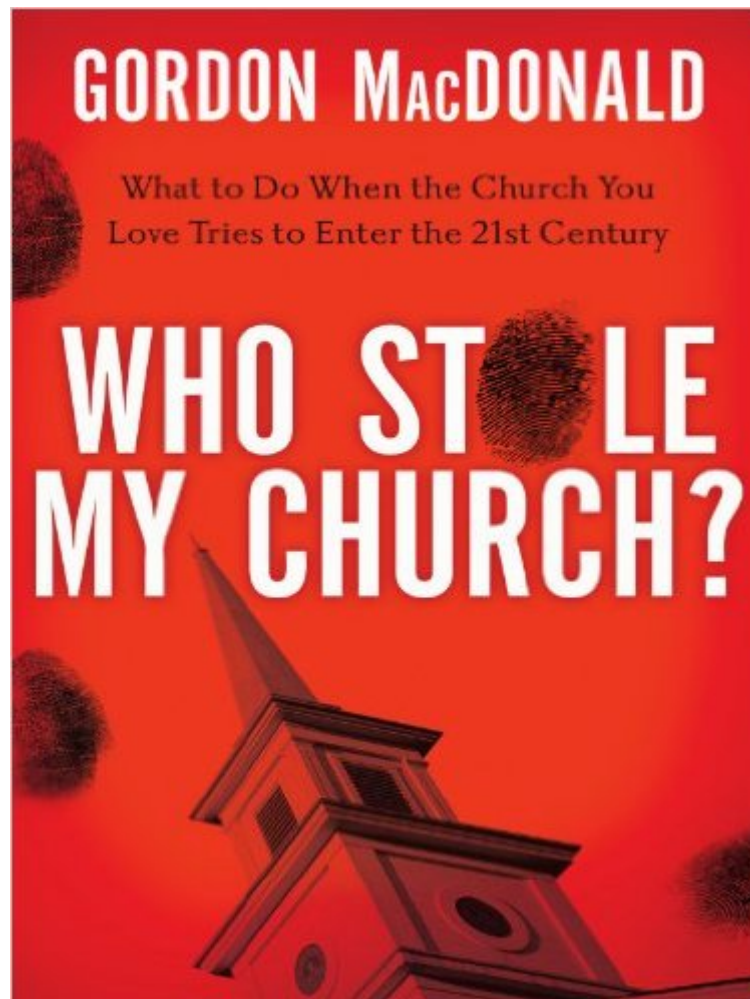


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# Who Stole My Church: What To Do When The Church You Love Tries To Enter The 21st Century



## Synopsis

A challenging, innovative approach to a delicate subject. It's sure to benefit church leaders and members of all ages who dream of a reinvented church. • Publishers Weekly Has your church been stolen out from under you? A storm hits a small New England town late one evening, but the pelting rain can't keep a small group of church members from gathering to discuss issues that lately have been brewing beneath the surface of their congregation. They could see their church was changing. The choir had been replaced by a flashy praise band. • The youth no longer dressed in their Sunday best. • The beautiful pipe organ sat unused. How will this group overcome a deepening rift in their fellowship and nourish the relationship between the young and old? Can their church survive or even thrive? *Who Stole My Church?* is a fictional story that tells the all too real tale of many church communities today. In this book you can walk alongside an imaginary community, led by real life pastor Gordon MacDonald and his wife, Gail, and discover how to meet the needs of all believers without abandoning the dreams and desires of any.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Who Stole My Church?* is a book that's both the same as, and different from, other books on transitioning churches. That's not particularly helpful, so let me explain. It's the same as other books because it covers some of the same ground: changes in culture, life cycles of organizations, the history of musical innovation within the church, and the bell curve that divides people into innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. This is helpful information, but

it's ubiquitous. But that's not the unique contribution of this book. *Who Stole My Church?* is different from any other book I've read on transitioning churches because it's a story, or parable, of real people who resist change in dialogue with an older pastor who leads them in processing what's happening. I said that they're real people, but I need to make it clear that this is a fictional book. But they're real in the sense that I've met every single one of them. In fact, sometimes I had to put this book down and shake my head. Was MacDonald spying on the church I pastor a few years ago? MacDonald writes as someone who knows how people struggle with change within a church. He's been there. I wish this book had been written ten years ago. As a work of fiction, it's very true to life. This book may help the late majority and laggards to understand why churches must contextualize, even though this is a painful process. I especially like it because it's written by someone in their peer group. Those who are struggling with change will recognize themselves in the book, and will also probably feel that they have been sympathetically portrayed. This book will also help pastors understand what's really happening as people react to change, and it may provide a model for both groups to come together and process what's happening. I really hope that pastors who are thinking of going into an established church to lead change read this book. It will give them an idea of what they're in for. *Who Stole My Church?* doesn't do everything. It doesn't help sort out what shouldn't change, and how much change is too much. It doesn't provide all the answers to what's faddish change versus significant change. It doesn't present a deep theology of the church, and it doesn't unpack all the resources of the gospel that will help us in the process. But it succeeds in what it sets out to do. It tells a story of a church that's struggling with change, helps both sides understand what's going on, and provides an example of how the resulting conflict could lead to greater health rather than disintegration. If you're in a church struggling with change, or thinking of pastoring one, you'll find this book helpful.

MacDonald's book is a treatise on how individual congregations can best meet the needs of those around it under the extremely thin disguise of a story. There are characters and something of a plot, but it's mostly all a conceit for MacDonald to get his point across. The plot, if it can be called such, is this: MacDonald places himself as the pastor of a fictional church, one that recently had something of a set-back. The leadership tried to pass a series of changes to the way the church did things, only to have some of the oldest and most faithful members push back. MacDonald, rather than rail on them, suggests they meet to discuss the changes and why he feels they're necessary. The title comes from the plaintive cry of one of those members at that first meeting. If we're trying to judge this book as fiction, it falls flat. As a matter of fact, I'd even be tempted to say that this shouldn't be

called a "novel" or a "story" or anything like it. It's more like a Platonic dialogue. The characters, while distinct, are foils for MacDonald. They eventually come around to enthusiastically see things his way. The only holdout is depicted as a reactionary and something of a jerk (more on why this bothers me in a bit). In terms of nonfiction, this book gave me a lot to think about. Lutherans (especially my kind) are a stubborn bunch. There's an old joke that goes, "How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb?" "CHANGE!?!?" We tell that amongst ourselves because it's true. But MacDonald makes a strong case that sometimes, change is not only necessary, it's healthy and good. Every congregation should take the time to reevaluate what they're doing at one time or another, if for no other reason than to make sure that everything is still working the way it should. That process may be painful, especially if people discover that something isn't working right, but then, it's sometimes necessary to go through "growing pains." But there is a problem with the way MacDonald presented his argument. Since he did so through a story, he could simply have all the characters come to agree with him in the end. They all become "enlightened" enough about his new, better way of doing things that they all fall in line and become enthusiastic for the new ways. The only person who doesn't is depicted in a very harsh light afterwards, so much so that MacDonald insinuates that he's almost an abusive husband and not really a Christian. That's unfortunate, because it leaves the impression that if you don't agree with MacDonald's analysis of how churches should adapt to the 21st century, you're somehow less of a Christian. I would strongly disagree with that assessment. It might have been better if some of his "discussion partners" had ended the journey unconvinced but willing to go along with it. Or better, if some of them made it clear that they still didn't like it, still thought he was wrong, but weren't going to leave the congregation. Simply put, MacDonald set himself up for everyone to pat him on the back for his keen insight. Had he presented his argument in a standard, non-fiction sort of way, people could evaluate his ideas and take them or leave them. Now, with the fictional story format, a person who doesn't quite buy his arguments is left with the impression that perhaps the problem isn't with the ideas, it's with them and their faith. Not cool. In spite of that, it's still an intriguing read. I can only hope that more people read it. For people of the younger generation, it's a good insight into the way the older generation thinks. For people of the older generation, it's an argument for why "We've always done it that way!" isn't a valid argument. And for pastors, it's definitely food for thought about how we should conduct our various ministries.

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