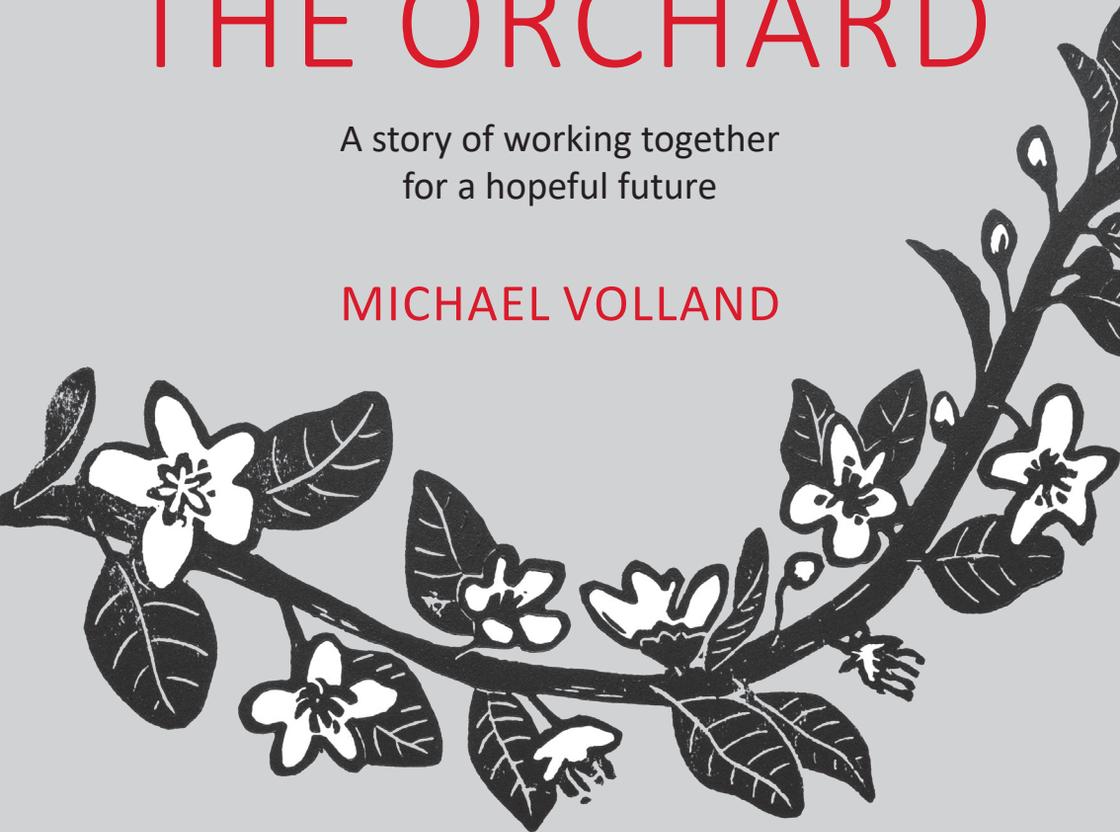


THE ORCHARD

A story of working together
for a hopeful future

MICHAEL VOLLAND



Illustrated by Rebecca Torrance

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RIDLEY HALL
CAMBRIDGE

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*For the staff and students of Ridley Hall
and the churches and communities they are sent out to serve*

*‘The biblical narratives are full of stories about places
and people without hope who become the centers of
the Spirit’s creative, world-changing activity.’*

Alan J. Roxburgh

*Surely your waste and your desolate places
and your devastated land—
surely now you will be too crowded for your inhabitants.*

Isaiah 49:19



Introduction

The story of the orchard was first told in 2014. Those who heard it were the congregations of nine small churches in east Durham. It stimulated faith and hope and provoked a good deal of prayer, creative thinking and loving service. The nine churches had sought to faithfully serve their communities—mainly ex-mining villages—over many years. But resources had diminished, people were getting older and clergy were overstretched. In response to these challenges, the East Durham Mission Project (EDMP) was established; a low-key, low-resource, low-control, flexible, adaptable and responsive collaboration between the nine parishes, the diocese and a local theological college.

The EDMP was planted to help the congregations to focus their minds and hearts on working together with God rather than

trying to struggle on alone. It aimed to encourage and enable spiritual and numerical growth in existing congregations and, where appropriate, to plant new forms of church. It was a life-giving initiative, full of adventure and fun. But the stories of the project are for another time. This story, *The Orchard*, is one of the many gifts that God gave to us as we worked together with Him in east Durham.

The story is best read out loud, in a group. Read it slowly; prayerfully. Linger over the images; allow yourself to arrive in the orchard and to inhabit it. Let the story take root in your mind and heart. Ask the Spirit of God to breathe life and energy into the story and to give the growth. Spend some time in silence, thinking about what you have heard, and then read it a second time.

After a further time of silence, turn to the questions. Perhaps have each member of the group ask a different question and guide the responses of those present. Ensure all have a chance to

speak—especially the youngest, and those who are sometimes reluctant to share.

As you draw towards the end of your time together, invite each person to name one thought or idea that stood out for them. Write these down. Decide what you will do next. Before you close, offer your discussions and thoughts to God in prayer.





The Orchard

In the grounds of an old house at the edge of a market town in rural Northumberland there lies an orchard; overgrown and almost forgotten. I stumbled across it a few years ago while out exploring with the dog and have been back many times and in every season.

The grand Edwardian house, whose gardener planted the trees and whose children once ate the apples, was sold for apartments long ago. The orchard lies to the east of the old house. A high, straggling hedge of hawthorn runs along three of its sides.



The northern boundary is marked by a dilapidated fence, hammered up between knarled oaks lining a single-track road.





There are a dozen apple trees in the orchard. All are bent and bowed. Some have fallen on their sides; their plunging branches forming gothic archways over rabbit runs and fox tracks.

Each spring the orchard hums with blossom and bees. In the evenings the thick scent promises summer. As the days grow longer brambles heap up in the rutted spaces between the trees and thorny tendrils claw their way up tired trunks; the siege ladders of an invading army.



When warm afternoons give way to crisp autumn mornings, apples dangle in their hundreds. Some are eaten where they hang by wasps and birds. The rest drop to the ground and rot in sweet, sticky heaps.



I was walking in the orchard one afternoon when a question occurred to me: What would need to be done to help the orchard to flourish once again and to ensure that people were picking apples here in a hundred years' time?





I began to talk about the orchard in each of the parish churches assigned to me. I asked the people what they would do to play their part in bringing the orchard back to life and ensure a fruitful future. They listed all the things you would expect.

First we would cut down and clear the brambles and the rotten fruit. After this we would prune the trees. Doing this properly requires knowledge and experience, so we would want to find wise guides who could help with that.





Next we would dig around the existing trees and fertilise them. We would work on all of the trees, not just one or two. After all, the fruitfulness of each one depends on the flourishing of the others.

To ensure that the orchard was full of life a hundred years from now, we would plant saplings. We would work hard to maintain the orchard all year round.





We would tell our friends and bring them along to enjoy the beautiful trees, to share all the orchard has to offer and to give glory to its creator.



Questions for discussion

- 1) What are the 'brambles and rotten fruit' that might need 'clearing' in your context?
- 2) Whose voices are included in deciding this?
- 3) What might need to be 'pruned' in your church or group of churches?
- 4) Who are your 'wise guides' – those who can assist with 'pruning'?
- 5) What shape does 'digging around the existing trees and fertilising' them take in your church?
- 6) How can you ensure you 'work on all the trees' and 'not just one or two'?
- 7) What 'saplings' might you plant?

The story of the Orchard is a gift to small congregations who are seeking to serve God while wondering how to navigate the challenges of diminishing resources.

It is designed to be used by small groups and will encourage the growth of faith, hope and love. It will stimulate creative thinking about working alongside other Christians to realise God's hopeful future for your church and community.

The Orchard aims to help you and those with whom you worship and witness to listen to what the Spirit of God might be saying to you today. The story emerged in a group of parishes in east Durham and has gone on to inspire congregations wrestling with the challenges of a changing world as far away as New York!



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