

Review: Setting God's People Free – A Report from the Archbishops' Council

"This report concludes that what needs to be addressed is not a particular theological or ecclesiastical issue but the Church's overall culture. This is a culture that over-emphasises the distinction between the sacred and the secular and therefore fails to communicate the all-encompassing scope of the whole-life good news and to pursue the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to make whole-life maturing disciples. We will not raise up cadres of godly leaders unless we create communities of whole-life disciples." (Page 2)



The Archbishops' Council has released this report under the *Renewal & Reform* agenda. Hot off the presses (it is dated February 2017) it is refreshingly and provocatively titled "Setting God's People Free" and is based primarily on the work of the Lay Leadership Task Group. It is perceptive in outlook, insightful in analysis, but self-admittedly limited in application. It provokes a degree of excitement with just a hint of cynicism.

From my "outsider" perspective, reports like these from the Church of England have stimulated and encouraged mission and discipleship in other contexts. This was the case with significant works such as *Mission-Shaped Church*. It is similar here; the leadership of the church is saying what needs to be said, giving a voice and lending language to those who desire a deeper Christian community that is more active and effective in doing the things that matter. The simple *encouragement* that this gives to those on the edge cannot be

underestimated.

With my slowly developing “inside” view, these documents now seem a little starker. It is still immensely encouraging that these things are being said, but there is also an awareness of why they *need* to be said. A report like this reveals behind (or in front of) it some sense of the inertial malaise that can be found in the Church of England. It envelopes a justifiable sense of *urgency*.

So what does this report give us? It’s not really anything revolutionary. It’s a couple of things that make deep sense, and, if taken seriously, come attached with a whole bunch of difficult but positive implications:

*This report identifies the need for **two shifts in culture and practice** that we see as critical to the flourishing of the Church and the evangelisation of the nation.*

1. Until, together, ordained and lay, we form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never set God’s people free to evangelise the nation.

2. Until laity and clergy are convinced, based on their baptismal mutuality, that they are equal in worth and status, complementary in gifting and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission, we will never form Christian communities that can evangelise the nation.

We believe that these two shifts would represent a seismic revolution in the culture of the Church. The first is about the focus of our activity and the scope of our mission, the second is about the nature of the relationship between clergy and lay. They are both vital. And they are both rare.

(Page 2, emphasis theirs)

This is an exemplary act of ecclesial self-reflection. These

assertions about church culture are based on some decent quantitative and qualitative analysis. It is a conversation that is well and truly at the missional and cultural level. Personally speaking, we have been bewildered in our observation and experience of how these issues are usually avoided or mishandled. This includes misalignment over the meaning of crucial language such as “discipleship” and “mission.” This report not only clarifies terms (“Discipleship is not a course of study but is determined by circumstances”, page 7) but unpacks what that clarity reveals:

Today... the Church of England finds itself in a situation where the significant majority of the 98% of people who are not in ordained ministry are neither adequately envisioned, nor appropriately trained, nor consistently prayed for, nor enthusiastically encouraged for mission nor ministry in the ~90% of their waking lives that they do not spend in church related activities. (Page 3)

Yes, huge numbers of lay people serve in positions of influence and leadership in the church, community, workplace and society. However, few claim to have been given a theological framework or to have the confidence to express biblical wisdom, in both word and deed, in these contexts. We will not raise up cadres of fruitful godly leaders in every sphere unless we create healthy communities of whole-life disciple-making disciples. (Page 4)

What is needed, first and foremost, is not a programme but a change in culture. A culture that communicates the all-encompassing scope of the good news for the whole of life, and pursues the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to form whole-life maturing disciples. And a culture that embodies in every structure and way of working the mutuality of our baptismal calling and the fruitful complementarity of our roles and vocations. (Page 5)

Our contention is that the motivation for Christian leadership must arise not from a slightly greater willingness to 'do jobs' but from a compelling and positive vision of the redeeming work of Christ for all people. It is when people become aware of the great things that Christ has done for them and wake up to the gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on them that a joyful and willing leadership emerges, for it is out of communities of disciples that cadres of leaders will appear. (Page 8)

To all this I give an understated Anglican "Amen, brothers and sisters!" Here is a vision for a missional church that resonates with our own hopes and passions.

It is not an unrealistic vision. The report is aware of "constraining factors" and rightly names as primary a "theological deficit" (page 13) of "robust and incisive... thinking" (page 14). The counter offer is a "theology of the laity as grounded in the centrality of *mission* and *evangelism*" (page 14) made with full awareness that parochialism and other factors work to prevent such vision from "achieving long-term currency, let alone significantly informing policy and practice across the Church of England" (page 14).

Mission is not about removing people from the world to seek refuge in the Church... but about releasing and empowering all God's people to be the Church in the world in order that the whole of creation might be transformed and restored in Christ. (Page 14).

I am sympathetic to, but not entirely yet convinced by, the engagement with the clerical-lay divide as a primary problem.

The report portrays both sides of the frustration and that is useful: some congregations try to make their clergy into messiahs, some clergy already think they are! Nevertheless, the engagement with the issue assumes and perhaps unhelpfully reinforces the division. **After all, the clergy are a subset of**

the laity, not a separate category. And one of the problems in our formation of clergy is that we don't also (and especially) *disciple them as people*. A discipleship culture is rarely prevented by a lack of theological knowledge; it is resisted when leaders are unable to share of themselves because of insecurities, fears, emotional immaturity, inexperience with suffering, or simple lack of exposure to the deeper things of life with Jesus.

Few churches have developed the kind of learning culture that would illuminate the resource and support that is required to develop lay people. Few churches are equipped with the kind of 'action reflection' approaches that we see in Jesus' disciple-making and in best practice adult learning models in wider society. (Page 18)

Good reports make recommendations and here “eight levels of cultural change” are proposed (page 19). They are only really applicable to “Dioceses and the National Church”, which is understandable as these are the atomic ecclesial components from the point of view of the Archbishops' Council. I am not particularly familiar with the sort of machinations that happen at that level, but the principles seem sound: theological vision, increased lay voice, episcopal priorities, centralised resourcing, liturgical development, structural reform and so on. I'll be watching the commentary on these things with some interest.

There are two recommendations for action in the short-term that attract me. The selection of “pilot dioceses” (page 26) to model the culture has me hoping that my own Diocese of Oxford will be one! And, the provision of resources through a “national portal” (page 26), particularly “the facility for people to join small affinity/learning groups for support, discussion, and accountability” recognises a crucial lack of communal learning that *should* be happening at Parish, Deanery and Diocesan level, but usually isn't.

The emphasis remains however: *cultural change is required*. And that is a fraught exercise.

I have sat on enough boards and committees in my time to understand that clarifying the situation and identifying the problem is one thing; putting forward achievable and appropriate proposals is another. This is only amplified when the problem is a cultural one. There is always an aspect of catch-22 and chicken-or-egg. How do we use culture to change culture? Are the available options – the levers that can be pulled – able to *transcend* the culture or are they products *of* it?

There are all manner of obstacles to cultural change. It will take more than this report to overcome them.

For instance, cultural change is resisted by allowing symptoms to control the remedy. Our natural tendency is to alleviate symptoms, and it is often not efficacious. Consider how the report points out that there is “no sense of any centrally-coordinated strategy for the support and development of lay leaders across the Church” (Page 11). This is clearly a symptom of something that’s wrong. But it may not follow that the answer is to rely on a “centrally coordinated strategy.”

Rather, it is likely that cultural change is achieved by some other means, which then *results* in a centrally-coordinated strategy. What comes first? Here, while not wanting to “institute a top down approach” (page 1) we still have a “clear implementation plan” (page 9) from a high-level body! Catch-22.

In general, there are other obstacles to cultural change.

There is the presumptive existent: “We exist, therefore we’re on the right course.” There is semantic deflection: “Of course we’re doing X; when we do it it looks like...” By embracing the buzzwords the real engagement is avoided. We’ve seen this happen with words such as “discipleship”, “fresh expression”, “leadership”, “vision”, “mission”, and

“emerging”. Cynicism can easily abound.

I’m not sure the report totally avoids these obstacles. For instance, in trying to articulate a picture of lay ministry in terms of the “sent church” there is an emphasis on volunteerism. However, as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, there is often a cultural disconnect between the social action of individual parishioners and the movement and mission of the church to which they belong. The report mentions Street Pastors (page 10), but how much can we say that that ministry belongs to the institutional Church? There is a danger of stealing the fruit of others in order to avoid our own barrenness.

Nevertheless, I was both encouraged and moved by this paper.

I am grateful to know that people are thinking these thoughts, and even dreaming these dreams. It’s the right conversation in the right room, and it speaks a vision that needs to spread to every room in this House of God.

Four Levels of Church Conversation

There’s something to observe when Christians get together and talk about themselves in meetings, in groups, or even over coffee. It’s an observation that relates to the question of “what is this meeting for?” and “what are we not talking about?”

Here is how I’ve come to answer that question: by identifying **four levels of conversation**. It’s an oversimplifying categorisation, for sure, but hopefully a useful way to discern what page a conversation is on.

The **top level** of conversation is ***mechanical and operational***. Like coats of paint, it's this *top* layer that is on the surface and is often the easiest level to enter into.

It is at this level that we find ourselves talking about operations: planning services, organising rotas, remarking on how good the flowers look, the size of the congregation, the clarity of the sound, and the feel of the sermon. These are all necessary things to discuss and it's not for no reason that such topics dominate the agenda of many meetings, and make up the bulk of a minister's emails and phone calls. Things need to happen, programs need to run, and coordination and conversation is required to do that.

Conversations at this level, however, *presume and rest upon* an understanding about *how* the church operates. That's the topic of the next level of conversation:

The **second level** of conversation is ***managerial and organisational***. At this level, it's not so much about keeping the church operational but *improving* those operations.

These are conversations that deal with priorities, financial allocations and budgets, improving efficiencies, and responding to hiccups and crises. A good engagement at this level keeps things running smoothly. Most complaints and criticism are also at this level because they usually relate to how things could supposedly be done better. Boards and oversight committees often spend time talking at this level.

These sorts of conversations *inform and found* how we talk about the operations of the church (the previous level), and *presumes* the church's mission and purpose:

The **third level** of conversation is ***missional and cultural***.

This is where questions of identity, purpose, and values are considered. It's a level of conversation that is both *reflective* and *strategic*.

It is reflective, in that it involves questions about ourselves: *Who are we? Where are we going? What are we for? What's really important? What are we struggling with? What is good about us that needs to be affirmed? What is wrong that needs to be addressed? Where are we clinging to idols that we should put away? What gifts are we ignoring that we should cling to? What is our culture? Where are our blind stops? What makes us tick?*

It is strategic, in that it involves questions about mission and calling: *What is God doing in with and around us? Where is he leading us? What is his heart for the people and place in which we find ourselves? What is the culture in which we find ourselves, and how do we bear witness to the gospel in the midst of it?* It is in this sort of conversation that vision and purpose are tussled through and articulated.

Conversations at this level can be quite rare. Such engagements are usually motivated by passion or crisis, or both! Where the context is marked by stability, or even stagnancy, these topics are rarely broached; the presumed answers suffice for the sake of management and operation.

This is understandable; for conversation at this level to happen well, there needs to be a willingness to embrace the *challenge* that these sorts of questions generate, and that often requires facing fears and insecurities and daring to dream and be imaginative.

Conversations at this level *inform and shape* how we talk about the management and organisation of the church (the previous level), and *presumes* a theological and doxological basis:

The **base level** of conversation is ***theological and doxological*** and deals with spiritual foundations.

These conversations can sometimes feel a bit academic or esoteric. This does not necessarily mean that they are not

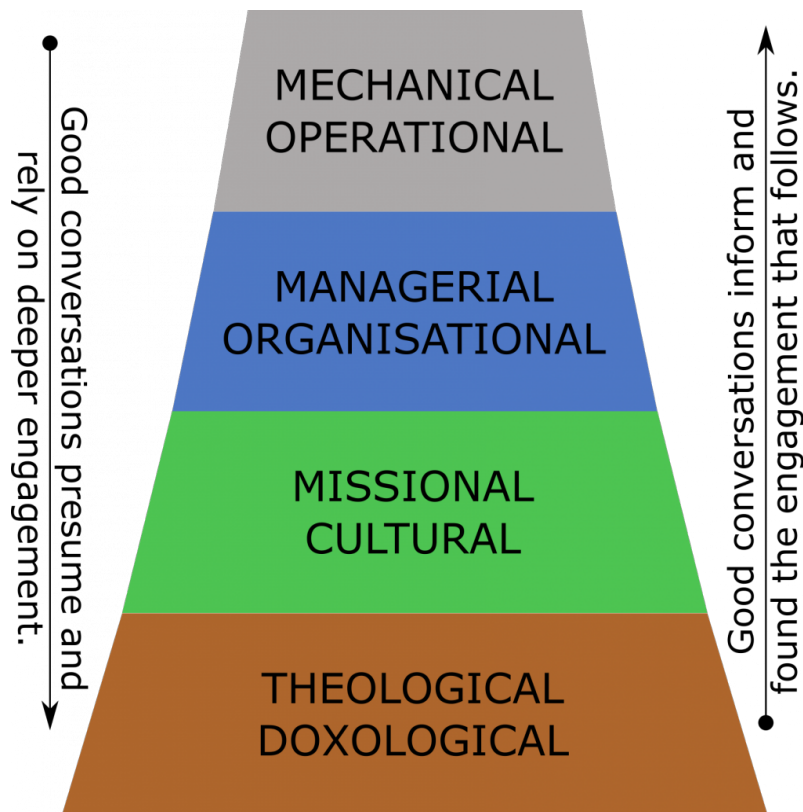
delightful, dynamic, and life-giving. The main contributor to my own theological formation was coffee with fellow students! I have wrestled with fellow colleagues about things like Neo-Calvinism (when it was a new thing) and New Perspectives (which still is). There might be no clear application for such discussions, but they do shape the foundations upon which all other conversations rest. *What do we believe? And why?*

Of course, “theological” doesn’t just mean cerebral things. Theology cannot be divorced from doxology. The conversations at this level are also intensely spiritual. I have had delightful conversations with deeply contemplative folk who make use of art, symbolism, metaphor, and even silence. Shared spiritual disciplines are located here. It is at this level that our conversations come close to the heart of worship.

Again, these sorts of conversations can be few and far between, even in a church setting. There is often an intense sense of privacy and vulnerability that prevents the dialogue. We often tend to mitigate this by relegating these sorts of topics to a didactic sermon or by speaking in abstractions so that awkward conclusions can be avoided.

Yet this sort of engagement is the stuff of life, it is where we discover a common root for our passions, a base level unity that founds a true and open community, irrespective of disagreements at the other levels.

Diagrammatically, it looks like this:



It is a simplification, but it does help as we ponder how we ourselves engage in dialogue about the church.

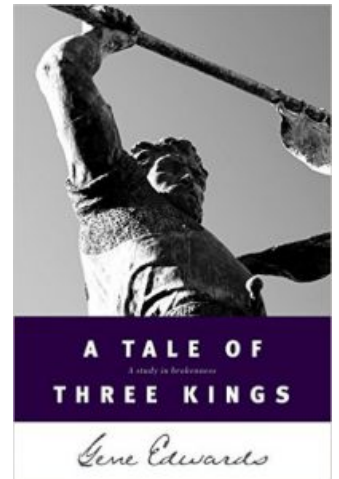
I suspect that every one of us is more comfortable engaging at one level more than another. And sometimes we try and do things at the wrong place. This is the situation where a conversation about hymn selection is not about the operation of the music ministry, but actually a commentary with regards to priorities, purpose, and base values; the issue is rarely the issue! This can help discern where the conversation needs to go.

But it also reminds us of the conversations that we *need* to have but sometimes never get around to. The management meeting that spends all its time on minutiae and forgets the important things is a well-known experience. The old analogy of the church that forgets that it is a lifeboat station is a failure to have the deeper conversations at the right time and in the right way.

The thoughts, and hopefully the conversations, continue.

Review: A Tale of Three Kings – A Study in Brokenness

What is our posture and place before God?



Gill has often asked me, “How do you see God right now? Who is he to you?” It’s not a doctrinal question, it’s a *posture* question. Am I rejoicing before him, in freedom? Am I figuratively curled up on his lap in weariness? Am I ignoring him, hardened and rebellious, presuming and attempting to usurp, blocking my ears? Am I being contrite, bringing my brokenness to him? Do I see God as someone to be scared of, to avoid? Or can I boldly approach the eternal throne, trusting in his mercy and grace?

It is often useful to ground such exploration in the pages of Scripture; to look to those who have gone before us and see how God reveals and deals with them. What posture do they take? What can we learn? Exegetical care is required, of course, but it is a blessing to observe the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever. And dare to seek to his face.

In this fascinating book, *A Tale of Three Kings*, Gene Edwards takes us to the example of King David, to glean what we may.

David, of course, is one of the three kings. The other two are Saul, who saw the young David as a rival and pursued him, and Absalom, David's son, who sought to usurp the throne of his father. Edwards finds in David's response to both Saul and Absalom, an example of someone who is enrolled "not into the lineage of royalty but into the school of brokenness" (page 8).

If we were to be critical, we could say that Edwards overplays his hand. His framework has David as a "broken vessel" who is able to pursue God through pain (page 12), and Saul is "the unbroken ruler (whom God sovereignly picks) who metes out the pain" (page 15). Of course, in reality, David is not always the David that Edwards speaks of. He is unbroken with regards to Uriah. He is also a belligerent warrior, an inept father, and a wielder of authority who isn't always humble. I'm sure that there were many in Israel for whom David was their Saul!

Nevertheless, this doesn't diminish the force of Edwards' exercise. He takes us into David's experience and unpacks what is virtuous in a way that matches the thrust of all levels of the biblical narrative. As a type of messiah, David reveals Christ, and so Edwards is helping us to imitate him as he imitates Christ, so to speak. Conversely, he wants us to be aware of the "King Saul in you" (page 23) and to be aware of where we may ally with Absalom (page 62).

The Sauls of this world can never see a David; they see only Absalom. The Absaloms of this world can never see a David; they see only Saul. (Page 80)

The result is an excellent tool for self-reflection, particularly for those in leadership. We are taken, for instance, to places where people desire power, "ambition, a craving for fame, the desire to be considered a spiritual giant" (page 41). We are caused to think of why sometimes the wrong people seem to have the power, and how we might respond

to that. The example of David who would not bring down the Lord's anointed in his own strength governs much of this reflection.

It takes us to David as a "study in brokenness". This is where we find Edwards' overstatement: That David "forced no rebellion because he did not mind if he was dethroned" (page 47) is not entirely true, and surely it could not be said of Jesus that "he had authority... but that fact never occurred to him" (page 48); humility is not psychological obfuscation! Nevertheless, the way of leadership as a deliberate path of trust through loneliness and suffering is well made.

*Legalism is nothing but a leader's way of avoiding suffering.
(Page 47)*

The most important lessons, however, are not just for the leaders, but for Christians in general, for churches and congregations. For me, the biggest lesson Edwards expounds is to **exercise faith such that we are willing to do... nothing**. He looks to David with both Saul and Absalom, and also to Moses with Korah, who didn't meet rebellion with rebellion, but simply "fell on his face before God. That is all he did" (page 87).

Consider this posture: **"I will leave the destiny of the kingdom in God's hands alone**. Perhaps he is finished with me. Perhaps I have sinned too greatly and am no longer worthy to lead" (page 93).

My instant reaction was to write this off as unworthy passivism, a reneging of responsibility, a failure to embrace the favour we have in Christ. Surely that is far from the pursuit of God's mission and a faithful response to his call?

But Edwards' observation is not invalid, and the reflection has merit.

We Christians, individually and as churches, are so very very

quick to sacralise our drivenness and idolise our achievements. We intone, "Unless the Lord builds the house...", and then pick up our own hammer and nails and do whatever we want; any success, on our own terms, becomes proof of divine favour. We pray "Lord, bless my church, and all that we do" and this looks like (and can often actually be) a humble petition, but it can also be the essence of self-reliance. The fact is, it is actually the Lord's church, and we might not be doing what he wants at all!

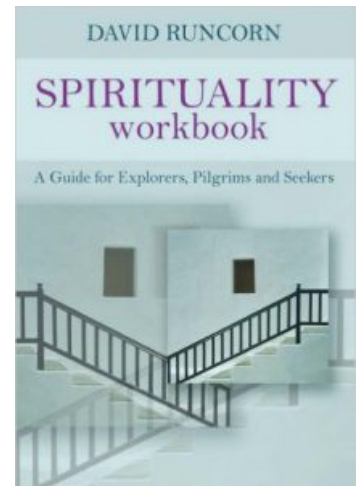
Rather, David *receives* the Kingdom just as Christ would later *receive* resurrection and "*all authority in heaven and on earth*", not from themselves, but in the laying down of themselves. The posture that Edwards finds for us in Scripture would have us seek to do the same.

My own reflection is this: We are so often like self-centred children. Our Lord offers us *every spiritual blessing* as a gift of grace. Our response should be to *receive* this gift, and the calling and activism that goes with it. Yet our attitude can subtly shift us away from this; rather than receive, we *seize*, we *take*, we almost *demand*. We consider our *inheritance* and treat it like an entitlement. And this is where Edwards' reflection assists: Because the difference between receiving and taking is in the attitude, the *posture*. And that difference is that the receiver *waits*, and does not presume, *doing nothing* until the giver puts the gift in place.

It *is* God's church. And *he* will build it. That honour belongs to no other.

Review: Spirituality Workbook – A Guide for Explorers, Pilgrims and Seekers

Some books are wide-ranging and broad. Some books are deep and specific. David Runcorn, in *Spirituality Workbook*, deals with some of the nitty gritty of everyday expressions of Christian spirituality, and manages to do both; it is both deep and wide. I read the slightly older 2006 edition.



The breadth comes from the simple amount of material covered. Runcorn has put together work from years of the rhythm of theological formation. The chapters are short and independent from each other, but each is a gem of insight and reflection. The content ranges from topical analyses, to reflections on historical persons and movements, to unpacking specific spiritual disciplines.

It is impossible, therefore, to condense the book down into a governing argument, or to give a fulsome summary. For myself, I take from the book a number of insights that interact with, subvert, and even blatantly combat some of the ways in which Christians and churches have capitulated to the spirit of the age.

Consider his early chapter on the spirituality of the desert, which draws on the example of the early monastics. He identifies the motivation of a “longing for God” that cannot be satisfied in an “increasingly worldly church” (page 10). And his enumeration of the value of the wilderness experience includes concepts such as “judgment” and being “confronted

with the sheer depth of our need of conversion" (page 11) that are anathema to the comfortable pews of the western world which idolise success and fanfare.

"In the desert you leave behind all your familiar securities. You come to a place of confessing your absolute need and the emptiness of all you have been placing your trust in... The desert is a place that weans us off addictions and false dependencies. If your god is not the true God the desert will find you out. Only the true God can sustain you in the wilderness." (Page 11)

Consider the irony in his reflection on exile in a changing world, that the word from which we get "parish" and "parochial", *paroikia*, originally meant "a place of refuge or exile" for Christians who experienced themselves as "resident aliens, non-citizens... sojourners in the world... shaped by the experience of enforced mobility, vulnerable exile and disorientating change" (page 23).

Consider the frustration that recognises that "finding and sustaining *community* in today's society is a real struggle" even when "the Christian vision of community is central to spiritual formation, prayer and faithful discipleship" (page 51). Hear the challenging wisdom, quoted from Bonhoeffer:

If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian community in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith and difficulty, if we only keep on complaining to God, we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ." (Page 55)

Ponder his counter to the addiction of churches to self-actualising mission management, as he values a rule of life that resists that greatest of all Christian predilections: the

inability to say “no” to something that is good but wrong.

*It is quite common for churches to have their own mission statement these days. What is less common is to find churches that have gone on to think and pray through together a shared, sustainable shape of living that might make that vision realizable. Without an agreed boundary to its life and mission, church life proceeds on the assumption that Christian time and energy can extend limitlessly into an ever-increasing range of worthy projects. That this is all “for God” just makes the burden worse! **The result is corporate exhaustion, guilt and frustration.**” (Page 65, emphasis mine)*

He gives important correctives for our corporate life: “Worship that is organized to impress outsiders is no longer true worship – which is offered to God alone” (page 70). He gives insight into culture: “The defining identity on offer today is that of consumer” (page 89). He plumbs the depths of spiritual practices that may have become staid: “Intercession involves seeking to be where Christ already is... [it] is a participation in Christ’s costly and life-giving presence in the world.” (page 122).

And whether it be in the presentation of the Jesus Prayer or a discourse on sexuality, Runcorn takes us deeper, *uncomfortably* deeper, *blessedly* uncomfortably deeper. Here is the constructive *challenge* of an effective spiritual director. Such challenge disabuses us of immature and insipid notions of Jesus and what it means to follow him. It presses us beyond superficiality and the ubiquitous ecclesial shallows and *provokes* us.

Where we would settle for peace & tranquility, he would take us to the *shalom* of Christ, who also challenges, and provokes and questions our assumptions until we rely on him: the Christ who counters our agendas with “Unless you repent you will all

perish" (page 177). Where we would like to waft on clouds of easy ecstasy, he reminds us that "Christian prayer is more often marked by conflict than by feelings of peace" (page 179). Where we would prefer the stagnancy of unrocked boats, we are reminded that true hospitality and receptivity "does not mean becoming neutral" (page 193).

It is neither polite nor respectful to just sit agreeing with everything your guest says. We are to offer a real articulate presence, sharing our own beliefs, opinions and lifestyle clearly and distinctly. 'An empty house is not a hospitable house,' [Nouwen] says, 'Real receptivity asks for confrontation.' (Page 193, emphasis mine)

We have challenge, confrontation, provocation, uneasiness. This is the stuff of life. What we have then, is a book to return to, and a book to recommend. It takes us to depths that are rare in the salt-pan of contemporary corporate Christianity. It is both comfort and correction, broad and deep, and therefore utterly useful.