Review: Leading One Church at a Time – From Multi-church Ministers to Focal Ministers

Grove booklets are helpful little tools for the ministry toolkit. They are often insightful and informative. Occasionally, like this one, they are somewhat frustrating, because the content should be bleedingly obvious.

Church researcher, Bob Jackson, posits the question, “As clergy numbers fall, is there a better leadership model than multi-parish incumbency?” (rear cover), and the answer is basically “Well, of course!” As church attendance declines, and the relative cost of “employing” a stipendiary vicar increases, the number of parish churches per clergy has also been increasing. Combining and amalgamating parishes sometimes works, but, in general, it stretches the mode of ministry to a breaking point, spreads the vicar too thin, and accelerates the decline. Jackson has researched the numbers (page 7).

So what do we do instead? Jackson proposes the use of “Focal Ministers”: Individuals, who are not expected to carry the burdens of incumbency (more on that later), but who can focus on the local congregation, the local community, and lead the rhythms and practices of the local church towards properly contextualised gospel ministry. Statistics show (page 9) that this is generally effective. This is not surprising. “Human
communities rarely flourish without a hands-on leader. Leadership is best embedded, not absentee” (page 5).

Jackson spends his 28 pages helping us to imagine life in the Church of England with such Focal Ministers in place. He unpacks the benefits, identifies some of the pitfalls, and articulates some good practice. While opening up the “Range of Focal Ministry Options” (page 16), he maintains the “irreducible core idea… that one person leads one church” (page 3).

Taken alone, it is a simple premise, i.e. it is bleedly obvious. The complexity and the relative obscurity lies in its juxtaposition alongside existing ecclesiastical structures, culture, and expectations, particularly in the Church of England.

To reflect on this, I have come from two different angles.

The first angle relates to what I have experienced and observed over the years.

In my experience: I am used to recognising and raising up what Jackson might call Focal Ministers (FMs). In one of my posts, the lay reader of many decades experience was clearly exercising local ministry, and much more effectively than me as I was stretched between three half-time vicarly posts; it was a no-brainer to encourage her towards increased ministry, and, eventually, ordination. In another post, Gill and I identified a young man with clear giftings and call, as he was raised into leadership we did ourselves out of a job. I could go on and on in delightful reminiscence about the numbers of coffees we’ve had to encourage people into areas of ministry (leading, preaching, pastoral care, etc.) While not all of these would be exactly the same as Jackson’s FMs, they were in the same ethos. I’m not trying to blow my own trumpet here, but isn’t this the norm? Isn’t this how ministry works? How else do you do it?
Similarly, I have been able to observe various forms of focal ministry. The Diocese of Tasmania experimented for many years with “Enabler Supported Ministry” (ESM) in which a “Local Mission Support Team” (LMST), which usually included an Ordained Local Minister (OLM), was called by the local congregation, recognised by the Bishop, and provided with a stipended “Enabler.” It differs slightly from Jackson’s model (it has a local team, not a focal minister; it is overseen by a non-authoritative Enabler rather than an incumbent in a “mini-episcopic oversight role” (page 8)). When ESM worked, it worked. When it didn’t two things often emerged: 1) The LMST collapsed into one person, usually the OLM, who effectively became a Focal Minister, and 2) there were times when the Enabler needed to be given some authority in order to resolve conflict etc., and so were often also appointed as Archdeacon-Mission-Support-Officers. I don’t know if Jackson has looked at ESM (or it’s “Total Ministry”, “Every Member Ministry”, or “Local Collaborative Ministry” equivalents) but he’s arrived at a model that aligns with the outcomes.

The second angle for my reflection relates to my recent history in the Church of England. My current Diocese of Sheffield is in the midst of significant structural shifts. The development of “Mission Areas” with “Oversight Ministers” and “Focal Ministers” is a key part of the strategy. These issues are therefore very much live for me (as a recipient more than a participant in the current moment) and it has stimulated some thoughts for what to embrace, and also to avoid:

1) **Focal Ministry requires a cultural change, but the danger is we only grasp it structurally:** Jackson promotes FM as a way of eschewing the “pastor-and-flock model and professional ministry” (page 5). This is a strange contrast; turn over “pastor-and-flock” and you don’t quickly have a “Focal Minister” you have a flatter structure with no clear hierarchy. At best this could look
like effective partnership, perhaps within a fivefold shape. At worst, (and I’ve observed this), it looks like bland egalitarianism articulated as “we don’t need anyone to lead us” and often feeling directionless and, ironically, insular. If Focal Ministry can find the balance between assertive leadership and collaborative inclusion, then that’s fantastic, but that’s firstly a cultural issue not a structural one. There’s no reason why “normal” ordained leadership should not also find that balance. Similarly, without cultural change, it will quickly reduce back to a pseudo-vicar and their flock.

2) Focal Ministry raises questions about what ordination is all about. This is not a bad thing; it raises good questions! In Jackson’s model, Focal Ministers are charged with being the “public face of the church, [the] focal leader in the community, [the] enabler of the ministry of all, [the] leader in mission” (page 20), and he can imagine them leading a congregation of up to a 100 or so (page 26). On page 23, he suggests that Focal Ministers could get started by “raising the standards of church services,” looking “for people who have left the worshipping community” to hear their story, and using festival services as a means for growth. All of that is a great description of what ordained ministry looks like on the ground! If it isn’t, then what on earth are we teaching our ordinands to do? The only aspect of ordained ministry that Jackson doesn’t really mention is theological reflection and sacramental ministry. But don’t we also want our FM’s to be theological formed, and aren’t we giving them the oversight (at least) of the celebration of the sacraments in the local context? So, conceptually, how exactly is Focal Ministry anything other than a mode of ordained ministry?

We need to think about how Focal Ministers are “searched for, trained, and supported” (page 25). One would hope that Focal Ministers would be assisted in discerning their
particular vocation, provided with training in theological reflection and pastoral skill, and offered tangible support (perhaps even some remuneration where possible) so that they are free to exercise their ministry. How is this not the same concept as the pathway to ordination and the provision of a living? It may be that our training pathways for ordinands are not helpful for FMs, and that we should provide them with more flexible and contextual options. That doesn’t raise questions about the training of FMs; it raises questions about the possible general irrelevance of ordination formation! If ordination formation is relevant, why wouldn’t we offer it to FMs? If FMs don’t need it, why would we require it of ordinands?

In Jackson’s model, there isn’t really a difference in kind between Focal Ministry and Incumbency, it is a difference in degree (in his chapter 4 the only difference between “FM” and “IN” is that FMs only have one congregation and an INcumbent can still have multiple). The church offers a more rigorous (and defined) form of support to Incumbents, and a more flexible (but presumably cheaper and missionally adaptive) form of support to Focal Ministers, but they are both (in the truth of the concept) exercising the essence of ordained ministry. This is not a bad thing. However, it feels awkward because the Church’s statutory wineskin can’t easily cope with the adjustment, and we have to develop new terminology to get it there.

3) My only real concern with the model, therefore, is in its implementation. Jackson speaks of the need for “official diocesan policy” when it comes to this (page 25). He speaks of “a discernment process” for FMs “as there is with readers and OLMs” (page 25). He suggests that a “Focal Minister training syllabus will be needed, perhaps prepared nationally” (page 20). Some form of process is needed, of course, but the extent of it worries me.

The joy, and beauty, and actual point of FM is the local
connection and flexible local adaptation of ministry. As soon as you have syllabi and processes that are imposed from a distance (even nationally!), they risk becoming hoops to jump rather than resources to release. Such processes often hinder local adaptation by insisting on irrelevancies, and they undermine recruitment of FMs for whom that is onerous. Too much centralised expectation and we might as well replicate (or just use) the ordination streams and send FMs off to the so-called “vicar clone factory.” We need to learn the lessons from what happened (or didn’t happen) with the aspirationally contextual Pioneer Ordained Minister schemes of 15-20 years ago.

It’s at this point of FM discernment and training that Jackson should have emphasised the role of the Incumbent Oversight Minister. Surely it is in the “mini-episcopal” incumbent that you entrust a level of discernment for who may or may not be invited into the FM role? Surely someone who has been through the “full” ordination program (and subsequently provided with the living) will have been equipped to offer formation and training to those with whom they share the work? An incumbent is both aware of the local context, and connected by their office into the wider accountability; incumbents are key to the framework working. In fact, here is the point of distinction between the two roles of incumbent and FM: incumbents are called to raise up and form, in addition to joining the focal work on the ground.

In conclusion, Jackson has given us a useful resource. The prospect of a framework that aligns with what he presents excites me. Not least of which because “it rescues incumbents from impossible job descriptions, enables some to work at a more strategic level and others to enjoy a more fruitful ministry with direct responsibility for fewer churches” (page 27). But I still slightly shake my head. This is not a new solution to a new problem. This is simply a framework around
the sort of work we should have been doing anyway. No matter the exact form or nomenclature, we need to get on with it.

**Review: Sacred Fire – A Vision for A Deeper Human and Christian Maturity**

Like many life-long Christians, my formative years were shaped by speakers and writers fanning the flames of zeal and purpose. We wanted to know God’s plan for our life. It was about learning our gifts, keeping pure, and pursuing Jesus for the life that lay stretched out before us. We would change the world!

There’s nothing wrong with that. Three of my four children are now, officially, young adults, and I want something similar for them. Opportunities lie open before them. They don’t fully realise their sheer potential. So push into Jesus, equip yourself with his Word, become familiar with his Spirit, find healing for childhood hurts, and launch forth! “I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:13).

We all grow out of our youth and into our adult seasons. And the discipleship that once formed us no longer fits as easily. We try and make it work. We take our sermons and channel our
inner youth: fan your passion into flame, live life for Jesus! We mentor others by setting and pursuing goals, just like we did when the vista was young and wide. And we do the same with our churches: we place our communities on an horizon of opportunities, articulate some mission action goals and motion for them to launch forth like the youth we once were. Occasionally it works.

Our forms of discipleship are youth-shaped, even as we hit our middle age. They don’t hit the mark. This is where we need the sort of wisdom Ronald Rolheiser offers in Sacred Fire.

Rolheiser’s framework is simple. He identifies three stages of discipleship in our walk through life:

1) Essential Discipleship: The struggle to get our lives together. This is the youth-oriented form of discipleship with which we are familiar. It’s for when we are searching, “for an identity... for acceptance... for a circle of friends... for intimacy... for someone to marry... for a vocation... for a career... for the right place to live... for financial security... for something to give us substance and meaning – in a word, searching for a home” (page 16, emphasis mine). “Who am I? Where do I find meaning? Who will love me? How do I find love in a world full of infidelity and false promises” (page 17)? We are familiar with these things.

2) Mature Discipleship: The struggle to give our lives away. This covers the majority of adult life, and begins when we become “more fundamentally concerned with life beyond us than with ourselves” (Page 18). The transition from young adult to responsible parent typifies the entry into this stage of life. “The struggle for self-identity and private fulfillment never fully goes away; we are always somewhat haunted by the restlessness of our youth and our own idiosyncratic needs.... [However the] anthropological and spiritual task will be clear: How do I give my life away more purely and more generously?” (page
18). This is the substance and focus of the book.

3) **Radical Discipleship:** *The struggle to give our deaths away.* As we age, the default line shifts a second time. The question is no longer “What can I still do so that my life makes a contribution? Rather, the question becomes: How can I now live so that my death will be an optimal blessing for my family, my church, and the world?” (page 19). Rolheiser touches on this at the end.

Perhaps the quote from Nikos Kazantzakis on the very first page, sums it up: Three prayers for “three kinds of souls”.

1) *I am a bow in your hands, Lord, draw me lest I rot.*
2) *Do not overdraw me, Lord, I shall break.*
3) *Overdraw me, Lord, who cares if I break!*

It is the second of these that we need to explore.

**In this stage of life, the aspiration is not towards heroism, but towards eldership** (page 64). Rolheiser doesn’t go into it, but my reflection is that eldership has diminished in our collective imagination. Take any popular movie (my thoughts jump to **Happy Feet**) and it pits zealous youth against repressive elders: youthful explorations of real experiences against the oppression of traditions and the narrowness of a self-loathing parental generation. It’s an effective narrative; even now, my heart flutters with some longing to be the heroic youngster. But I’m getting old. I also long to cover, care, nurture, and father. I yearn to pass on some of the depths and ancient learnings that I discovered on my own youthful quests, and which I have digested over many years.

Eldership is valuable, so how do we disciple people towards eldership? How do we disciple people in their maturity?

This collision occurs in the church world. We promote (and fund) **avant garde** pioneering programs and strategies that
promote church growth. There’s a risk of it being seen as just a young person’s game. That isn’t the case. I realised some time ago, that I simply ain’t the green young church planter I used to be (thank God). I’m not going to be able to grow a church, or pioneer something new, through my waning youthful zeal. It will only come through growing into and resting upon a developing eldership. That’s the discipleship I need, and Rolheiser has helped me.

I no longer need to explore paths of youthful imagination. I need to fathom the depths of when the patterns of life are “pretty bland, or flat, or overpressured, or disappointing” where underneath the (relative) stability of life “is an inchoate, nagging disquiet, that is stirring just enough to let us know that someday, though not quite yet, there are still some deeper things to sort out and a deeper journey to be made” (pages 65-67).

One of Rolheiser’s more powerful images is that of the “honeymoon.” Perhaps it sums up the dynamics of a mid-life crisis!

Our route to maturity generally involves a honeymoon or two. Honeymoons are real, are powerful, and afford us, this side of eternity, with one of the better foretastes of heaven. Because of that they are not easy to let go of permanently. Inside of every one of us there is the lingering itch to experience that kind of intensity yet one more time…” (Pages 69-70)

We could be driven by that allure for honeymoon excitement, not just in terms of marital fidelity, but simply as a fantasy of what “success” means to us (“grandiosity” as Rolheiser calls it). Starry-eyed youth run to their honeymoons, thinking to have escaped loneliness. In our mature years, we learn to embrace a “new loneliness, that of seeing and accepting the actual limits of our own lives, a pain intertwined with
accepting our own mortality” (page 74).

If there is one bit of wisdom to dwell on from this book, this is it.

All discipleship equips, and Rolheiser does just that: He unpacks workaholism. He looks at “acedia” — that noonday listlessness and ennui mixed with a daydream of regret and jealousy (pages 79-81), and the answering hope. He looks at forgiveness and how it is needed at the most existential level (page 83). He even unpacks all the seven deadly sins in helpful and insightful ways! Sloth, for instance, is not laziness so much as wilful distraction (I’m looking at you, Netflix). He teaches us to pray (page 169ff), with emotional honesty and life-giving rhythms. And he reminds us to bless and not curse (page 212). Chapter 8 sums it all as “ten commandments for the long haul.”

It was gratifying to find myself familiar with some of what he expounds. Gill and I have reflected for some years on how life is so often a divine call to wait. Our world is now-and-not-yet, and this can feel like Easter Saturday, or the days between Ascension and Pentecost. Just like Rolheiser, we also have drawn on the road to Emmaus (page 98ff) to grasp the depression and despondency of what this can feel like, despite the (unrealised) company of Jesus on the road. We too have encountered the painful compulsion of Peter (page 105), as we are bound to the one who has the words of eternal life, despite the costly road on which we are led and where often we don’t wish to go. In the words of one of the songs that inspired me in my youth, but which I didn’t understand until I had lost some blood: “I know who I am, I know where I’ve been, I know sometimes love takes the hard way.”

In all good discipleship, we need to be both affirmed and stretched. This book stretches us towards the giving away of life that defines our age and stage. We are stretched towards kenotic living, and laying down of pride and judgementalism,
superiority, ideology, and personal dignity (page 124). We are compelled to imagine living as ones baptised into Jesus, not just baptised into John: i.e. baptised into “grace and community” and reliance on the one who can do the impossible. Pentecost comes not to the self-hyped and activated, but to “a church meeting where men and women, frightened for their future, were huddled in fear, confusion, and uncertainty, but were gathered in faith and fidelity despite their fears.” (page 131). We cannot live our lives out of “sheer willpower” (page 130). I know; I tried that once ten years ago and I broke.

The way of mature discipleship is to give away our life. It is Paul sharing in the sufferings of Christ. It is Mary, watching the crucifixion, not running, but absorbing the pain and refusing to “conduct its hatred” (page 149). Sometimes, the Lord places us as walls upon which the ugliness of a broken world breaks, and upon which the sulfurous sharpness of an idolatrous church sloshes. In our youth we might fight back. But in our maturity, we absorb, we bow, we break, and all that the stooping does is put our faces closer to the Rock on which we rest.

That is not the same thing as despair. Our muted helplessness is not a passive resignation, but its opposite. It is a movement toward the only rays of light, love, and faith that still exist in that darkness and hatred. And at that moment, it is the only thing that faith and love can do. (Page 149)

We need this sort of discipleship. We need this sort of imagining of what mature leadership, mature lives, mature ministry looks like. We need a church that can cope with being out of control, that can lean into decline and devote what is left as an offering of blessing. We need a church that finds faith in pain, and just simply is as the winds and waves of the world wash around.
We need to inspire our youth, and delight in their zeal (and their pretensions at times). And us older ones need to aspire to eldership, and give away our lives.

Review: The Last Reformation – Back to the New Testament Model of Discipleship

What’s gone wrong with the church? Surely, new life in Jesus and the Kingdom of God are so much more than stultified, sanitised, professionalised institutions? How do we organise ourselves so that there is more freedom for the Holy Spirit? How can we be the true embodiment of the world-changing gospel like we see in the early church of Acts?

That’s what this book is about. Torben Sondergaard, a Danish evangelist with a growing influence and impact penned this book some years ago. Amongst other things, it is required reading for those wanting to be trained under the imprimatur of his movement.

I have just finished reading it and I am left uneasy. This is a divisive book, for which Sondergaard is unapologetic (“We are going to be accused of destroying the church.”, p13). He interacts with some important issues. He taps into a disillusion amongst some of Jesus’ people: “There are many who are dissatisfied and frustrated because they are not being used and are not growing in the things that God has put in
them” (page 96). His response, I think, is sincere. In the end, however, it is flawed.

I’ve had to check myself continually. Perhaps my unease is appropriate; as a vicar I represent the sort of churchiness that Sondergaard is rightly critiquing. Maybe I’m biased as Sondergaard attempts to deconstruct my current way of life. After all, I’m a professional churchman; the church institutions house and feed my family. My expertise, my career, my “marketable skills”, let alone my sense of vocation and divine purpose are woven into a form of church from which Sondergaard is pulling loose threads. So I’ve had to question myself: is my unease with this book just a form of self-preservation? I don’t think I’ve fallen into that trap.

After all, there’s a lot that I like. As he assesses the problems we face, I am often nodding my head. I love the church. It can and is a location of great blessing. Nevertheless...

1- Church culture often obscures Jesus rather than revealing him. Sondergaard writes, “We do not need to impose our church culture on people in order to make them ‘proper Christians.’ Rather, when we remove today’s church culture, we will see that people are more open to God” (page 21). I, personally, know what it’s like to find myself steering someone who is new to the faith away from the church world, and towards contexts where there is a deeper sense of spiritual family and where Jesus is acknowledged and relied upon. The way we do church doesn’t always have the presence of Jesus as a factor; it can be a toxic and neglectful environment.

2- Our churches appear spiritually stagnant and ill-prepared. “I look at churches in the West, I can see that they need to be refreshed” (page 23). I have felt this as a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction in the status quo. Even when we are blessed and fruitful, we cannot simply stop as
if we’ve “made it” and be satisfied with the way things are. “Semper reformanda,” our forefathers said; the church needs continual reformation. We are not pursuing Jesus enough. We are not prepared for difficulty and adversity, let alone persecution, should it come. “The big churches will suddenly become small when they find out that following Jesus has a high price, a price most of them have never been willing to pay” (page 25).

3- Hierarchy (both formal and informal) beats discipleship in many churches. When I hear stories of people being raised up, nurtured, covered, cared for, and released, they often attend to people and relationships that are usually (but not always) outside of church structures. Here there is true accountability, an honesty and freedom to share difficulties, and receive help. However, within the structures, the stories are often different; they tell the tale of arbitrary hoops to jump, faceless people making decisions for you and not with you, power plays and spin. This is where accountability is reduced to box-ticking and number crunching; no-one “has your back” and, rather than freedom to grow, there is a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) demand for complicity and conformity. When Sondergaard speaks of how “mature Christians get locked up in a hierarchical system that stops them from making progress” (page 43) he touches on these things. I don’t fully agree with how he deals with this phenomenon, but it’s right to raise the issue.

4- Church culture often has a worship problem. The so-called “sacred-secular divide” is much deeper than the “Monday-Sunday” separation that is usually used to describe it. Rather, it’s a cultural demarcation that defines claims on our time, money, and life. It’s as if we say, “Sunday mornings and 10% of my income, and some other contribution belongs to God and the church and the rest is mine.” Churches buy into this culture in order to facilitate
collective goals and providing a means for people to contribute their bit. This isn’t a bad thing, but it can be self-defeating. Regarding tithing: “all our money belongs to God and not just ten percent… tithing can actually keep people in their comfort zones” (page 61). Indeed, true worship is about being a “living sacrifice”, a hundred holistic percent. It’s about giving Jesus all of our lives – our money, our time, our family, our identity, our career. This is how we worship (Romans 12:1), but we rarely nurture it in our church contexts.

5- Church culture often has a flawed sense of growth. I trained during the latter part of the Hybels-esque “church growth” era, shaped by being “seeker sensitive” and offering “homegenous unit” activities for the different blocs of children, youth, men, women, marrieds, singles etc. Growth was about presenting a pleasant and non-threatening atmosphere and getting people in the door and onto the seats. Some good things have come from this mindset, but in general it is a failed experiment that breeds passive consumer Christians. I’m not sure it’s necessarily true that “pastors and leaders... are mostly focused on how to get non-Christians to come to their church” (page 65) but I agree that “they should be looking to God to find the best way to equip the Christians who are already there” (pages 65-66).

I even resonate with some of Sondergaard’s experiences. Gill and I have been pioneers and church planters, and we have seen, time and time again, how something exciting and new can easily fall back into the rut grooved out by expectation and weariness. “This is not different at all! This is exactly how we held meetings in the other church.” (page 37).

Moreover, Sondergaard has given me some helpful food for thought. His treatment of fivefold ministry is generally very good (and even lands the apostolic in the right place at 1 Corinthians 4 – page 120). His emphasis that the fivefold
gifts are most effectively expressed as *itinerant ministers equipping local churches* is intriguing, and I’ll give it further thought.

Yet despite all this, **I am still uneasy about this book. His solution to these problems is flawed.**

Sondergaard’s solution is his titular “last reformation”. He sees the need for a dramatic shift of the size and significance of Luther and Wesley, that would, unlike them, “transform our whole church structure” (page 12, emphasis mine). This imagined realignment of structure is shaped around his understanding of the early church in Acts: smaller household-sized communities, with a flatter organic leadership structure, that fosters spiritual activism (including the supernatural ministries of healing the sick and casting out demons), and which avoids the hierarchy, inertia, and control of larger organisations.

It’s a worthy vision. Structurally, it seems very similar to the house-church movement of the ’70s and the broader cell-church movement in general. It resonates with the “missional discipleship” movement of the ’00s, and the emphasis on “oikos”/household sized “missional communities.” In terms of missional ethos, it is similar to contemporary embedded communities such as Eden and parachurch organisations such as YWAM bases.

So again, **why am I uneasy?** I’ve distilled it down to three concerns:

1. **His vision is self-defeating.** There’s more than a hint of pathos at times ("I felt we could not put up with the rejection any longer." page 41). Believe me, I get it. But a firmer foundation is needed. Here’s my concern:

   The early church model in Acts is intriguing and attractive. However it was far from perfect, even in those early primal years. Read the first few chapters of
Revelation and you’ll see how spiritually ineffective they could be! Moreover, the evolution of the early church, even before Constantine, was not due to a hardening of heart away from the will of God. It was moved by a desire to remain true to Jesus (apostolic succession, canon of Scripture), to flourish in faith amidst persecution (liturgical rhythms, appointment of pastors and leaders etc.), and to combat heresy and defend belief (trinitarian theology, apologias). Inevitably these lifegiving currents were, naturally, systematised. The assumption that the early church was great and it became increasingly bad does not entirely match reality. Sondergaard doesn’t seem to grasp this. e.g. He makes the curious observation that in the early Church “No one but Jesus was the Head of the fellowship, and it was clear to everyone” (p135), and doesn’t recognise that the Holy Spirit manifested that leadership through Councils of elders (Acts 15) and the sending of corrective letters from people in authority (Paul’s epistles)!

Even if Sondergaard were able to re-manifest that early church purity (on his terms of purer structures), it would inevitably (on those same terms) apostasize, just like the early church. You see, it’s already happening. Sondergaard is growing a movement. He has written a definitive book that is essential reading. He is playing the part of apostolic overseer and doctor-theologian. Within this movement, he defines what is orthodox, and what is not. As the movement grows, it will require infrastructure to organise and (ta da!) hierarchy to ensure that the core values of the movement are held and acted upon. None of that is bad! As long as you realise that this is what is happening and play your part well. I’m not sure he sees it.

What I think I see here is something I’ve observed in other contexts – a form of ecclesiastical nihilism. “I’m not your pastor”, someone says by way of pastoral advice. “I’m
not the leader”, they say, leading the way. “We trust in the Holy Spirit alone,” they say, by way of articulating the Holy Spirit’s guidance. “We are not full of ourselves”, they say, by way of self-description. The only way forward is to not pretend: you are a pastor, a leader, a discerning of God’s will. You do help shape our identity and place; now do it well!

Similarly, to Sondergaard, who imagines when people “once again begin to meet in homes and on the streets where there are no big names, programs, or organisations” (page 83) while writing a book with his name on it, offering pioneering training programs, and fronting an organisation: Don’t pretend you have discovered a pure form of doing church (which would necessarily need to be purer than the early church that, eventually, ended up with us!). Don’t pretend you have somehow avoided the pitfalls of structure and hierarchy and the pressures of collective identity; admit that you’ve actually got those things... and do them well. Stand on the shoulders of those who have literally done before what you are doing now. A little humility would not go amiss.

Relatedly,

2- He’s honed in on the wrong problem. The problem is culture not structure. His critique of church culture is worth hearing. But his structural proposals are not novel, nor are they essential to the changes we need.

Sondergaard often plays existing church systems as a straw man. For instance, he rightly envisions a situation when smaller communities of faith can reproduce themselves quickly and efficiently. But he asks things like this: “Why are the churches so afraid of new fellowships if all the numbers show that this is the solution to reaching the world?” (page 45) They’re not! They might not be very good at it. And the big monolithic techniques of resource church
mega-plants may not be my cup of tea... but everyone recognises that “church planting” or “fresh expressions of church” (when defined well) are essential to the way forward. And some even manage to do it.

Similarly, “Imagine that a matured married couple... come to the pastor and say: ‘We’ve really been seeking God, and we feel that it’s time for us to move on... We would like to have your blessing.’ Do you think the pastor will bless them?” (page 54). Well, yes! Sondergaard implies that the pastor would withhold the blessing in order to manipulate continued membership and financial support. Really? If that happened, that wouldn’t be a structural problem, but a competence problem! And if it was pervasive, it would be a cultural one.

In every structure, I can find (or at least imagine) a church culture which alleviates all the concerns such as spiritual stagnation and lack of discipleship. I even see existing churches doing things that Sondergaard aspires to. E.g. I know of a church who is more than “happy to see people start their own [church] families in the neighbourhood instead of waging war with them.” (Page 51, NB. it’s either “happy to see” or “waging war” – there’s the straw-man false dichotomy again). Similarly, in every structure I can find – including house church movements like Sondergaard – I can find spiritual lethargy and even toxicity.

We don’t need to reform the skeleton of the church – it’s structures – we need to reform the heart of the church. We need to fall in love with Jesus again, and to embrace that love and devotion individually, collectively, corporately. I have encountered that heart in the smallest of home churches, and in the biggest of cathedrals; in the most organic of prophetic communities, and in the most structured of liturgical settings. It’s not the structure that matters, it’s whether or not those in the structures
devote them to Jesus or not. Sondergaard briefly touches on this peripherally (“many... issues would be resolved automatically if people would simply repent and get saved”, page 134), but it is the heart of the matter.

3- His vision is too small. Reformations of the church have both discontinuity (a big shift from what was before) and continuity (it is still rooted in the ancient works of God). Sondergaard emphasises a discontinuity and achieves it because he takes a narrow field of view. His awareness of the nature and character of the Body of Christ doesn’t see the beauty and depths of existing traditions.

I can see how Sondergaard’s vision would rest well within some of the charismatic and pentecostal traditions. But even I struggle with his over-realised eschatology. I am no cessationist. I’ve got a lot a time for “Naturally Supernatural” activities, when done sensitively and well, such as Healing On The Streets and Healing Rooms etc. But you don’t have to look too much at Christian history to recognise that those who say “Jesus is coming back very soon, and I am convinced that we are the ones who will see His return” (page 15, emphasis mine) should be heard with a raised eyebrow.

Similarly, he is has a closed hand on some issues that should be held more loosely. For instance, he anathematises infant baptism (p15). This is fair enough, I guess (I am open-handed on this issue!). But to assert that it is important to some churches merely because it “brings in money” (p57) is not only insulting, but blatantly untrue. I doubt any church I have been a part of has even broken even on providing the ministry of Baptism, let alone made a profit.

All this does is narrow the vision. Is there a place in this last reformation for my reformed brother and sisters, who emphasise the study of Scripture, and value the
expertise of learned teaching? Is there a place in this last reformation for my contemplative and traditional brothers and sisters, who value how the Spirit has actually been at work in the church over the last millenia or two, and who draw upon those good, ancient forms? I can’t really see it.

In conclusion, this is a difficult book to read. For those who are in some sort of denial about the state of the church, it would be usefully provocative. But my unease at his “solution” remains.

Sondergaard says he is “not out to criticize pastors but to see them as victims of this system. I feel sorry for them, and I want to save them from it. The problem is not them, or any other people! No, it’s the whole church system we have built up.” (page 55, emphasis mine). I appreciate much of this sentiment. I have been a victim of the system, and, I suspect, a perpetrator of it as well. I love the church, in, around, and beyond the institutions of which I am a part. Which is why, occasionally, I look at it and despair. But I only need one Saviour, and he is the church’s Saviour as well.

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Review: Bring ‘Em Back Alive – A Healing Plan for Those Wounded by the Church
Reading this in my current quest to explore the connection between trauma and church culture, I have found a book that is well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed.

Dave Burchett’s *Bring ‘Em Back Alive* gets a lot right. He is honest about how church can and has been a painful experience for many. He has a pastoral heart that yearns for the church to reach out to those so wounded. There is some helpful advice for those who care and some useful insights for those who have been hurt. But this book is far from the “healing plan” it is touted to be.

A defining image (page 13) in the book is of the “lost sheep”, the one who has wandered, as opposed to the 99 who remain in the fold. He exhorts us to have the heart of the Good Shepherd who seeks out that one lost sheep. The image draws on Jesus’ words in Matthew 18, of course, but it’s a somewhat tortured connection with the parable. Not only does Burchett avoid a nuanced exposition, he misses the plain correlation between the lost sheep and the “little child” of Matthew 18:5 who “enters the kingdom of heaven.” His use of *The Message* as his biblical text throughout severely restricts the depths from which he can draw.

It’s a shame, because Matthew 18 can really help us in this area. The wandering sheep is a “little” one, who exhibits a childlike faith. Jesus has just talked about the consequences for those who would cause such a “little one” to stumble, or sin, or wander. The dramatic image of a “millstone hung around the neck” and being drowned in the sea should give us pause for thought! It is a prophetic parable against those “who look
down on one of these little ones” and has more implications for the character of the flock, than that of the little lamb.

And here lies Burchett’s problem. As he rightly appeals to church leaders to value those who have wandered away, he misses this prophetic trajectory against the existing flock, and therefore embraces some worrisome assumptions. I’ve tried to bluntly distill them here:

1. **The point of reaching out to the wounded is to bolster the strength of the church.** “How much depth have we, the collective church, lost by not aggressively seeking to find and heal our wounded lambs?” he asks on page 2, in the introduction. Somehow the utilitarian power of the wounding community has become the point.

2. **The problem lies with those who have left.** “So many people out there have been given up for lost,” he writes. “They could be found, healed, and returned. If we could only begin to communicate that we are willing to accompany them on the road back, forgive them, love them, and celebrate their return” (page 18). Frankly, this sentence made me angry. The subtitle of the book aims it at “those wounded by the church”, yet here it is the wounded ones that need to be “found”, “returned”, and “forgiven.” This is close to the language of an abusive husband, offering “reconciliation” because he is gracious enough to forgive his wounded wife.

3. **People leave because of their immaturity.** “Like a thirsty sheep, a bored and unfulfilled Christian who is without spiritual shepherding may wander onto paths that lead away from God.” (Page 36). Which is fine to say, perhaps, if this is a book about being better shepherds. But it’s not, and it infantilises those who have left and diminishes the principles (some of them dearly held) that shape that departure.

4. **Unity trumps holiness and justice.** “The Good Shepherd has a cure for us, and it starts with His prescription
for unity.” (Page 48). “Division within the body of Christ is sin. Jesus’s teaching about unity is indissoluble.” (Page 56). His words, in themselves, are not wrong. They are simply not careful enough. Again, he inadvertently echoes the words of an abusive husband insisting that marital unity is more important than any particular transgression on his part. Sometimes separation is necessary for unity. Even Paul (quoted by Burchett on page 53) exhorts Titus to have “nothing to do with” the (truly) divisive person. I know too many people who have appropriately departed their church community, and have then be shamed as divisive or schismatic, when the real wound to the body of Christ was done to them, not by them.

I’ve deliberately painted a stark image here, to make my point. Despite the flaws, Burchett does get to some helpful places.

The chapter entitled The Heart of a Shepherd is generally good. Occasionally he has the same sentiments as people like Mike Pilavachi who reimagines church as family. “Peter did not advise the shepherd to show difficult rams and ewes the sheep gate”, Burchett writes (page 76), and I hear Pilavachi echoing “We don’t have employees to hire and fire, but sons and daughters to raise.” Burchett’s one clear point is well made: We have a responsibility to the wounded(page 78), and we should take it seriously.

The second part of the book is also useful. It is actually aimed at those who have been hurt, rather than those who might seek them out. It’s nothing groundbreaking, but it is good, solid, stuff. He would turn our wounded eyes towards Jesus who “understands the pain, betrayal, and anguish that… selfish and sinful behavior causes” (page 117). He exhorts us towards forgiveness (page 180). He gives guidance about living in the present (page 153).
Occasionally, the era of the book shows. Published in 2004, it is just before the heyday of the emerging and emergent church movements. As he scratches on the disaffection of those in church who are “tired of pretending their lives are better than they actually are” (page 90), he has not yet seen the growth of movements that did arise from those who left that plastic world. Perhaps there is a glimpse of some generational wistfulness: “...they need to hear from their former flock that we care, we miss them, we need them, and we want them to come back” (Page 91). Having lived and led in that era, what we actually needed to hear was “that we care, we miss you, and we long for you to fly, and do, and build what that the Lord is leading you to do, we’ve got your back.”

I shook my head a little, when he talks about churches setting up classes and seminars for those wounded (by the same churches running the classes, presumably!), so that the “injured lambs” might not “feel alone... having a forum where they can express their hurt, and share their concerns.” I don’t think he realises how patronising that idea sounds.

You see, in the end, the lost wounded sheep don’t want to be found by a hurtful church, even a regretful hurting church. I know this from my own experience. I know those because many of those I’ve met are wary of being found by me; I wear a clerical collar, I embody that which has been the source of their trauma. They don’t want to be found by us, they want to be found by Jesus. Yes, they also want community, but they want it real, spiritually authentic. Which means, Jesus first.

Helping the wounded isn’t about classes or offers of therapy. It’s not about technical change in tired institutions. It’s not even about “revivals” of a surge of life into ordinary auditoriums. It’s not our task to “bring ’em back alive.”

Yes, we follow Jesus as we search for them, care for them, breathe life into them, back them, cover them, and cheer them on. But it’s not about slotting them back in to where they were first injured. It’s about the Lord doing something new.
When I meet the “little ones” who find no place at the institutional table, laden with looming millstones, I am increasingly realising that the kingdom of God belongs to those such as these.

Review: Recovering From Churches That Abuse

Churches can be hurtful. Whether it be the institution, the community, or individuals within them, they can wound, manipulate, damage, and neglect. This is no new thing. Recovering from Churches That Abuse was written by Ronald Enroth in the early 1990’s. It’s been on my bookshelf for almost 20 years, but, for various reasons, I have only now found the right time to read it.

For church leaders the topic of church abusiveness can be painful, awkward, and emotionally complex. It’s like reading a book on parenting for those of us who have children. There is a complex mix of feeling the pain of our own childhood and our own imperfect parents, of feeling the pain of our own mistakes and many flaws, and of fear about the fact that more mistakes will likely happen in the future! Similarly, I have been hurt by the church, I have been (along with all my colleagues) a flawed and broken church leader, and sometimes the way ahead seems more fraught than hopeful.

Which gives all the more reason to thoughtfully and
deliberately engage with this topic.

Enroth’s book may not have been the best place to start. It is anecdotal more than it is analytical, a “life-history approach to illustrate patterns of spiritual and emotional abuse” (page 137). Its focus is on situations where the level of abuse is extreme, blatant, and cult-like. There is some use in seeing dysfunction in the extreme, but it’s not always helpful when reflecting on the “ordinary” hurts of the everyday church.

Nevertheless, there is some wisdom to glean. In what follows, I simply outline the echoes of some of these stories in my own experience, and also the useful insights that Enroth bring.

1) Points of resonance:

Although the anecdotes are often of extreme situations, we can connect them with more “normal” circumstances as well. I have heard some of the language Enroth shares being used by those around me. I have used some of it myself. There are points of resonance.

For instance, Enroth quotes someone as saying “I woke up one morning and realized that I had not thought my own thoughts for three years” (page 33). I hear similar from those who may have left a mainstream church that has a strong and particular view of their own mission. It’s the experience of buying into someone else’s mission until it reaches a point where the secondhand faith becomes a collapsing foundation. When a mission-driven church doesn’t also exercise the right interplay of freedom and formation and focus on real people, pain results.

Similarly, we read words like this: “One of the things that has been most distressing to me is to see the way the church can discard people the way you throw an old banana peel out of the window with no apparent care for them” (page 33) and language that appeals to God’s will as a means of control or deflection. I’ve seen what it’s like to be on the receiving
of interpretations of God’s will as a means of ameliorating rejection: “I’m so glad you’ve found the place where God actually wanted you to be…”

I’ve reflected in the past about the disillusionment of those who are “done” with churches which are increasingly “self-referential.” Enroth shares stories in which “members will be requested to serve, to become involved, to sign up for a variety of activities that, upon closer inspection, appear designed to maintain the system” (pages 31-32). I know what it’s like for the direction of the church rut to be about “helping the vicar do his job” and nothing more. I understand the painful passivity of those for whom “it is hard to be a part of anything anymore” (page 46).

As I read through Enroth’s anecdotes, a thought crossed my mind: There are many situations in which church members are not ill-treated, but in which church staff come away damaged. It’s a point of concern, because there is a growing tendency to “professionalise” vocational work and assess ministry via bureaucratic markers. It’s telling that Enroth refers to abusive communities as “performance-based” (page 17, 44) a number of times. I have seen too many church workers broken by impossible performance measures, mediocre remuneration and support, and spiritualised reasons as to why they should grin and bear it.

Indeed, I have sometimes reflected on the fact that the mechanisms for abuse that Enroth’s stories reveal (financial dependence, the priority of institutional reputation over personal injustice, spiritualised language to assert authority, and gaslighting condescension as decisions are made for you and not with you), cohere to the relationship between most clergy/pastors and their institution. If these mechanisms are not proactively countered by good oversight, their abusiveness inevitably emerges.

2) Helpful learnings:
Where Enroth does provide some analysis, it is helpful.

For instance, he raises the question of “How can we discern an unhealthy, abusive Christian church or fellowship from one that is truly biblical, healthy, and worthy of our involvement?” (page 27ff). His answer references the psychological health of members, of whether or not people are isolated from families, or discouraged in “independent thinking” and “individual differences of belief and behavior.” We learn of “legalistic churches” exhibiting an often-hypocritical emphasis on “high moral standards” and which allow no external accountability.

Throughout, he also raises aspects of church life in which good things are twisted to achieve bad outcomes.

For instance, there is no doubt that the Scriptures are a source of life, and truth, and a revelation of God’s love, grace, and presence. Yet, from an abusive situation in which “if you questioned Scripture you were made to feel very guilty” (page 22), even the beauty of Scripture can be hidden in pain and trauma. It is similar with some of the precious doctrines of Christian theology, e.g. the Lordship of Christ, the atoning sacrifice of the cross. These can be mishandled into guises of dominance and guilt-inducing wrath.

I am learning to see it for myself. I can tell when words, that have been life-giving for me, walk into clouds of darkness in someone else’s eyes. I have encountered Scripture and the truths of Christian doctrine as refuges, places of safety and sustenance when the church has otherwise left me starving in the dark. For others, they have been instruments of control. As they begin to move towards healing, they can come close to throwing out the baby of truth with the bathwater of pain. Enroth doesn’t give any great insight into how to address this tension, but nevertheless declares:

*The survivor must be assured of God’s unfailing grace and be*
able, in effect, to rediscover the gospel. (Page 43)

We thought we were Christians, but despite years and years of being in Christian groups, neither of us knew Christ at all. Neither of us knew how to depend on Christ. (Page 61)

I have found a number of them who have difficulty with or even an aversion to reading the Bible because it has been misused by the group to abuse them. Learning the proper application and interpretation of Scripture goes a long way toward healing the wounds of abuse. (Page 66)

Victims must be able not only to rebuild self-esteem and purpose in life, but also renew a personal relationship with God…. it is possible to have a rich relationship with God… the victim must be turned “to faith in the living God from faith in a distorted image of him.” (Page 67)

Day by day we had to put one foot in front of the other and say, “Jesus, I have been a disciple of my denomination. I have been a disciple of my church. I have been a disciple of my pastor. I want to be your disciple and follow you.” (Page 84)

I now have a church where the pastor leads us to Christ, not to himself. (Pages 139-140)

Similarly, another twisted “good” is the concept of spiritual family. For myself, the concept of family is life-giving — a place of refuge, warmth, and formation. I have found that individualism is a lonely place, a form of sterile functionalism in which no one has your back, a capitalist vision of Christianity in which the body only moves together as a collective of coincidentally aligned self-actualised individuals. I resonate with Mike Pilavachi of Soul Survivor who speaks passionately and rightly about the need for church to be family rather than business.
I am learning, however, that even language of “family” can resonate with people’s trauma. Dysfunctional families eradicate individual differentiation so that identity is lost. The language of spiritual parenting has also been used to manipulate and control and attaches to the abuses of so-called “shepherding” (page 55, 143). We need to redeem that language with care.

It takes time to work through this language barrier. It is possible to have healthy church family, and to share common goals, and to find oneself as part of a larger whole, and to have appropriate formation and discipline. “The intensity of relationships within an abusive group must be matched by intense relationships in a wholesome setting” (page 65). It requires a context of love, and grace, and warmth, and acceptance. At times it requires some particular leadership skills, which I am aspiring to discover. For those of us who inhabit a leadership, pastoral, or even therapeutic role, we need to understand how the mistrust of us is not personal, but a natural wariness “of allowing another authority figure into their lives” (page 64).

It is useful, therefore, to see how Enroth takes us to some of the pathways that lead to healing and restoration. It involves overcoming a “shame-based identity” (page 37) and mistrust.

By learning to trust again, the victims of abuse also discover that they can tolerate and trust themselves, an important part of the recovery experience (page 40).

Simply by describing this journey, Enroth helps us. I understand what it is like to go through a season of regret over “the lost years” (page 44) of giving away health, wealth, and youth. Similarly, the journey through “anger and rage” (page 128) and bitterness, away from “pointing the finger” (page 78) and talking about “what had happened to me” (page 112), is difficult but necessary. The four stages of “role
exit” (page 116ff) of those who leave an abusive situation is illuminating. The summary of “mending” (page 140) is helpful.

They need to understand that their significance is not in what they had, but it is in their relationship with Christ. They have lost a few years, but they have not lost their soul. (Page 130)

In conclusion:

Enroth has helped me listen to my own internal pain. If find something of myself when he quotes Johnson and VanVonderen who write:

> There is no test to diagnose spiritual abuse. There are only spiritual clues: lack of joy in the Christian life; tiredness from trying hard to measure up; disillusionment about God and spiritual things; uneasiness, lack of trust, or even fear...; a profound sense of missing your best Friend; cynicism or grief over good news that turned out to be too good to be true. (Pages 138-139)

If nothing else, Enroth has shown that such painful journeys are “far more prevalent and much close to the evangelical mainstream than many are willing to admit” (page 139).

I remain perplexed and moved. In my real world, I am frequently running into those who have been left bleeding, and who have reached the same end as some of Enroth’s stories: “[W]e will never get what we need from a church. It is going to be our family and the Lord, and we have to get that relationship right. There is not going to be a church suited for people who have our backgrounds...” (Page 99). How to help, how to serve, how to bless, from a church leadership role that looks like what has hurt them before? This remains my question, my conundrum, and my prayer.

> Recovery means trusting in the God of grace, the God of
endless years. Remember the promise made to Israel in Joel 2:25: “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” (Page 145)

Review: Dirty Glory

Hey @PeteGreig. You don’t know me, but I just blubbed my way through Dirty Glory. Fanned fire from both living flames and dormant embers. Holy mess. Not sure whether to say “thank you” nicely or wryly :–/. “For the sake of the world burn like a fire in me…” Groan. Now what? 🤔

— Will Briggs (@WillBriggs) April 7, 2018

I remember a Bible college lecturer asking the class once, “What aspect of the gospel first impacted you?” For some it was about truth. For some it was about forgiveness and renewal. For others it was about belonging and reconciliation. The aim of the question was to get us to think about how the gospel is a passionate thing. How are we moved, enlivened, stimulated by the good news that Jesus, who calls us to himself, is King of this world?

There’s a similar question about our sense of vocation, the part we play in God’s mission. How does the command to “Go and make disciples of all nations” move us? For some it is a passion to teach and preach. For others, it’s about embracing the broken with care and comfort. Some simply
want to introduce people to Jesus. [Aside: there’s a strangely fivefold shape to these missional passions].

It’s a question worth pondering, because vocational fires dwindle. We come to plod from day to day, being as faithful as we can. Even church life can become a lurch from Sunday to Sunday; it can revolve around the management of buildings, and the placating of opinions. Individually, and together, we Christians are adept at curling up into ourselves and maintaining a static equilibrium of spiritual excuses.

Sometimes we even forget what those old fires felt like. But then annoying books like Pete Greig’s Dirty Glory come along and douse us in rocket-powering oxidiser.

I wasn’t really expecting to begin to burn again when I read Greig’s book. It was “just” another book; the standalone autobiographical sequel of “just” another hipster church leader and his well-marketed 24-7 prayer movement, (I mean, Bear Grylls wrote the foreword and everything!). I hadn’t really looked into 24-7 much (it’s mostly a UK-US thing and not as big in Australia). I’d heard enough to be both interested and slightly sceptical. And the thing is, I’ve read the book, and we’ve even visited Greig’s Emmaus Road church in Guildford, and I still don’t know much about the practicalities of the movement and the exact details of what they do. But there’s something at the heart of this book, something in the intermingled testimonies and teachings, that has caused my heart to be strangely warmed.

Here are the principles that I can glean from what Greig has written:

**Dissatisfaction.** I get this. Without a sense of discontent, mission is reduced to “more of what we already have.” Church health is reduced the static health of numbers and money, and not the dynamic growth of vision and depth.

> I began to realise that it would now be possible to live the
For Greig, the touchstone of holy dissatisfaction is prayer. To express this he turns to the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, a house of prayer that had become filled with corrupt traders. He wants us to hear the rebuke of Jesus: “...[T]here could be large, impressive, popular churches... attracting large crowds... impressive buildings, strong brands, great wealth and a remarkable history...” but they might “evoke a similar rebuke” if “they have lost the fundamental heart of prayer”, (page 44). From this, he develops his “blueprint” of Presence, Prayer, Mission, Justice, and Joy (page 45) which becomes the essence and structure of the book.

**Presence** speaks of the fundamental imperative in prayer to “seek his face always” (page 51). I have been exploring these thoughts in different ways recently, and I was able to rest in Greig’s words here. What is fanned into flame is a posture of intimacy (page 71) and of surrender:

> Urgent voices are calling us to abandon the familiar comforts of Christendom, to strike out into the unknown and rediscover the Nazarene. Let him hack our systems and take us back to the place of willing surrender in which we will simply do...
anything, go anywhere, say anything he tells us, whenever, wherever, whatever it takes... We need a theophany, a rediscovery of the terror of his proximity. (Page 57)

Learning to dwell (and even to sleep) in the love of the Father is offensive to the strategic part of our brains: a violation of the ego; a sort of dying. It can seem irresponsible... It can appear profligate... It can seem naive and scandalous... It can appear selfish... It can seem rude... It can seem unstrategic... [but] ‘To be a witness’, says the writer Madeleine L’Engle, ‘is to be a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one’s life would not make sense if God did not exist.’ (Page 77)

**Prayer** speaks of power. Greig recounts some amazing stories of answered prayer, of course, but this isn’t about hype. This is about simple prayers – bold, simple prayers – simply answered. It is also about “predictable valleys of the mundane” in between, in which “we mature; our faith fills up into faithfulness, we learn to push into community and into God’s presence, which is, after all, the greatest miracle of all” (page 108).

Luke 18:8 asks, “Will the Son of Man find faith, when he comes?” and Greig ponders “a big, fat, screaming ‘if’ hanging over the people of God in every generation: will we, will we not, pray when trouble comes?” (page 118). It is a real question. I used to think about ministry and church and simply assume that, of course, we would pray. After two decades in church ministry, I am no longer that naive.

Whenever prayer is reduced to a clumsy technique for getting God to mutter a reluctant ‘Amen’ to our selfish desires, it is merely wishful thinking in a religious disguise. But when prayer is an ‘Amen’ to God’s desires, it is profoundly Christian and powerful beyond measure. (page 126)
What is fanned into flame here is a connection of our worship with the renewal of the land. Greig draws on the promises to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 to do this, and takes us to “God’s great project to see creation remade” (page 120). He speaks of prayer as a travailing and wrestling (page 129), as childbirth (page 130), and even of violence (page 131); to not have that in church makes as much sense as a soldier not having a gun, “a boxer his fists, or a theologian great tracts of his Bible” (page 132).

I would pushback a little at Greig at this point, though, because he sometimes slips into a false progression: “Once the church is back to normal, pulsing with life, God’s great project is to see creation remade” (page 120). These are not distinct steps, as if once God has finished building the church, he’ll move on to the world! A church does not pulse to life unless it is already yearning for God’s great project. Christ grows his church as he calls us out into his world-changing purposes, not before he does. I think Greig gets this though.

Mission reflects how God intends us to be a house of prayer for the nations. Greig takes us to stories of God’s people being present – in America, Ibiza, and (later in the book) “Boy’s Town” on the Mexican border. These are missionary stories of the old kind, like the ones that stirred Gill and I in our YWAM days. They are of ordinary folk stepping out in faith, daring to go where others would not, for the sake of bringing light to a life, to a place, to a generation.

There’s some decent missiology in Greig’s approach:

“In approaching any new culture our first task is always to remove our shoes, recognising that we are standing on holy ground. We are not bringing the Lord somewhere new, because he is already here. Our primary task, therefore, is to identify God’s fingerprints and to trace his footprints in the new environment.” (Page 208).
And he helpfully addresses our propensity to perform mission as some form of service provision by professionals:

“Our own journeys of salvation and spiritual formation will... become intertwined with those to whom Christ is sending us... We go to the lost and make space for them to preach to us, to teach us, to minister to our unbelief. This requires stillness, and humility, a deeply anchored assurance in the gospel, and the ability to ask gently disruptive questions.” (Page 213)

**Justice** is the touchpoint at which mission impacts the real world. “Prayer without action is just religion in hiding”, (page 238). Justice is where mission gets real. Greig quotes Bob Pierce as he tells us that “one of the most dangerous prayers you can ever pray: ‘Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God’” (page 247).

There’s a lengthy exposition of Kelly Teitsort’s ministry in Boy’s Town Mexico which fans these flames well. And Greig backs it up biblically: He runs a thread through the pre-exilic prophets (page 255), Christ’s cleansing of the temple, and his claim to fulfill Luke 4:18-19 (page 250) and then connects it to our own worship and mission. We are not just about reaching souls, we are about “recognising that “something [is] wrong systemically and it [is] only going to be changed by a profound cultural shift” (page 283).

“Compassion for the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner is not an optional extra for those with a strong social conscience. It bleeds from the heart of true Christian worship. When we care for the poor, we minister to Jesus himself.” (Page 254)

When God freed the Israelites from captivity in Egypt he did it literally – not just metaphorically. Similarly, when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralysed man... he proceeded to heal him physically too... **Down the ages, it has always been the**
tendency of the rich to reduce salvation to a purely spiritual experience. But if you’re hungry you need real bread before you will consider the heavenly variety. If you’re in chains you take the Bible verses about freedom very literally indeed. (Pages 278-279, emphasis mine)

Joy is the outcome of faith as it works itself out through dissatisfaction. We are content with nothing else but the presence of God, manifest in power, mission, justice, etc. Jesus is our answer, and his presence is our joy, in with and through all circumstance. Greig spends much of this section talking about the fifteenth anniversary celebrations of his movement. He truly celebrates, but there is a warning away from triumphalism. He points us to the “Jesuit ‘Litany of humility’… From the desire of being praised, Deliver me, O Jesus…” (Page 315).

So why does all this make me burn up (in a good way)? I’m not entirely sure.

There are certainly some points of personal connection. I know what it is like to share the journey with a chronically-ill wife (“I’m sick of being sick”, page 116). I know what it’s like to travel internationally as a family, involving our children in the discernment and the cost (page 300). My tears flowed as Greig spoke of his wife’s graduation after “illness had robbed her of so many precious moments” (page 299). They flowed even more when I encountered the thought of “the Lord inviting us to pioneer together once again” (page 299).

I found myself repenting at points, or at least, crying out with a desire to repent. In our current season I know I have had to turn from the idolatry of comfort. I have had to repent of the faithlessness by which I have placed my sense of identity and worth, and the source of my family’s protection and care, not in God’s hands, but in broken ecclesial systems.

There was also times of frustration in my reading of this
book. Having had my passions awakened, the engines are revved up and that is accompanied by a familiar sense of wheels spinning. No grip, nowhere to go. It’s time to turn this towards intimacy, towards trusting God not just for the fire, but the fireplace in which to burn, and the specific promises for a specific people to cling to.

For me then, the greatest help was Greig’s image of “Blue Camp 20.” This is drawn from his time in America where he learned the history of his local town: It was once a camp, a place where pioneers, originally intending to go on further, often decided to settle down instead. It speaks of premature comfort with a road not yet travelled.

I was moved by Greig’s confession of the temptation to “settle down here and stop pioneering… would it really be wrong to serve the Lord with a bit more cash, a bit more kudos, and a lot less rain?” (Page 141). Indeed, having experienced church planting, and time-limited placements, I am sometimes jealous of the seemingly comfortable run that some of my clerical colleagues get to enjoy! But then there’s that annoying, calling, stimulating and painful fire: “I signed up to change the world. I never wanted to be like it.” (Page 153).

It’s easy to pioneer when you’re too young to know what it will cost you, when you feel immortal and invincible and the whole of life is an adventure waiting to begin. But pioneering a second time is hard. Abraham was one of the few who never settled down – even in his old age he lived ‘like a stranger in a foreign country… For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and build is God’ (Heb. 11:9-10). (Page 143)

We tend to assume that Blue Camp 20 is the frontier from which we can pioneer into new territory geographically, or into new effectiveness professionally, but ultimately it is the place of testing from which we can pioneer into deeper intimacy with Jesus than ever before. We wrestle with God at
Blue Camp 20... to come close to him in greater intimacy. We lay down comfort at Blue Camp 20... We pioneer from Blue Camp 20 not to achieve something for God, but to receive something from him – a deeper fellowship with him in his death and resurrection (Phil. 3:10-11). (Pages 147-148)

Perhaps all that is happened in me is that Greig’s prayer for his book has been answered. It has deepened my thirst, because it has “rubbed salt on my lips” and woken me up, (page 12). It has had me shaking off the protections and pretenses of being a performing parson. It has had me reflecting on the past and the present. It has got me dreaming for the future. It has got me longing for his kingdom to come, real, substantial, local, global.

I no longer have the vigour and brashness of my youth and younger pioneering days. I know what real mission costs. I have regrets, and I have hopes. And all I can do is pray, to the glorious God who meets us in the dirt. Somehow, that’s where life happens, and I long for more of it.

I give you back today the prayers I have prayed that are not answered – yet. The seeds I’ve sown that haven’t borne a harvest – yet. The dreams I’ve buried that haven’t risen – yet. Restore the years, the prayers, the trust that the locusts have eaten. Remember me, Lord, redeem my life, and answer my oldest, truest, prayers. Amen.

(Pages 307)
Review: Into the Silent Land – The Practice of Contemplation

I have recently been engaging with the more contemplative side of Christian spirituality. It hasn’t been a mere academic exercise. My current circumstance demands I reflect on all matter of things regarding life, and church, and the ways of the world and it has led me to something of an eddy, of going around in circles a bit.

It’s an intellectual eddy; I know what I think about things, and while I will always have an enquiring mind, it’s been a long time since I have come across new thoughts about the things that matter.

It’s a leadership eddy; I am aware of all manner of strategies for mission, and while it will always be a defining passion, it’s been a long time since I have come across anything that is essentially able to reach beyond insubstantial churchy forms.

The grace in this is that God has led me deeper, to an unsettling proposition: that the answers to life’s deepest questions are not fundamentally about intellect. The foundations of vocation are not, in the end, matters of skill, ability, or even opportunity. Rather, we are called to spiritual depths, to simple mystical things such as the love of God, and the fact that, lo, the Spirit of Jesus is actually with us to the end of the age.

In these eddies, I have remembered an experience I had about eight years ago. At that time I experienced what some might term a “breakdown.” It was also a “breakthrough.” I found
myself in a place where intellect and leadership had been taken away from me by my overworked and broken brain. All that was left was worship, rest, silence. Jesus’ Spirit was present, and all that was required of me was to simply, trustingly, “be” in his presence. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

My brain healed, and life moved on. Now in recent years, with my brain and body well and able, I am facing again the end of intellect and “leadership skills.” In that place, I have been helped by Martin Laird’s *Into the Silent Land*.

It’s not a perfect book by any means. In fact, I would go as far as to say that it might be a hindrance to those who are not confident in their biblical theology. There are, for instance, clear influences of late 20th-Century pseudo-Eastern spiritualism when he oversteps from seeking closeness and oneness with God, to an almost panentheistic sense of “union” in which we avoid the “illusion of separation” (page 15). Nevertheless, I found it a helpful book. If we are to discipline ourselves, including our interior life of thoughts and feelings and anxieties, we need some equipping. We can learn to quieten our soul.

I can certainly identify with the experience of the “wild hawk of the mind” (chapter two) as the “mind’s obsessive running in tight circles generates and sustains the anguish that forms the mental cage in which we live much of our lives – or what we take to be our lives…” (page 20). I see the turmoil of anxiety and fantasy that can dominate my thoughts. But it takes more than recognition to resolve it; like attempting to calm waters by splashing down on the waves that rear up, our attempts at “self-control” can simply add to the churn. We need quietness, silence; we need to find ourselves abiding in Christ, not striving for peace but living in the peace that he has already given us.

Laird draws, of course, on contemplative practice, and
particularly on the notion of “breath prayer.” This is nothing magical, it is simply a discipline of praying and breathing that assists internal quietness. We use our body to respond to spiritual things all the time – standing to sing, closing our eyes for prayer, sitting attentively to learn, etc. – and this is of the same kind. It is the use of posture, a simple “prayer word” or phrase, and a focus on breathing. It has a quietening effect:

At times the mind flits like a finch from branch to branch and at other times it is like the three-headed dog, Cerberus, unable to decide from which bowl which of its heads should feed at any given moment. Then again, and more often that we may like to admit, the mind is uninspired and limp as a mildewed dish cloth. The mind has countless faces. For centuries the advice of the contemplative tradition has been: well, then, give the mind something to do. If it can’t be still, give it a short phrase or a word to repeat silently. And so when we sit, we give our attention wholly to the gentle repetition of the prayer word. We will find that our attention is forever being stolen. As soon as we become aware that our attention has been stolen by some thought, we gently bring ourselves back to the prayer word. (Pages 34-35)

For me, this is not an eradication of self or something equally as eery, it is simply the quietening of all that is in me that tunes God out. Faced with various anxieties or concerns, I could push into them with my intellect or strength of will, and I all I would find would be more anxieties or concerns. Any wisdom, any insight, any creativity – that simple sense of “hearing from God” is elusive when I am noisy. In order to hear the groanings of the Spirit, to watch the glow of illuminated Scripture, I need the quiet.

If I confront my anxieties, I add to the noise. But instead, using a simple act of worship with my body, I “look over the shoulder” of the anxiousness, trusting that the Spirit of
Christ is present in the moment of all that’s left. It’s a surrender, an offering, a laying down, by relaxing the clawing clinging fingers of my mind. Into his hands I commit my anxious spirit... by meeting it with silence.

As I have practiced and adapted what Laird speaks of, I have found it beneficial. Whether it be times set aside, or five minutes caught during the day; I have resolved two things: 1) Not to reach for my phone and dull myself by flicking through distractions, and 2) Not to run with the bulls of my anxieties and fears. Instead, I have sat myself down, grasped hold of a phrase (usually a line from a worship song or psalm), and have leant back into that gentle worshipful repetition. I don’t look for “results” (that would defeat the purpose), but there has been fruit nonetheless: a sense of peace, a word of encouragement for someone, a gentle prod to pray in a specific way, the strength to forgive.

Laird’s ongoing explanation of this practice has described something of my experience. He speaks of “three doorways of the present moment” (page 52) and I get what he’s talking about.

The “first doorway” is the sense in which we seek quietness as a refuge. We sense the noisiness. The “videos” of anxiety and fantasy are coming thick and fast, and we seek silence as a solace. We calm ourselves. We respond to the content of our thoughts. Has someone made me angry? Instead of responding to that anger, I quieten myself. In that place of quiet, God can change the narrative, or give me quiet resilience.

The “second doorway” is the sense in which we find ourselves using silence not only as a refuge, but almost as a deliberate form of engagement. Here we respond not just to the content of the thoughts, but the anxious thoughts themselves; we don’t just look over the shoulder of the person who has made us angry, we look over the shoulder of the anger itself.
The deeper we delve into the prayer word, the less we use it as a shield from afflictive thoughts. Rather we meet the thoughts with stillness instead of commentary. We let the thoughts simply be, but without chasing them and whipping up commentaries on them. (Page 63)

From my own experience, I find myself noticing “I am anxious”, rather than “I am anxious about X.” In the first doorway, I seek silence, rather than chasing down the solutions to X. In the second doorway, there’s a gentle recognition that anxiety is not my bedrock, Jesus is. Rather than focusing on the anxiety, I quieten myself, and so allow his presence, on his terms. The anxiety may be or not be, I will look over its shoulder, to the quietness of trusting Jesus.

The “third doorway” is where I think Laird slips too far (“my ‘I am’ is one with Christ’s ‘I am’”, page 67). But there is some substance in his gist. It was something like this in the midst of my breakdown-breakthrough: I could not do anything else, other than be. Being was simply enough. Outside of my triggering stressors, I could watch and observe almost everything, including myself. I didn’t have a need to perform, to strive, to prove. I have heard people talking of “falling into the arms of Jesus”, of finding themselves able to “breathe underwater.” The words are hard to find – for me, it was like the gravitational pull of God was inside of myself, pulling me inwards towards a truer sense of self, that was God-centred, not me-centred. It was the utter contrast of the anxieties that would rip me apart. It wasn’t mystical or amazing. It simply was.

My aspiration, moving forward, is to grow in this sense of abiding in Christ. I don’t want to be defined by my circumstances. I don’t want to be defined by my emotional chemical response. I want to be defined by the present character of God. It can’t be manipulated into being by my intellect. It can’t be manufactured by my strength of will. It
is a place of embodied trust.

The bottom line is this: minimize the time given over to chasing thoughts, dramatizing them in grand videos, and believing these videos to be your identity. Otherwise life will pass you by. (Page 71)

This contemplative area is new to me. But it matches my experience. Above all, it has been a way for me to apply hope; a vehicle for faith in my inner world.

We move from being victim of what is happening to being a witness to what is happening. Things keep happening, but we experience them differently. This move from victim to witness is an early psychological fruit of the contemplative journey. (Page 81)

I sometimes wonder what Jesus used to do in his times of solitude. I don’t think it was complicated. I think it matched the “emptying out” of Philippians 2:1-11. In fact, I have been reflecting on Hebrews 5:7 where the writer talks of how Jesus often offered up anguished prayers that turned to “reverent submission.” He didn’t lose himself, but was able to place himself in his father’s hands; it marked his ministry, most clearly on the cross. Truly, he must have ministered from an experience of shalom – the “stillness [not] of a rabbit hiding from a predator, but the stillness of a mountain presiding over a valley” (page 101).

Laird ends his book well, by finding application in the experience of our woundedness (“The Liturgy of Our Wounds: Temptation, Humility, and Failure.”) Our rights-based culture cannot cope with woundedness, except by increasing the clamour, within and without. Yet the joy and blessing of failure and hurt is the thirstiness which draws us to look beyond the noisy experience. It’s not an avoidance of woundedness, it is of finding God even there. “I am going to
seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart” (Hosea 2:14).

**Review:** *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making – An Anglican Guide for Christian Life and Formation*

The word “discipleship” has become such a buzzword in recent years that when it is used, particularly in official documents or vision statements, it’s intended meaning is not always certain.

I have a vested interest in pursuing discipleship in an Anglican context. It is useful, therefore, to familiarise myself with how discipleship is being understood, talked about, and promoted. Practical on-the-ground examples are the most valuable. But perspectives from the heights of the institution are also important. Last year’s Archbishops’ Council report, *Setting God’s People Free* pointed out that the main obstacle to discipleship is cultural intransigence. Sometimes it is possible for papers at the top to cut across
the lower tides of avoidance; they can simply state what needs to be stated, even if their immediate effect is not obvious.

This small book, published by the Anglican Consultative Council in 2016, is a case in point. It is a Communion-level, globally-scoped report. It brings some important insights, especially from the Global South. I’m finding it invaluable as I prepare some thoughts on discipleship for our Deanery strategic planning process.

It is available for download in pdf.

One of the ways we avoid a discipleship culture is by subsuming the term into our existing church culture, rather than allowing it to provoke much-needed adaptive change. That is, we undertake “discipleship activities” or, worse yet, we simply shoehorn the word “discipleship” into the description of our existing activities, and we quench the Spirit. In the end, discipleship is about being a disciple/student/follower of Jesus himself. If we think we can do that and remain unchanged. If we think we can avoid having our “self-identity” challenged (page 5), we are deluding ourselves. Yet we try.

Archbishop Ng Moon Hing of South East Asia addresses this symptom from the very beginning, in his foreword:

To follow Jesus of Nazareth into his cosmic reign is simply the most challenging, the most beautiful, the most costly, the most rewarding journey we could ever choose to begin... our following Jesus requires much more than the latest course or introduction to Christian living. Courses have their place... but our apostleship, our discipleship demands much more – in fact it demands everything. (Page vii)

A definition of discipleship is needed for this book to make any sense. The definition it gives is not so much provided as located; discipleship “encompasses this total God-ward transformation which takes place when individuals and
communities intentionally, sacrificially, and consistently live every aspect of their daily life in commitment to following Jesus Christ” (Page 4).

This is a wonderfully Anglican way of doing it: Discipleship is not so delicately defined that it adheres to one time or place, but it is bounded so that we know what we’re talking about.

It is also wonderfully Anglican to begin from the basis of biblical theology. Discipleship themes are quickly traced through the Old Testament before focusing on Jesus himself, with his “group of ‘learners’ who were selected to be with him” (page 11). The book does well to go beyond the prosaic picture of Jesus merely as pedagogical examplar, as if Jesus is defined by his discipleship methods. Rather, the fundamentals of Christ’s person and mission are first and foremost. It is discipleship that is defined by Jesus, not the other way around. Therefore, true discipleship bears the mark of the cross. It is much more than a spiritualised self-help program, “much more than belief and personal growth in Christian character” (page 16):

For the original twelve there was a literal journey following Jesus up from Galilee into the eye of the storm, Jerusalem – a journey marked with misguided hopes and some trepidation… we are all on a journey, following Jesus… we are to leave things behind… we are to trust him both for our eventual arrival in the city and also for the surprising details along the way and through the desert; above all, we are to ‘take up [our] cross daily’ and follow Jesus (Lk 9.23) (Page 15)

From this biblical starting point, we are taken through a cursory look at discipleship in the early and historical church and arrive at a multi-faceted examination in recent and contemporary Christianity. Like the charismatic renewals of that latter 20th Century, there appears to be evidence of
similarly transdenominational currents in this area. I find this encouraging.

Consequently, this book has stimulated my thinking. For instance, there is a harmony in discipleship between separation (as in the monastic tradition of withdrawing from “the accommodation of Christian communities to the ways of the secular world” (page 35), or the Latin American emphasis (page 101) on “preparing Christ’s disciples to act differently”), and missional engagement that connects with and promotes a relevant gospel. Popular evangelicalism lacks the language to tackle this.

For instance, I found myself unexpectedly pushing back at how we describe secular “work and other human activities as a form of vocation” (page 65). It’s not that I disagree that secular work is vocational. Nor do I wish to slip into some sort of clericalism that elevates church work as somehow spiritually superior. It’s just that the language does not prevent an apparent lack of distinctiveness in the pursuit of vocation. The consequence is our propensity to sacralise all work and so fall into the careerism of our surrounding culture; to assert the divine right to pursue the career of my choice. Rather, the journey of discipleship necessarily moves us away from careerism; it may take us on either path of secular work or ecclesial ministry, (if we need to make the distinction at all), but whatever it is, whatever we do, it is to be submitted to the call of Christ. Our career is first and foremost shaped by our vocation, our discipleship, and not the other way around.

This book has stirred my consideration of practice. The way it draws on the experiences of discipleship in various parts of the world and diverse cultures is stimulating. The common threads recognise that discipleship is holistic, communal, missional, and deliberate. Jesus is the beginning and the end.
Churches should be assemblies of disciples of Christ and not pew-warming believers. All sermons should be discipleship-driven and not entertain spectators with feel-good sensation. Christ’s death is costly, and it would be considered worthy if he knew that his life was laid down for people who became his disciples. It would be sad for him if he knew that it is for pew-warmer Christians. A disciple of Christ will ask, ‘What and how shall I serve and live for Christ?’ A pew-warmer believer will ask, ‘What will Christ do for me?’ (Page 89)

These experiences are wells to draw from. They help us get to some practicalities without becoming programmatic.

For instance, the importance of cultural analysis is present in the reflection from the Middle East. Cultural self-awareness is something that can be learned and practised. It is a skill that is sadly missing in much of the Western Church, an aspect of our normative missional illiteracy. The book speaks of “an adventure for the ‘disciple-maker’ as for the ‘disciple’... discovering where the Spirit of God applauds the norms of our culture, where he accepts some norms as a fair enough starting point and where he says ‘not good enough!’ about them” (page 91). Similarly, the cultural questions posed by “insider movements” (page 120) poses important cultural questions that can and should be more readily asked; we are all inside a culture.

The practical importance of relational and emotional courage is present in the reflection from Latin America. This pushes back at the Western tendency (or perhaps it’s British?) to confuse harmony with polite silence and emotional avoidance. This lesson moves away from an attitude of “waiting for someone else to solve [the] problem.” Drawing upon the lessons of the Road to Emmaus, it speaks of the importance of the final movement back “to Jerusalem – to community, joy, dynamism, but also to the conflicts, to the
There is one significant weakness, a gap that is almost bewildering: Despite the brief acknowledgement of the “importance of the parents’ role in teaching each new generation to walk in the ways of the Lord” (page 9, see also page 68), there is very little at all on the place of family, children and youth. The one perfunctory chapter (page 107) is insufficient. A discipleship culture is inherently *intergenerational* and that characteristic deserves more engagement. Our prevailing habit in the Western church of splitting the Body of Christ into homogenous age brackets is fundamentally antagonistic to Christ’s heart for mission. A failure to engage with that diminishes this book.

Nevertheless, the book’s ambition is valuable: It is fundamentally vocational. i.e it issues a call that is coherent across all Anglican contexts. Without whitewashing the “rich diversity in the understanding and practice of discipleship and disciple-making” (page 3), it nevertheless affirms a “strong intentionality” and lays it before us: “…the Church needs to be called back to its roots as a community of disciples who make disciples.”

It is therefore yet another resonance to the growing prophetic voice calling for a shift in culture. More voices are still needed.

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**Review: Prayer – Finding the Heart’s True Home**
Richard Foster’s *Prayer* is a classic of the early ’90s but I’m glad that I have only just recently read it. I don’t think I would have truly understood it, or been impacted by it, if I had come to it before I’d lived some life.

Foster is, of course, known for his teaching on spiritual disciplines with contemporary application. This book is in the same vein. It is a compendium of independent chapters, each considering the sorts of prayer that we see in the biblical narrative and in Christian experience. A quick look at the table of contents reveals the gist: “Simple Prayer, Prayer of the Forsaken, The Prayer of Examen, The Prayer of Tears, The Prayer of Relinquishment…” and so on.

Foster takes us to the base foundation of spirituality, to the character of God himself. God is a God who speaks, and who listens, and who creates and restores the relationship between himself and his people. How we interact with him, i.e. how we pray, is the question that takes us into these depths. Like similar relational questions (e.g. “How do I speak and be closer to my husband, my wife, my child?”) the answer is both simple (“Just speak!”) and profoundly deep, even mysterious. Like all relational issues, it requires both deliberate action and humble response. Prayer is not something to “master, the way we master algebra or motor mechanics” (page 8), but “we come ‘underneath’, where we calmly and deliberately surrender control and become incompetent.”

As I record my thoughts here I am not going to touch on every chapter, but on those parts that have challenged me, taken me deeper, or have reminded me of the gracious permission I have, as a child of God, to come to him in prayer.
Prayer of the Forsaken.

It is right that Foster touches on forsakenness early in the book. This sense, occasional or frequent, is part and parcel of the Christian experience; we feel as if we are praying to bronzed-over heavens, when everything would scream at us that God is absent. Foster has drawn on “old writers” to give me a new phrase, “Deus Absconditus – the God who is hidden” (page 17) for those times when God appears to have disappeared.

The prayer of the forsaken is the prayer of the pair on the road to Emmaus who stand with “downcast faces” because of their dashed hopes about the one who was “going to redeem Israel.” They walk with Jesus, but he is hidden from them. It is the prayer of Jonah in the belly of the whale. It is the prayer of David, and Jesus himself, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Times of forsakenness are a given in the Christian pilgrimage of life. And they are necessary. They take us to the bedrock of God’s sovereign grace where we are stripped of any pretence that we might manipulate God in relationship or prayer.

That is the next thing that should be said about our sense of the absence of God, namely that we are entering into a living relationship that begins and develops in mutual freedom. God grants us perfect freedom because he desires creatures who freely choose to be in relationship with him. Through the Prayer of the Forsaken we are learning to give God the same freedom. Relationships of this kind can never be manipulated or forced. (Page 20)

Such seasons are seasons of refining that burn hot. We question ourselves, and “nagging questions assail us with a force they never had before” (Page 23)... ‘Is there any real meaning in the universe?’ ‘Does God really love me?’

Through all of this, paradoxically, God is purifying our
faith by threatening to destroy it. We are led to a profound and holy distrust of all superficial drives and human strivings. We know more deeply than ever before our capacity for infinite self-deception. Slowly we are being taken off vain securities and false allegiances. Our trust in all exterior and interior results is being shattered so that we can learn faith in God alone. Through our barrenness of soul God is producing detachment, humility, patience, perseverance. (Page 23)

In the last year we have experienced a sense of this forsakenness. One instructive experience stands out for me: At a summer festival in 2017, ironically surrounded by the joy and bustle of the worshipping people of God, we found ourselves in this dark place – a deep sense of being lonely, abandoned, forsaken. As I breathed and paced myself to get to the next workshop a leader approached me and gave me a word that had been impressed upon him as he saw me randomly within the crowd. What was that word of the Lord in the midst of emptiness, frailty, darkness, and lost hope? “God is saying, he is giving you the courage of a lion.” It broke me, I wept, and it was bitter. It was bitter, but right.

True courage rests not on ourselves, but on faith. The prayer of the forsaken takes us deeper yet; faith rests on trust.

When you are unable to put your spiritual life into drive, do not put it into reverse; put it into neutral... Trust is confidence in the character of God... I do not understand what God is doing or even where God is, but I know that he is out do me good.” This is trust. (Page 25)

We cry out to the infinite mercy of God. We learn that “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” finds its answer in “Into your hands, I commit my spirit.”

The Prayer of Relinquishment.
There is faithfulness in the simple prayer of petition, in which our needs are laid out before our Lord and provider. But I have noticed that this form of petition can actually play an opposite role; we often use it as a defense against the leading of the Spirit. We lay out our needs before God and say “Lord, bless us” with a heart that actually says “I am going this way. I am doing these things. Now do your part, God, and make them work.” We build self-reliant castles, and hold our petitionary facade as evidence of faithfulness.

I have noted this tendency in my own journey with Jesus, sometimes with a desperate internal monologue: “Look at these things, fix them, sort them, don’t let me fall! I’ve turned up to work, where are you?” In an era of church which is fundamentally performance-driven, and amongst my generation of church leaders who are so readily anxiety-driven, I have heard this insecure form of “prayer” echoed time and time again.

The prayer of relinquishment calls us away from this dysfunction. It is the spiritual equivalent of a trust exercise, or, as Foster describes, “a person falling into the arms of Jesus, with a thirst-quenching sense of ‘ahhh!’” (page 50). Yet while this “soul-satisfying rest” is the end result of the Prayer of Relinquishment, it is not the journey.

The journey is Gethsemane. It is “yet not my will but yours be done”, prayed not as a catch-all default at the end of a prayer, but as a positive deliberate choice to submit our plans, our desires, our lives to the will of God. “All of my ambitions, hopes and plans,” sings Robin Mark, “I surrender these into your hands.”

*We pray. We struggle. We weep. We go back and forth, back and forth, weighing option after option. We pray again, struggle again, weep again. (Page 53)*

Indeed, “relinquishment brings to us a priceless treasure: the crucifixion of the will.” (Page 55) Personally speaking, given
my first name, I can almost take this literally! And it is a
treasure. In many ways, the battle of the cross was won at
Gethsemane; from this point in the garden, Jesus endures for
the sake of the joy set before him.

There is death to the self-life. But there is also a
releasing with hope... It means freedom from the self-sins:
self-sufficiency, self-pity, self-absorption, self-abuse,
self-aggrandizement, self-castigation, self-deception, self-
exaltation, self-depreciation, self-indulgence, self-hatred
and a host of others just like them. (Page 56)

The Prayer of Suffering

When the journey with Jesus takes us to fields of
forsakenness, or roads of relinquishment, our prayer can bear
substantial internal fruit; we grow spiritually and the path
leads to maturity. But prayer is not all about introspection.
As his book concludes, Foster’s focus becomes increasingly
external, even missional. He turns to intercession, to what he
calls “radical” prayer, and to a vision for church as
missional community (Page 268) that the rest of us are only
just starting to realise.

The prayer of suffering embraces the missional concept
of incarnation. This is not to undermine, as some have taken
it, the salvation-bringing incarnation of Jesus. Rather, it
takes the character of God in Christ as a model for how we
obey the Great Commission and are sent as Christ was sent.

Christ serves us not from above and beyond our condition, but
from within it. And so Paul can speak of a participation in
the afflictions of Christ as part and parcel of his
participation in his mission. And Peter can extend that
participation in both suffering and glory to his readers, and
so to us. In this sense we talk about suffering as redemptive, the same sense in which confession, preaching,
evangelism, and other forms of witness are redemptive. The
prayer of suffering expresses it.

In redemptive suffering we stand with people in their sin and in their sorrow. There can be no sterile, arms-length purity. Their suffering is a messy business and we must be prepared to step smack into the middle of the mess. We are ‘crucified’ not just for others but with others. (Page 234)

This is a conscious shouldering of the sins and sorrows of others in order that they may be healed and given new life. George MacDonald notes, ‘The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his.” (Page 238)

As Foster points out, (page 233), the concept of suffering is almost anathema to the consumerist culture of comfort that coerces conformity in the contemporary church. But this, itself, can create the redemptive suffering. Uncomfortable prophets and travailing intercessors are politely pushed aside or even directly silenced; their suffering and sorrow embodies the plight of the church and they cry out in the anguish of the church’s self-abuse. And so Jesus yearns for his Jerusalem and Moses refuses to give up the Golden-Calf-enslaved people of God:

‘I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin’ (Exod. 32:30b). And this is exactly what he does, boldly standing between God and the people, arguing with God to withhold his hand of judgment. Listen to the next words Moses speaks: ‘But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written’ (Exod. 32:32). What a prayer! What a reckless, mediatorial, suffering prayer! It is exactly the kind of prayer in which we are privileged to participate. (Page 257)

What I have learned from Foster here is that this form of suffering is not only permitted, but valued in the dynamic of
Jesus with his followers. In recent years I have come across many of the faithful who are have been all but submerged in the bloody mess that flows from the machinations of our religious organisations. I have come across the abused with their wounds flowing. I have witnessed the weary weeping of senior leaders overcome by the inertia of apathy. I have seen the delicate shells of those discounted, despised, condescended to and cut off by orphan-hearted panderers. I can count myself amongst both the wounding and the wounded.

The prayer of suffering turns this pain towards redemption. Daniel prays in the pain of exile, confessing the sins of those others that sent him there. Jesus, impaled by the nails of desperate human rebellion, prays for their forgiveness and Stephen later echoes him as the stones descend and Saul looks on. Their prayers availeth much, redeemeth much. They are prayers of suffering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when we pray for our enemies, ‘we are taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them. We are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves.’ (Page 240)

There is intimacy in this prayer, and it brings intimacy to our mission with Jesus. Only in intimacy can we pummel the chest of our heavenly Father, offering prayers of “holy violence to God” (Page 241). Only in intimacy can the accusatory cry of the martyrs, “How long, oh Lord?” find its answer in the divine heart.

This is not anger. It is not whining. It is, as Martin Luther puts it, ‘a continuous violent action of the spirit as it is lifted up to God’. We are engaging in serious business. Our prayers are important, having effect with God. We want God to know the earnestness of our heart. We beat on the doors of heaven because we want to be heard on high. We agonize. We
cry out. We shout. We pray with sobs and tears. Our prayers become the groanings of a struggling faith. (Pages 241-242)

Foster has reminded us here that suffering can be redemptive and should be released, not suppressed, in prayer. It is not wrong to demand a divine audience. It is not wrong to be more persistent than the widow. It is entirely right to bring our cause before our righteous, just, and loving Father. Maybe our cause is unjust; he can meet us in our prayer and change our heart. But maybe it is true, and we have been unknowingly sharing the heart of God, who mourns with those who mourn, and is stirred to redemptive action.

Come, Lord Jesus.

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Review: Wasteland? — Encountering God in the Desert

I’d never really heard of Mike Pilavachi before coming to the UK. I’d vaguely heard of Soul Survivor and, to be honest, was a little sceptical, suspending just another super-spiritual-guru-man-caricature hyping it up. Instead, I have found in my experiences over the last couple of years that there is depth to the Soul Survivor movement, and Pilavachi himself has come to intrigue me. At the front he is part bumbling oaf, part lovable uncle, sometimes authoritatively prophetic and eloquent,
other times lurching from anecdote to anecdote, self-effacing and yet stepping out in naturally supernatural words of knowledge and a ministry of restoration. In some ways it seems preposterous that God could work through him a successful and influential movement that reaches 1000’s of youth each year, and sustains works of justice and care across the globe.

Now here’s something I’ve learned over the years: you can’t trust leaders who aren’t dead yet. The more they are full of themselves, either in inferiority or superiority, the more they will injure, harm, or neglect. I include myself in that cohort. But those who have been through fire, who have been stripped away, who have been through wilderness and desert, and have learned to die and surrender all to God... well, I can trust them more. They look more like Jesus and Jesus is trustworthy.

Here’s the same lesson: church leadership and the work of ministry can be either an act of self-focussed performance, or it can be an act of God-honouring worship. In his grace, God often uses both, but there is a difference. That difference comes with brokenness, suffering, and wilderness. While we ask God to bless our ministry, we are performing, relying on our strengths. When we are stripped away, broken, we find ourselves operating out of weakness and dependence in ministry shaped less by our own (sometimes impressive) capability, but by the power and purpose and presence of the Spirit of God.

I think that’s what I see in Pilavachi: He’s a big man, and I see a bigger God.

All of this to introduce a book I picked up at a stall while attending Soul Survivor this year. Written in 2003, this is a somewhat autobiographical insight into where Pilavachi is coming from. And it’s called Wasteland? – Encountering God in the desert.

Here’s the dynamic I’m talking about:
The great need today is for deep and authentic people... In our attempts to be ‘culturally relevant’ we could, if we are not careful, become as shallow as the surrounding culture... Jesus came to usher in another way. He called it the Kingdom of God... Why do we prefer to stay in the Christian ghetto where it is safe?... Yet if we are to go further into the world and make a difference instead of being yet another voice that adds to the noise, we have to listen to the call to go on another journey, a journey into God himself. If we are to offer life instead of platitudes we need to catch more than a glimpse of glory... Specifically, if we want to move in the power of the Spirit, to live the life of the Spirit and to carry a depth of spirituality that alone can change a world, he invites us on a journey into the desert. It is sometimes a very painful journey... but it is, I believe, a necessary journey. This adventure is only for those who are committed to being a voice to and not merely another echo of society... It is only for those who are sick of superficiality both in themselves and in the church. (Pages 13-16)

The desert is a dry place. Nobody goes to the desert in search of refreshment. The desert is an inhospitable place; it is not comfortable. The desert is an incredibly silent place; there are no background noises, no distractions to lessen the pain. The desert is the place where you have to come to terms with your humanity, with your weakness and fallibility. The desert is a lonely place; there is not usually many people there. Above all, the desert is God’s place; it is the place where he takes us in order to heal us. (Page 20)

This book simply unpacks this common, but often undescribed, dynamic. It is in the autobiographical content (“I wondered if God had forgotten me?”, p19; “More than anything else, when I came to the end of myself, I came to the beginning of God.”, p20 emphasis mine). And it is a common thread in his exposition of the biblical narrative (“In the desert Moses
came to the end of himself. In so doing he came to the beginning of God.” (p29). At all times it both excites and dreads, and is therefore compelling.

I found *Wasteland*? to be personally challenging. Ministry life is not easy, and can often feel like a desert. Pilavachi has helped me in my own reflection and crying out. For instance, he writes that “dependence and intimacy are the two major lessons we learn in the desert” (p22). Over the last few years I’ve learned a lot about dependence, but I know I need to learn more about intimacy with the Lord who is near to me, even if I can’t tell that he is there, even if he is setting my heart on fire. Pilavachi speaks of being determined to “seek God for himself whether I had ministry or not” (p21) and I know I need this example. He gives the forthright truth, “life’s a bitch, but God is good” (p79) and I must face my resentment, and the pain of knowing that that truth applies to church life just as much as any other domain. I am encouraged to continue “plodding” (p86).

The book certainly makes for insightful reflection. I do have a slight question as to whether it would always be helpful to someone who might be in the midst of their wilderness. After all, it’s very easy to slip into the despondency of (unfair) comparison: “It’s easy for him to write, he’s come through it, he’s a successful famous Christian!”. And sometimes the descriptions don’t totally match what someone might be experiencing: for instance, the wilderness is not always a “place where he slows us down” (p43), I have found it can also be something that feels like a dangerous jungle, a place of anxiety and fear. These concerns are only minor though.

The aspect I most appreciate is how the book has a prophetic character, speaking truth to the church, the church of the West in particular. Consider this provocative truth:

> When we turn from the spring of living water, we try to satisfy ourselves from any contaminated pool. We then become
contaminated and diseased. Instead of seeking healing, we live in denial that there is anything wrong. The desert is a place of healing. Before that, however, it has to be the place where we discover that we are sick. When all the props are taken away we come face to face with our bankruptcy. The gospel has to be bad news before it can be good news. In the desert we find that we are ‘wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Revelation 3:17). Only then can we truly receive the Saviour. It is very dry and arid in the desert. Only when we truly thirst can we begin to drink the living water. (Page 43, emphasis mine).

This is the antidote to a faith that owes more to Western consumerism than to the word of God. It is out of suffering and death that life comes. If we have not learned that from the cross of Jesus, what have we learned? (Page 83, emphasis mine).

The lessons he draws from the Song of Songs are profound as he speaks of the longing of the Beloved seeking her Lover. If we resist being moved by the presence of God (which we do), how much more do we resist being moved by a sense of his absence? We would often rather numb out and muddle along in our own strength.

Sadly, for some Christians, for those who have never known themselves as the ‘beloved’, his presence is not missed. It is business as usual. I heard someone ask once, ‘If the Holy Spirit left your church, would anyone notice?’ The desert sorts out the spiritual men from the boys. [Like the Beloved in the Song of Songs], will we walk the streets until we find him in a deeper way, will we choose to sit in the desert until we hear him speaking tenderly to us? Or will we take the easy option?... God is not interested in a ‘satisfactory working relationship’ with his people. The passionate God wants a love affair with his church. A love so strong that we know we could never live without him. The desert is God’s
This is an “if only” book. “If only” I could get the spirit of this book into the heart of the church at large. We are so formulaic, pulling programs off the shelf, often to avoid our wasteland by busyness or some self-made productivity. Yet in the wilderness, we can be made into a “voice, not an echo” (p57), a people that can speak the gospel from depth to depth. This is what changes lives. This is what changes the world.

I have learned to consider prospective church leaders with the question “How dead are they?” I have regretted it when I have gone past that question too quickly. I have regretted it when I haven’t asked that question of myself. Pilavachi puts it this way: “I am wary of trusting any leader who does not walk with a limp” (p87). In many ways he is a Christian superstar, with big lights, big tents, and big band… but his limp is obvious. In this book it becomes a provocation, exhortation, and encouragement for all of us. I have come to really appreciate the whole Mike Pilavachi, Soul Survivor thing, with all its chaotic, messy, haphazard, space where God is so often manifestly present. It is that blessing, because of a limp.