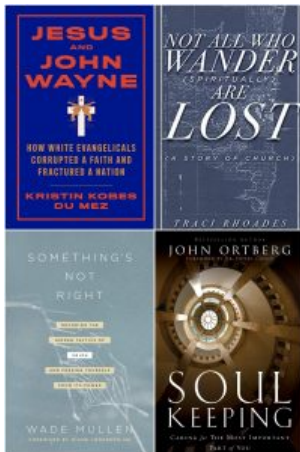


# For When The Church Hurts You – Short reviews from my reading pile #1.



It's been a habit of mine to review every (substantial) book that I read. This hasn't happened in the second half of 2021. Changes to my job, while delightful in many ways, have left me with barely the time and energy to attend to the word of God and prayer, let alone to the reading and mulling-over of books in general. This too will pass.

Instead of reviewing each book in-depth, I'm attempting a broader overview. Because the books I have read fall into two broad categories, I will do this in two parts. The second part, coming, will engage with books that critique our current industrial forms for expressing Christian religion. They have helped me ponder some subtle revolutionary ways of being God's people that are both ancient and future.

In this first post, I'm drawing on a different theme. It has reached a crescendo this year, cresting at the time I reviewed Langberg's *Redeeming Power*. In the background is the fallout from the abuses of Ravi Zacharias. An accompaniment that has swelled in and out (with its, um, "variable" release schedule) is the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill podcast.

**This theme is a mournful lament to the simple fact that church culture can be, and often is, toxic.** Gill and I have been processing our own ecclesiastical trauma; Langberg and others have helped us do that. One of our key realisations has been to accept the reality of our abuse. Unlike others, we are not victims of a malicious perpetrator. Nevertheless, we have been

hurt, and it wasn't just "one of those things"; it has been, at various times, due to toxic culture, vicious immaturities, and collective negligence. We can't just shrug it off; we have been wounded and the healthy thing is to pursue healing.

And it is not just about us. Our children have, unavoidably, witnessed what has been done to us; and have been on the receiving end of ostracism and shunning themselves. They have carried emotional loads which have been indirectly, but obviously, foisted upon them by inept church leaders unwilling to carry their own burdens, let alone the yoke of Christ to which they laid claim. Our children are learning to discern between the way of Christ and the way of his people, and how to count the life-giving cost of the former while standing firm against the latter. In due course they may share their own story; I will not go further than that here.

Similarly, by God's grace, we have encountered a number of others who have fallen under the wheels of the religio-industrial complex. Amongst their experiences are the effects of being silenced, ostracised, manipulated, or made subservient to a form of mission that is more about ecclesiastical ego than ecclesiological pursuit of God's good kingdom. The deconstruction of church is real. We are learning how to hear these stories, to undergo our own as-healthy-as-can-be deconstruction (because God's grace abounds when we are undone), while holding fast to the hope that is true, and truly, within us.

These books have been a part of that journey this last half-year.

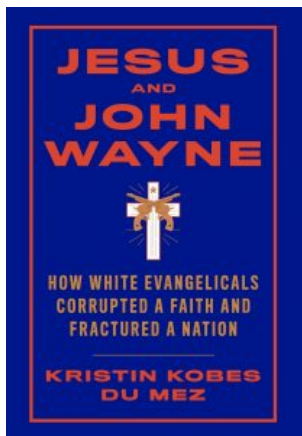
***Jesus and John Wayne*** : *How white evangelicals corrupted a faith and fractured a nation* – Kristin Kobes Du Mez

***Not All Who Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost*** : *A story of church* – Traci Rhoades

***Something's Not Right*** : *Decoding the hidden tactics of abuse and freeing yourself from its power* – Wade Mullen

## ***Soul Keeping* : Caring for the most important part of you – John Ortberg**

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*Jesus and John Wayne* by Kristin Kobes Du Mez has become such a touchstone book that it's almost a meme. It is closely tied to the American evangelical scene and while it gives some helpful insight, it also perpetuates the Trumpian vs Wokeist culture wars that are besetting the West of late. Consequently, some love the book, and others loathe it.

Du Mez describes a cultural phenomenon: “White evangelicals” who “piece together” “intolerance towards immigrants, racial minorities, and non-Christians” and “opposition to gay rights and gun control” in which “a nostalgic commitment to rugged, aggressive, militant white masculinity serves as the thread binding them together into a coherent whole” (page 4). Hence, Christians have come to worship and follow a proverbial John Wayne more than Jesus Christ. At times my evangelical friends need to read and inwardly mark this critique; at other times it is just an evangelical straw man, certainly with respect to what evangelicalism means outside of the US, particularly in the two-thirds majority Christian world.

The deconstruction, however, is helpfully real. Billy Graham is dealt with (page 23), along with the likes of Falwell (page 49), Dobson (page 78), Eldredge (page 173), and, of course, Driscoll (page 193). It is a valid unveiling of the late 20th

Century ecosystem of a religious industry forming and feeding a marketplace of conservative ideals.

So how does this speak to the theme of ecclesiastical trauma? **On the one hand, I am with Du Mez.** I first encountered American messianicism over a quarter of a century ago while working for a mission agency; it disturbed me then, it nauseates me now. There's a cultish idolatry in it, and while the blatant stars-and-stripes version isn't really prevalent outside of the US, the culture permeates. How can it be that church-by-default in the 2020's is basically Willow Creek of the 1990's, complete with it's success-driven if-you-ain't-growing-there's-something-wrong-with-you marketer method of managerial machoism? I've been under that bus, and too many of my friends have also. Du Mez gives insight into both the politics and social psychology of it all, and it is very helpful.

*Evangelicals hadn't betrayed their values. Donald Trump was the culmination of their half-century-long pursuit of a militant Christian masculinity. (page 271)*

A pervasive culture of misogyny is a particular focus of the book. You only need to hear the testimonies coming out of the *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast to see the legacy and fruit of the masculine hero complex. It hit close to home for me: While Gill and I weren't exactly fulsome proponents of the personalities, we *did* lean into the resources and some of the teaching of men such as LaHaye and Eldredge and even Driscoll. To be sure, some of it was helpful, but we have come to discern how many of the foundational premises are not of the Kingdom of God. Consider how marriage has been upheld as a way of sanctifying what remains an essentially pornified man-centred understanding of sex. To the extent that, back in the day, I did not detect, and even furthered, this corruption, I am chastened, saddened and regretful.

*The evangelical men's movement of the 1990s was marked by experimentation and laden with contradictions. "Soft patriarchy" papered over tensions between a harsher, authoritarian masculinity and a more egalitarian posture; the motif of the tender warrior reconciled militancy with a kinder, gentler, more emotive bearing... it might have appeared that the more egalitarian and emotive impulses had the upper hand... At the end of the decade, however, the more militant movement would begin to reassert itself. When it did.. [it] would become intertwined both with the sexual purity movement and with the assertion of complementarianism within evangelical circles. In time it would become clear that the combination... could produce toxic outcomes.*

*(Page 172)*

**On the other hand, however, #JAJW is not, for me, a salve for healing, it's just another beating.** In this way this book differs in my experience to that of Langberg whose titular focus is the *redemption* of power. What hope does Du Mez offer? In our experience, the early 2000's were *hard* ministry years. We were young and naive and winging it on-the-fly, clinging to whatever was of *some* use from the very few spiritual parents we could find who would help us navigate – let alone lead! – into uncharted waters. The Hybels-speak was already beginning to wear thin, and no one (apart from the self-infatuated Driscolls and Bells) had alternatives to offer. We eased our way forward, stumbling, learning, hurting, on the way.

Take that example of "soft patriarchy" quoted above: The emphasis on servant leadership in, say, Promise Keepers, was better than the Marlborough Man masculinity exemplified by our own fathers; so we took that step in the right direction. It's only in hindsight that we can see that it wasn't enough; it continued a disenfranchisement of our sisters; and it allowed an aspiration to manly-service to manifest yet another form of control. The first time I glimpsed this was when, having expressed some excitement about an upcoming meeting of

mission-hearted sacrificial church-planting pioneers, I encountered the sadness of a Christian sister who shrugged and said that it was not a room she was welcome in.

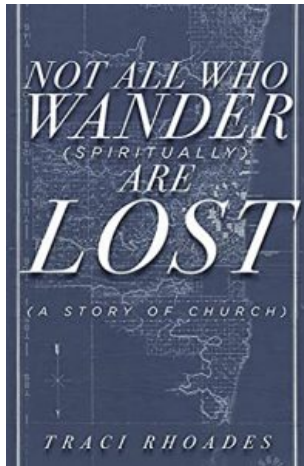
I have learned to heed those who have had skin and blood in the game, and aren't about the winning. To that extent, 20th Century evangelicalism, like all periods of history, had its dross, and its pure metal. Du Mez gives only cursory mention of those who don't fit the stereotype of the antagonist she needs; her bias is clear. Consider Jim Wallis of Sojourners (briefly mentioned on page 47) or the likes of John Mark Comer and Jon Tyson (the same generation as Driscoll, but more refined by trial to a place of humility) who are the children of 20th Century icons such as Willard and Ortberg and Peterson. Their story is not told; yet it is these sorts of men who exhibit a form of masculinity that is worthy of at least some aspiration. I found only one explicit caveat conceding that the "evangelical cult of masculinity does not define the whole of American evangelicalism" (page 301).

*Jesus and John Wayne* has now been weaponised by both sides. It is yet another no-man's-land for those of us who have been wounded from both right and left. Du Mez writes, "In learning how to be Christian men, evangelicals also learned how to think about sex, guns, war, borders, Muslims, immigrants, the military, foreign policy, and the nation itself" (page 296), and it's a familiar, political trope of conflation; apparently if someone has, say, a traditional theology of, the atonement (caricatured on page 200), then they are also guilty of islamophobia and the idolisation of the military! Correlation is not causation, neither is there a necessary coherence entwining all these things – and perhaps Du Mez is simply making a generalist observation – but that is not how it gets played. I get why some would wield Du Mez as a wrecking ball of deconstruction; but there is often an arrogance in their assertion, and it invalidates more than it gifts life. In its activist fervour, the left is just as corrupt and corrupting

at times as all that Du Mez rightfully points out about the right.

I read this book, and feel homeless.

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This was one of those books that I got for its title. At the height of covid, when the deconstruction was real, I was looking for testimonies of those who had passed through ecclesiastical storms, and were able to perceive the Tolkeinesque adventure within the journey. This was not that book. The title of *Not All Who Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost* is verging on literary clickbait.

Traci Rhoades' book is basically autobiography told through the sequence of her church involvement. Perhaps its beauty is in its sheer *ordinariness* ("Overall, when I look back on my early years in the church, I'm more thankful than disillusioned", page 12). Like all ordinary stories she reveals the easy and comfortable times, and the storms that have tossed her about. From "flannel boards" and "vacation Bible school" (page 3) to bewilderment at power games in leadership, Rhoades is descriptive, rather than analytical. The church she describes is cultural phenomenon rather than theological wonder. And while she is not naive, she never reveals the sort of crisis that is relevant to me and mine in this season.

*I've been in church forty-plus years. Don't think for a minute it's always easy or there aren't times when hefty doses of grace and forgiveness are needed, yet I've never considered leaving the church... Generations of my biological family have faithfully attended church, and I know I have a place in that heritage. (Page 23)*

The anecdotes from others are more helpful, and a bit more raw and real (e.g. "a story of a woman who had to leave for a time in order to let Jesus heal her heart.", page 29). Nevertheless, this whole book is more like an easy-listening podcast than a serious grappling with serious things; it's a glorified pinterest post. Sometimes, as she listed the various ways in which she was involved in the consumeristic programs of her latest context, I was simultaneously agitated and bored. What person of depth measures a church by a "parking lot" test and the rest of the quality-control criteria she employs (page 82)? The thought of pandering to such proclivities palpitates this pastor's pulse!

Perhaps the value of this book lies here: It is presented without guile. Occasionally I was even reminded of those heady days in my youth when the mission of the church *excited me* and when I could agree with Rhoades' Sunday School teacher, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to church'" (page 3). Those days are well and truly gone, but there is something of my "first love" in that sentiment which softens my cynicism even if it leaves me feeling wistful and sad at innocence gone. I still love the church of God, mostly in its hidden guises, but I am not void of delight, and sometimes it has the whiff of childlike wonder.

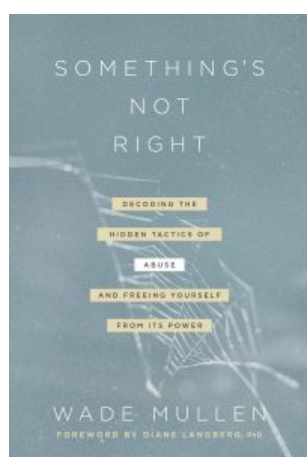
*The Jesus I met in the churches of my youth is the same Jesus who meets me in this spiritual wilderness. Jesus is the one who has formed and filled me. Jesus is the one who leads me, saves me, calls me. The Jesus I asked into my heart as a child is the same Jesus who I gave my on-fire heart to in my*



*early twenties, and is the same Jesus I entrust my broken heart to now. (Page 92, quoting "Aaron")*

I read this book, and feel both annoyance, and, at the same time, a reminder to not disparage a way of being church through which God has blessed many, despite its manifest inadequacies.

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Wade Mullen's *Something's Not Right* has a foreword by Diane Langberg, which is an instant recommendation. The subtitle speaks to it's purpose: *Decoding the hidden tactics of abuse and freeing yourself from its power*. It is not, so much, a therapeutic book; it is a *resource*, a form of training, that informs those moments when we know something is simply not quite right.

As such, Mullen provides an antidote to gaslighting. We know from experience that those who go through ecclesiastical trauma do a lot of soul searching. Most of us are, rightly, grounded in a desire to not rock the boat, to not tear down needlessly, and, in the most appropriate sense of it, to keep any rebellious spirit in check. Self-reflection is important, but it can be exploited by abusive perpetrators and toxic cultures. When we get tangled up, asking "What's wrong with me? What have I done wrong? Am I going mad?", the real issues (external to ourselves) avoid the exposure and the light they need for resolution. In contrast, Mullen helps us to be aware of the real toxicity, and to "advocate for yourself" (e.g. page 172).

*Abuse impairs your ability to make sense of what is happening. It spins you around and disorients you. (Page 79)*

The value of this book is it's applicability where toxicity is more subtle than blatant. Gill and I have not had many dealings with overt corruption but we have run the gamut of the covert. In our time we have experienced shunning and have had silence manipulated into us. We have been left capsized in the wake when perceptions are valued more than reality, and when dysfunctional institutions and offices are too big to question, let alone fail. We have been squeezed into false narratives which comfort the insecure but powerful. I found descriptions of all these sorts of things on the pages of this book, and it was a strange comfort to read; perhaps we're not crazy, just hurt.

Mullen speaks of silencing (e.g. page 13), different types of secret-mongering (page 17), the ways in which flattery is used (page 38), financial dependence (page 40), and attempts of using "past trauma against you" (page 174). A diagram (page 71) simply titled "dismantling your world" sums it up. He describes the protection of the indispensable over against the vulnerable (e.g. page 27). He speaks of narcissism and the complicity of those who prefer sterile comfort to healthy conflict ("peace when there is no peace", page 155). He describes the loss of agency ("a piece of her identity fell off with each step she took into the culture of the church", page 57). To a greater or lesser extent, we've seen it all, and personally experienced more than enough of it.

*I think many live with untold stories, not because they never want to tell them, but because they never encounter safe people and safe places where their stories can be heard.*  
(Page 170)

Here's a piece of truth behind why we are no longer enamoured by the religio-industrial church, and the glamour of success: "No amount of patience will produce change in an abusive community that isn't willing to surrender its legitimacy and pursue the entire truth" (page 166). Those who seek to save

their lives will lose it, you see. But that opposite is also true; and we have ever aspired to call God's people to lay themselves down, and so be saved.

I read this book and I feel validated.

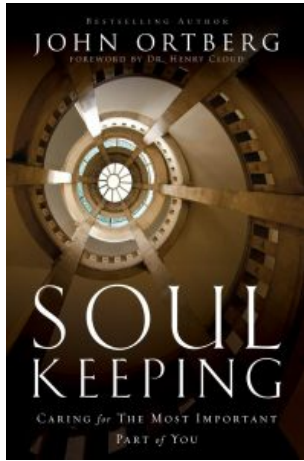
And, in a healthy way, I also feel warned. As a church leader I am privileged to be invited into the vulnerable parts of people's lives. Church is its best when it is not shallow, aloof, "professional," but embraces vocational vulnerability and communal exposure to the grace of God. As Mullen describes those who are complicit in toxicity, I am marking it in myself: Have I made that excuse? Have I blinded myself to that flaw? I am aware of my faults; we all bring a degree of toxicity to our relationships.

Sometimes, it is even expected of us. I have long observed that I know a *few* pastors with a messianic complex, but I know *many* churches who put their pastors on a pedestal. Mullen helps me to not buy into that game, to detect when it's happening, and to climb down to the ground, no matter the cost, or the disappointment I bring others.

I read this book and I feel wary of myself, but also equipped, perhaps, to have some blind spots revealed.

And finally, I read this book and I feel some hope. I see in my own family some of the wounds Mullen describes, including his own. Cynicism, despair, and hopelessness can easily abound. Yet Mullen seeks to move in the opposite spirit. And he does this with aspiration that I think I can share: "I look for and cultivate beauty." (page 177)

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It seems useful to conclude thinking about ecclesiastical trauma with a book that is more positive; Ortberg's *Soul Keeping* is about wellbeing.

It intrigued me for a number of reasons, not least of which is my appreciation of a growing movement of Christian spirituality that is hard to define but is nevertheless real. It is theologically evangelical, psychologically mature, sociologically aware, missional and holistic. It is epitomised by the likes of John Mark Comer, Tish Harrison Warren, and Jon Tyson. Look in to their background and you find influences such as Ortberg, and before him, Dallas Willard. This book, in many ways, is simply Ortberg's homage to Willard. There's even a line about the ruthless elimination of hurry (page 20) that someone "stole".

Ortberg considers "the soul" within the "operating system of life" as "the capacity to integrate all parts [body, mind, will etc.] into a single whole life" (page 42). "...like a program that runs a computer, you don't usually notice until it messes up." This concept of *integration* is at the heart of it all. And it is foundational to some of my own recent endeavours to bring emotional, physical, and spiritual health together.

In this book, therefore, we ponder ways in which our way of life can damage our soul, such that we are more dis-integrated. In doing so, there is a nuanced realignment of some of our church rhetoric: A "lost" soul is not about "destination", but "condition" (page 62). Salvation is not just about the location of our eternity, but of regeneration of soul in the here and now; it is about health and our soul

finding it's home. "Sin fractures and shatters the soul" (page 67), and the gospel is the path of restoration. Eternal life is meant to start now.

In this way our theology is grounded. Idolatry isn't mere metaphysics, it's essentially *addiction*; a "finding oneself" in something or someone other than our maker. Worship isn't mere duty of some ethereal benefit; it's the upwelling of our very selves towards the source of life, our maker.

*The soul must orbit around something other than itself – something it can worship. It is the nature of the soul to need. (Page 85)*

The exhortation of the book is a gentle assertion of agency, by the grace of God. Ortberg spins a parable in his prologue (page 13) of a fresh stream flowing from ancient roots to bring water to a village. If the stream is *kept* well – if it is cleared of detritus, and kept to its course, and resolved of pollutants – it is life-giving, and a bubbling joy. If left unattended, it can go stagnant and bring death. The exhortation is this: *The stream is your soul, and you are the keeper.*

Here there's a connection with the theme of ecclesiastical trauma. There are two facets to this. Firstly, trauma is a damaging of the soul. It is usually inflicted by those who have not *kept their soul* well; and who deflect that responsibility onto others. (An aside: vicars have the "cure of souls", but that does not make us the springs of water that others can empty; it is to help others find the source of life, and equip them to tend to their own stream). Secondly, for myself at least, the healing of that trauma is about re-integration more than anything else (including management-speaks words such as *resilience*).

In this light, trauma can lead to worship. "God has placed eternity in our hearts" and pain reveals our hunger for it.

That is grace. There's a reason why it's called the "dark night of the *soul*" (see chapter 16, page 179). God moves, so that we might follow. That is love; it is how he woos us and draws our attention to himself. And therefore pain builds maturity, and hope. Ortberg puts it like this: "There will be great pain, and there will be great joy. In the end, joy wins. So if joy has not yet won, it is not yet the end" (page 113). The resolution of my own trauma is, paradoxically, an *honest awareness* of it (so that I can tend to my stream) without giving it my focus. Trauma may block or hinder my soul and needs attention, but it is never able to be my source. Integration begins in worship, and attending to the presence of God.

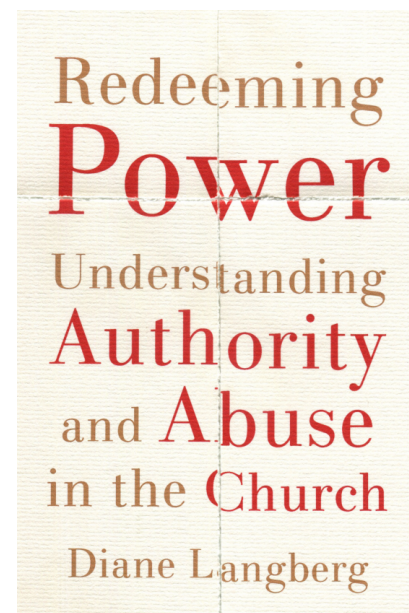
Which is where my pondering ends, at the end of a busy year. There is a sadness in realising that much of the year ahead will need to be about soul-keeping, being aware of the pollutants that leak and the blockages that tumble from many ecclesiastical machinations. But there is also resolve. I cannot build the house; unless the Lord builds it, it is all in vain. "I cannot live in the kingdom of God with a hurried soul. I cannot rest in God with a hurried soul." (page 134).

I will begin 2022 by discipling my soul, like I might disciple a child. Awake, my soul, and sing.

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## **Review: Redeeming Power – Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church**

In this current moment many Christians are deconstructing their understanding of church. Covid has catalysed it but not caused it. As the *forms* of church have been stripped away it seems that many are questioning the *substance* in their church experience.



Gill and I have found ourselves in numerous related conversations. No two of them are alike, of course, but there tends to be some common factors. In most, there is a sense of wanting to “cash out” of a religious framework that had previously been “bought into”. Sometimes, but rarely, it’s a form of deconversion. Sometimes it’s a desire to question the unquestionable, perhaps like in Ecclesiastes, to see if there *is* actually something new under the sun. “After 18 months of covid, I’m now not sure why I was getting out of bed on a Sunday morning.” “I’ve now had a positive experience outside of the typical Sunday, and have realised it was negative experience inside, this *can’t* be what it’s all about.” This is not the typical whinge of consumeristic disappointment (“Pastor, I’m just not being *fed!*”) it’s of simply of being *done* with church on it’s own terms: “This is not the dynamic gospel-embodying radically-believing community of Jesus-loving disciples that it pretends to be!”

After two decades in professional pastoral ministry I’m going through my own gentle deconstruction. This is no bad thing. It is part of maturation to go through times in which the grace of the Lord has us being “undone.” From dealing with my childhood issues in Bible College, through a breakdown at the pointy end of church planting, to the small-boat-big-ocean

experience of moving between hemispheres, it's all part of the letting-it-die-to-rise-again cruciform shape of life with Jesus. You can't be a leader without passing through these times. Yet this post-covid moment feels like a *big* reset impacting across the body of Christ; I'm waiting for it to hurt, timing the contractions of what might be.

It is in *this* context that I have encountered Diane Langberg's *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*. I have very few "must read" books for those who are in or considering church leadership and this is now one of them. It is good, solid, biblical, insightful wisdom for general application. In dealing with abuse, it relates to these times; in with and through the pandemic, the church world has also been rocked by revelations of spiritual and sexual predation in prominent organisations. There is *much* introspection about systemic injustices and abuses going on. Consider Langberg's interview on Justin Brierley's *Unbelievable?* podcast and her master class at the European Leadership Forum.

Langberg's wisdom is also a light for the present deconstruction. Personally, she has taken me to an examination of my own ecclesiastical trauma, including my own complicity and weakness, as well as helping me dare to imagine the ideal of what might be. Reading it has been a deeply personal experience. I simply can't review the book objectively; all I can do is to enter into a dialogue with it:

**First interaction:** For Langberg, **power is *real* and ubiquitous, and can be used for good**. Power is not conflated with evil.

My reflection: Very few of my ecclesial traumas have come through domineering powermongery, although I have heard those testimonies. Rather, I have collided with those who are *blind* to their hurtful exercise of power. In fact, some toxic situations are constructed by those who *deny* having any power at all! There's delusion in it, and also manipulation, a form



of leadership nihilism. By eschewing the formalities of power, manipulations are brought below the threshold of what can be “called out” and so accountability is avoided. To hold a leadership position in such a context is to be both loaded with unattainable expectation (so that the ineffectiveness of “power” can be proven), and, at the same time, be shunned because of the taint of the title. It is weary, and lonely, and toxic.

Langberg’s view of power is more robust. As one who is literally an expert on the *misuse* of power, she offers a profound and edifying reminder: there is goodness in the power of *Jesus*. This is truly affirming: “Are you verbally powerful? The Word gave you that power. Are you physically powerful? The mighty God, who breaks down strongholds and sustains the universe, gave you that power. Do you have a powerful position? It is from the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords...” (page 10). It also gives the proper bounds:

*Godly power is derivative; it comes from a source outside us. It is always used under God’s authority and in likeness to his character. It is always exercised in humility, in love to God. We use it first as his servants and then, like him, as servants to others. It is always used for the end goal of bringing glory to God. God is pleased with his Son. That means our uses of power must look like Christ because he is the One who brings God glory. (Page 13)*

Langberg is thoroughly biblical, and therefore *instructs* me in the healthy ways to hold what power I have: “We need the truth of the written Word of God and of the Word of God made flesh to help us see how to live out what God says, or we will lose our way, interpreting the written Word through the lens of culture and tradition and easily bending what is written into our own ends” (page 88).

**Second interaction:** Langberg understands **vulnerability**.

I have experienced cruelty in the church: Biting words. Shunning actions. I have known leaders who deflect their emotional burdens so as to foist them onto the shoulders of those who are weaker and at risk of injury. I can remember two times when words cut into me and left me to bleed; both times they were on the lips of those “above me” in the Church of England. They weren’t godly rebukes (I’ve had plenty of those) or wise, “hard” words of appropriate correction, they were words of diminishment moved by insecurity in one instance, and prejudice in the other. I had no recourse to emotional defense or safety; they didn’t see my vulnerability or didn’t care. Vulnerability isn’t just powerlessness, though. At other times, even though I was one of the most powerful persons in the room, the attacks were more covert, aimed at those that I love rather than directly at me. No one is invulnerable.

Part of my turmoil is that I am *tired* of being vulnerable. I would like some *safety* please, a place to rest, a freedom to not be dependent on those who do not have my wellbeing at the top of their priority list. However, I have also learned that if you can’t lean into your vulnerability you can’t exercise your power well. “You and I struggle to understand our own vulnerabilities and to manage them wisely” (page 28), Langberg says, and it’s a necessary task. “Vulnerability and power are intertwined, engaged in a dance that is sometimes beautiful and sometimes destructive” (page 19).

Here’s the key: Vulnerability is a “welcome gift” (page 22), a vehicle for our own growth, and for the building of trusting, deep, beautiful relationships.” Which means, also, that it needs to be *guarded*, “because it is unwise to make yourself vulnerable in abusive situations... **Maturity is learning where to guard ourselves, and where to lead from our weakness.**” I genuinely love the church, but note what that means: “The capacity to love makes everyone vulnerable... even God” (page 26). A journey through the world of church is often like walking through a battlefield marked by fortresses, no-man’s

lands, and battlefronts. We get tired from the exposure, and we seek castles of our own. I *feel* the draw of the drawbridge, but what would that look like, and would it actually be healthy and *loving*?

There's a tension to embrace here: To express love, we learn to offer ourselves vulnerably. To receive love, we create as much safety and security so that the vulnerability of others doesn't lead to their injury. How, then, do we offer safety from a place of insecurity; how can we offer a safety that we have not yet, first, received? In our experience, the normal machinations of church life struggle to embrace that tension. Church should manifest a shared mutual experience, a dynamic of abiding in the heart of God in whom we are perfectly, ultimately, safe, and therefore free to be vulnerable, and free to love. The fact that it often doesn't feeds the deconstruction.

Langberg explores this dynamic, in particular, with regard to gender and race dynamics. As a large white guy, this is instructive for me. Do others feel vulnerable where I feel safe? Compared to others it is relatively easy for me to find safety; this almost *defines* my privilege. It's on me to understand the vulnerabilities of others: In one experience I found myself aware of others' negative experiences of church leaders. Understandably, as a church leader, I was "lumped" into that box of unsafe people and, to some degree, I wore the face of those who had injured them. In a context of mistrust, my leading needed to be both aware of the trauma and yet shaped by freedom rather than that abusive legacy. It takes Jesus' wisdom to walk that line, and my inadequacy is obvious. Langberg is instructive; picking up on the language of "headship" in the gender dynamic she gives insight into that way of Christ: "To be a head is to turn the curse upside down, not to rule over others. The Son of Man did not rule, though his disciples longed for him to do so. Instead he held out his great arms and said, 'Come. It is safe.'" (Page 104).

### **Third interaction: Langberg understands deception, at a systemic, cultural level.**

*Systemic abuse occurs when a system, such as a family, a government, entity, a school, a church or religious organization, a political group, or a social service organization, enables the abuse of the people it purports to protect. (Page 75)*

I've remarked previously how the Church of England, like many church institutions, is abusive by default. If we were to describe, for instance, a marriage relationship as being marked by financial dependence, spiritualised language of authority, the priority of reputation over truth, decisions being made for-and-not-with, and gaslighting condescension, all our alarm bells would ring! Yet this often describes the relationship with institution for those in a pastoral position, along with their family. The harm is mitigated, sometimes even eliminated, when good people are in authority and they are able to resist and overcome the natural tendencies of the organisation. Langberg calls those things the "fundamental, though often hidden, properties of the system itself" (page 76) and reflects on how easily we refrain from speaking honestly about them. It leads to "...preserving an institution rather than the humans meant to flourish in it" (page 78).

All of this rests, of course, on forms of deception and self-deception which, itself, rests on a form of subtle idolatry. Langberg locates this at the heart of the first sin (page 29): We deceive ourselves by agreeing that we do not *need* God in order to be like him in nature and character. We cover our vulnerabilities by leaning into other things – "toxins" of deception. A common idol to lean into – for safety, preferment, provision, comfort, purpose – is the church itself. The result "is clear that we have preferred our organizational trappings to the holiness of God." (page 79).

The result is harm:

*Deceived hearts are closed hearts. They are closed first to the God of truth and second to other humans. Deception always does damage to the one deceiving and to those being deceived. (Page 40)*

Deconstruction, at its gut, is a reaction to this hidden hypocrisy. “Deceptions are systemic” (page 37), Langberg says. If we’re brave, we might seek to name them. In my own context of the Church of England some of them are obvious: Class, education, and position correlate to worth; That which exists is necessarily favoured by God and should not be questioned; Institutional deference is the same as unity in Christ.

Collective deception incorporates a form of blindness and therefore foments a culture of suspicion. Langberg speaks of the dueling cultures of “secular culture” and “Christendom” (page 47) and that war is real: On the one hand is the machinery of the religio-industrial complex, consumeristic, and self-centred. On the other hand is the graceless pseudo-gospel of post-post-modern humanism. Both are defensively defined. “Any human not transformed by the redeeming work of Jesus Christ lives out of self as center” (page 47). In the no man’s land in the war of attrition between the two, it is lonely. Even good gospel words – “discipleship”, “mission”, “kingdom of God”, and even “Christ” – cannot be trusted. “Good words can whitewash evil” (page 50).

*“When we hear scriptural words about building up the church for the glory of God, the work sounds heavenly. But when the building materials are arrogance, coercion, and aggression, the outcome matters. How we flesh out our good words matters.” (page 52).*

It’s easy to become cynical. It’s easy to become bitter. It’s easy to long for the false-comfort and false-community that

might come by joining one of the camps. I admire Langberg for clearly being at home in the middle, digging into and holding truth.

For instance, as she explores the question of the gender imbalance, she fulsomely critiques the patriarchy: "...violence is the male's right, and the burden of managing it is the female's" (page 93). But this is no shallow deconstruction. Rather than dismiss marriage, itself, as an abusive framework, Langberg speaks of "familiar theological words and concepts" that are misused to "sanction or minimize abuse and crush human beings." (page 94). In this she takes the same line as Barbara Roberts (who I've written on before) in recognising that while "God hates divorce" this is not merely the "termination of a legal relationship" but the "disunion" caused by abandonment and abuse (pages 94-95).

Indeed, Gill and I have often found a correlation between abusive systems and the treatment of marriage relationships. I literally cheered out loud, therefore, as Langberg affirms the mutual ministry of Priscilla and Aquila: "Priscilla was not just serving coffee or 'supporting' Aquila. She is mentioned first in four out of five instances... Do you perhaps have a silenced Priscilla in your church? (pages 100-01). Priscilla and Aquila are a side-by-side ministry that Gill and I have looked to as our own exemplars. Most church cultures cannot cope with them. They will split a couple either by insisting on subjugation or individualism. Over the years, it is in this area that Gill and I have felt the most disempowered, and pondered the cost of staying within the institutions we were in. There is a real spiritual component to this; to the extent that a marriage relationship speaks of the relationship between Christ and his people, a self-deceived organisation will seek to diminish it.

Langberg also spends some time interacting with the systemic issues of race. I've just interacted with Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, so I won't delve into that too much here. She

takes us, however, to the more general issues of collective guilt and shame that are thoroughly missional in impact. She asks, "Do we really think that we can enslave millions of people for more than two hundred years, treating them as things to be used, crushing, oppressing, and humiliating them, without long-term effects reverberating throughout generations descended from both slaves and slaveholders?" (pages 111-112). In the English church we would do well to ponder what our unresolved legacies are. We have not yet dealt with the abuse of either our own classes and peoples, or our external dealings with the wider world. Our systemic deceptions are rooted in our shame, meaning that England cannot love itself well. The call on the Church of England is to lead the way, without falling back to the comfortable deceptions of either denialism or self-flagellation. In the meantime we are perpetually self-starved of missional efficacy. We should learn from the "intergenerational transmission of trauma" (page 113). If we wish to see God's kingdom come, we need to bring reconciliation and healing to this land, beginning in ourselves.

#### **Fourth interaction:** Langberg understands **abuse within the church.**

It is a grace that I only have secondary experience of predation in church institutions. But I do *have* that experience; I have observed, from one step away, the nature and impact of predatory abuse on individuals and churches. My own experience of abuse is that of *negligence* rather than predation. Langberg speaks to the toxicity that can breed both.

For instance, a useful general point that Langberg makes cuts across our elevation of *external* qualities of position and charisma. These speak of power, but not of character. She takes us to Jesus: "Listen to the Word of God: 'What comes *out* of a person is what defiles him. For *from within*, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality,

theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness..." (page 25). I personally have found it relatively easy to not be enamoured by academic prowess or formal titles; the Australian in me is naturally wary of pretension. Indeed, "an ability to articulate theological truths does *not* mean the speaker is an obedient servant of God" (page 127).

What has taken me longer to size up is the allure of *success*, and of wanting to simply *belong* to a movement or spiritual family who might offer covering and security. "All of us long for meaning, purpose, connection, and blessing. The systems of Christendom offer us these things" (page 147). There is compulsion to *prove* oneself worthy of inclusion, and that is, invariably, a toxic dynamic. When it is fed, and the *performance* is rewarded more than formation and maturation, abuse abounds. Langberg's observations apply to our present church culture:

*A leader is expected to know more, achieve more, and perform better. The more adequate they are in those areas, the more they are declared a success. Leadership is thus reduced to a never-ending treadmill of acquiring more and better skills and achieving impressive results. (Page 128)*

*Character work and an understanding of one's personal history are not usually emphasized in training for ministry. This is unwise giving our heart's capacity for deception. (Page 130)*

I have filled out a number of application forms for pastoral roles in my time. *None* of them specifically ask about wilderness experiences (page 131) or of the maturation that comes in dry times and adversity; they *all* ask for proof of numerical growth, and offer a box for credentials and publications. We run to managerial and financially-driven structural changes, yet the reality is that "pastors and leaders often live with little to no oversight... longing for



good mentors" (page 131). We have left behind the traditions of spiritual direction, confession, and apprenticeship and have professionalised ourselves into courses and criteria. No wonder people get hurt.

I have been comforted by Langberg here. It is easy to carry the pain and shame of church trauma. Yet, the fact of that speaks to the deficiencies of the abuser and the abusive system, not the wounded ones (page 25). I have seen my teenage children summon emotional resilience and tenacity to weather circumstances that were beyond their control. The simple fact is that some of the roles I have inhabited have brought my family into an unsafe environment. I have searched my soul, I have blamed myself. But in the end there is grace in an honest grief: Their vulnerability was not their, or my, fault.

What I have found necessary, in the aftermath, is to wrestle with my *powerlessness*. Langberg brings her analysis and reveals what power looks like in a spiritual context (page 132-133). This was helpful to me. Despite the "power" of my ordination and the ministry titles I have held, my predominant experience of church life has been *disempowerment*. There are blessings and joys and brothers and sisters within the church of course; these are gifts from God. But they are usually gifts *in* the context, and not usually of it. It is simply the case, that the decades I have given the church have *restrained* me more than flourished me: socially, financially, and even in terms of my own dreams and longings. The church has not, ultimately had my back, it cannot, ultimately, be "for" me. This is simply the way it is; it is the cost of vocation, and it has been from the beginning. Even St. Paul as he writes to Christians who are rich in themselves, reflects on how he has become "scum of the earth" and "garbage of the world" in comparison (see 1 Corinthians 4:13).

As I work through the impact of this on my life and my faith, I hear similar echoes in the current deconstructions. I love the church of God. I *remain moved* to do my bit to see God's

kingdom come. I hope to speak words of life, and facilitate life-changing hospitality. I am drawn to know the heart of the Father and do what I see him doing. Yet, at the same time, I cannot recall the last time I saw in myself, or the church, a spirit of freedom and joyous expectation. To engage with the church is to steel ourselves for potential trauma, and to long for God. "Victims assume that God is also silent. Many people have asked me through the years whether they can find help for restoring their sense of safety in the house of God. that such a question must be asked is frankly, damnable" (page 137).

**Fifth Interaction:** Langberg understands the **redemption of power**.

My journey through this book has taken me to some of my pains and regrets. That's fine; it is necessary, sometimes, to take stock of one's injuries, and the temptations and weaknesses that leave us open to hurt. I'm still "hungry for safety" (page 153), for instance, and I need to be aware of how that drives me. I want to use whatever power I have for good and not for ill.

There is grace in the pain, and I see that affirmed in Langberg's treatise. I have had a blessed breakdown. I am willing to "let the work die" (see page 149) because I know from experience that those who seek to save their church, and strive for performance, will lose it. That doesn't mean it's easy. I learned that "long before God called [me] to shepherd, he called [me] first and foremost to be his lamb – a silly, stupid lamb who does stupid things, follows others into ravines, and allows themselves to get devoured" (page 150). It's all about grace.

I am learning – learning *again* perhaps, although it feels like it's from scratch – the necessity of prayer. Many of us leaders forget to pray (page 151), we forget to hope. Hoping hurts. Jesus only did what he sees the Father doing. He did that "no matter the cost. He did not work to preserve a

system, even one originally ordained by God" (page 154).

I am wary of the future. We should read Langberg as a prophet, warning us, calling us, berating us as churches tear themselves to shreds. "Rather than dealing with our own discomfort, self-absorption, or fear of matters not going our way, we distance ourselves and label and dehumanize others", she says (page 56). We've got some difficult conversations in the Church of England coming up, and they are surrounded by toxicity.

I am even wary of releasing this interaction onto this blog. I am used to "thinking publicly" and have written about politics and all sorts of difficult issues in the past. But there will be some who won't get what I am writing here. I *feel* my vulnerability in the institution to which I belong. "Some of us have faced the power of systems that proclaim God's name yet look nothing like him. That power can be formidable. It's hard to fight an organic whole, particularly when a system is full of people we love or those important to us and our future" (page 82).

Where then lies the hope? Matching Langberg's metaphor on page 51, one night I had a dream: Gill and I were in a situation in which we were required to live in a certain house. It was horrible. Excrement on the walls. Mould and mildew. Holes in the walls which let in frigid air and provided hideaways for poisonous spiders. It was a nightmare. It was a "home" in which constant vigilance was required in order to survive. If that is a metaphor for church life, then what is the answer? Reform is no longer enough. Renewal is no longer enough. Not even revival. What is needed is *resurrection*; a "burning down" is required, from which the new can emerge. That's not a negative thing. I think Jesus' friend Peter promised something like it, for "it is time for judgement to begin with God's household" (1 Peter 4:17).

Perhaps the deconstructions at the beginnning of the post-

covid reconstructions are a context where this can happen. Covid has stripped away our forms and many of our churches have found that there wasn't much substance underneath. There is a lesson to heed here: **"God does not preserve the form without regard for content. God wants purity in the kingdom of the heart, not the appearance of it in a system.** Our systems, our countries, our faith groups, our tribes, and our organizations are *not* the kingdom of God." (page 84).

Like all prophets, Langberg therefore, sees the value of hope in the time of trouble. "The voices of victims today, of those abused and violated and crushed in our "Christian" circles, are in fact the voice of our God to his people" (page 190), she says. In that way they are "troublers" in the best sense of the word; the "'Valley of Trouble' is God ordained, and in this place, he is calling his people back to himself" (page 190). Langberg writes, therefore, to encourage the *dissidents* and to give succour to those who are lonely.

*Jesus sat apart from those who stood together in his day. It is quite a picture, isn't it? In the same manner and spirit of Jesus, all Christians should be dissidents in the corrupt systems of this world, including in our own beloved institutions. (Page 85)*

This is where this book has catalysed my wrestling. To survive what is coming I need to learn to be with Jesus in the lonely place, in the solitude of dependence on him. That is where my safety lies. "The discipline of living under the governance of God in the hidden places is a lifelong work." (page 176). Only from here can the beautiful vision of the church, that Langberg *never* loses, emerge; it's a beautiful vision of what she calls "Lady Ecclesia" (page 181).

*The people of God who compose the body of Christ on earth are to live fully and faithfully under the lordship, authority, and mastery of Jesus Christ. **If we are to be mastered, we***

*must know him. (Page 186)*

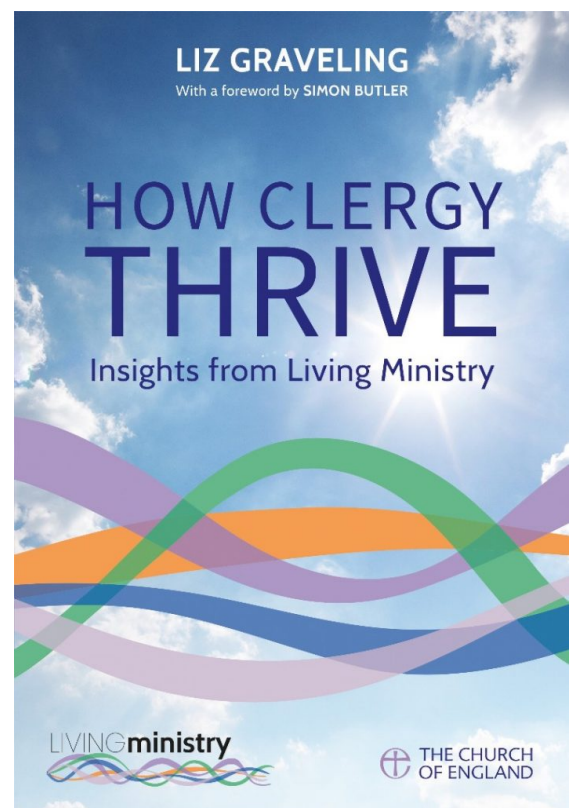
Intimacy is required. If “we love and worship the system or our church more than we love and worship Jesus Christ” (page 187) it all falls apart. This is a truly pastoral book. As I’ve conversed with it, it has exposed me to some honest reality, and thus thoroughly brought me, in the end, to Jesus.

Amen.

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## Review: How Clergy Thrive – Insights from Living Ministry

*How Clergy Thrive* is a short report in the Church of England that was released in October 2020. It provides insights from the *Living Ministry* research programme, a longitudinal study into clergy wellbeing that has been following four cohorts of clergy and their families. It is substantial research and author, Liz Graveling, presents it well. It pushes in the right direction but, unsurprisingly, falls short of a fulsome exhortation for the cultural and structural changes that are really needed.



I have attended enough “resilience” sessions at clergy conferences to approach a report on this topic with a healthy

cynicism. This report avoids many of the normal pitfalls.

For instance, clergy wellbeing is often reduced to a matter of individualised introspection and the promotion of coping mechanisms. Refreshingly, this report recognises that “wellbeing” is a “shared responsibility” (page 7). It notes that the “the pressure to be well”, itself, “can sometimes feel like a burden”. Indeed, “clergy continuously negotiate their wellbeing with institutions, social forces and other people: family members, friends, colleagues, parishioners, senior clergy and diocesan officers, as well as government agencies and market forces.” We clergy live in a complex web of ill-defined social contracts. We are often the least defended from the inevitable toxicities. A recognition of this *system* is a good foundation.

Similarly, the multifaceted approach to “vocational clarity” (page 9) deals well with actual reality. There is always a gap between the “calling” of ministry and the “job” of ministry, between the way in which the Holy Spirit gifts someone to the body of Christ, and their institutional identity. In my experience, the wellbeing of a clergyperson is essentially shaped by one’s emotional response to that gap. Wellbeing is encouraged by stimulating and supporting a clergyperson to reach an honest, holistic, and healthy equilibrium. It is undermined by arbitrary training hoops and merely bureaucratic forms of institutional support. The short discussion on where annual Ministry Development Reviews are either helpful or not (page 9) or even damaging (page 10) indicates that this dynamic has been recognised. The many “questions for discussion and reflection” are also helpful.

It’s impossible, of course, to read something like this without evaluating my own wellbeing and the health of the institution to which I belong. I have my own experiences, of course, including some significant times of being unwell. Here, however, my attention has been turned to the cultural and structural problems that are revealed.

Take the surveyed statement “I feel that I am fulfilling my sense of vocation” (page 11). It is noted that “79% agreed they were fulfilling their sense of vocation.” This sounds reasonable. However, I’m not sure if that positive summary is quite what the data actually suggests. Only 47%, less than half, of the respondents can fulsomely agree with vocational fulfillment. The other 32% in that 79% can only “somewhat agree”, and a full 20% is neutral or negative.

In many professions this picture might be excellent. Retention rates for teaching, for instance, indicate a 30% loss after five years.<sup>1</sup> We must, however, make a distinction between an ordained vocation and most other professions. In ordained life, one’s profession is not just one facet of life, it is holistic (page 7); it captures many, if not all, of life’s parts. *Integration* of those parts is key to being healthy. How can it be, then, that 53% of our clergy are not able to fully find themselves within the life of the church? From my perspective, this speaks of a consumeristic culture in which clergy are service-providing functionaries rather than charism-bearing persons. Perhaps it simply speaks to an unhealthy culture in which it is tolerable for square pegs to be placed in round holes despite the inevitable trauma. Whatever the case, this isn’t about the church institutions *doing* wrong things, it’s about innate ways of *being* wrong; we need to change.

We see glimpses of this same sense throughout. Consider the relative benefits of the activities that are meant to support clergy (page 14). The more positive responses correlate to personal activities or activities that are outside the institution: retreats, spiritual direction, mentoring, networks, and academic study. The institutional supports such as MDRs, Diocesan Day Courses, Facilitated Small Groups and so on, are of relatively less benefit. In fact IME Phase 2, the official curacy training program, scores worst of all! I cannot speak to IME – my curacy was in Australia – but the

rest of the picture certainly matches my own experience.

This is observation, not disparagement. I generally sympathise with those in Diocesan-level middle management. They have tools and opportunities that look fit for purpose, but they so often appear to run aground on deeper issues they cannot solve. Dissatisfaction then abounds. A related observation is this: It appears to me that a common factor amongst the poorer scoring forms of support is that they are often *compulsory*. This invariably amplifies dissatisfaction. Appropriate accountability and commitment aside, compulsion usually reveals an institution propping itself up through confecting its own needfulness.

Again, when “sources of support” are considered (page 31), the ones most positively regarded are non-institutional: family, friends, colleagues, and congregation. Senior Diocesan Staff, Theological College, and Training Incumbent score low. This is understandable and perhaps it is unfair to make this comparison; no one is expecting the Bishop to be a greater source of support than one’s spouse. However, the question wasn’t about support in general, but about “flourishing *in ministry*”, and the picture remains stark. Note, also, that the most negative response that could be offered was a neutral “not beneficial.” If a negative “unhelpful” were counted, the picture might be even starker.

My point is that *cultural* problems are being revealed. If only 63% of respondents could agree, at least somewhat, that “the bishop values my ministry” (page 49) then this is not so much a problem in our bishops, and certainly not the clergy, but in the institution in which we all embody our office.

Remuneration and finances are also revealing. 45% of the respondents are “living comfortably”, but 81% of the respondents had “additional income” (pages 39-40) which, I suspect, relates mostly to the income of a spouse. To some degree, this is all well and good; a dual income usually means



a better quality of life. Nevertheless, the sheer disparity in financial wellbeing between clergy couples with one or two incomes cannot be ignored. The provision of parsonage housing is a factor; in other occupations accommodation costs generally rise and fall along with household income and dampens the disparity. More importantly, however, is how this reflects the *individualisation* of vocation, and the shocking degree to which clergy spouses are simply invisible, for better or for worse, within the Church of England. It is also my experience, both personally and anecdotally, that the wellbeing of couples who are both clergy is not well assisted in our current culture. This is especially so for those called to “side by side” ministry, who share a ministry context and usually only one stipend. It’s well past time to allow for couples to be licensed and commissioned *as couples*, like many mission agencies do. We need the means to share remuneration packages and tax liability, and, at the very least, the provision of National Insurance and pension contributions for the non-stipended spouse. Our current culture does not allow for this.

Finally, this study would do well to extend its work to take into account the effects of incumbency on wellbeing. I wonder what proportion of the respondents, given their relative “youth” in career-length terms, have reached incumbent status? Incumbency comes with a certain level of stability, power, and protection. Attached to incumbency are checks and balances on institutional power. Incumbents are more clearly party to the social contract between clergy person and institution. Associates, SSMs, permanent deacons, and the increasing numbers of crucial lay ministers are not as well protected. They *do* “find themselves overlooked or under-esteemed” (page 35). The increasing prevalence of non-tenured and part-time positions in the Church of England is a structural concern that *does* effect clergy wellbeing. We need more work here.

*How Clergy Thrive* has painted a useful picture. There is scope

for even more insight. The benefit of longitudinal research is that the story of wellbeing can be told *over time*. The testimonials in this report reflect this and are very helpful. It is unfortunate, however, that most of the data is presented as a snapshot census-like aggregation across the cohorts. An accurate picture of how wellbeing ebbs and flows as a career progresses would help us all. If we knew, for instance, at what point in their career a clergyperson is most likely to not be thriving, we could respond. If clergy wellbeing suddenly drops, or if it slowly diminishes over time, that would teach us something also.

Like the vast majority of reports, this one struggles to answer the question of "What do we do about it?" How *do* we help clergy thrive? In the end, it appeals to an acrostic: THRIVE (pages 56-57). It's not bad. It's healthy advice that I've given to myself and to others from time to time: Tune into healthy rhythms; Handle expectations; Recognise vulnerability; Identify safe spaces; Value and affirm; Establish healthy boundaries.

These principles are applied, to a small degree, to how the existing system might do a few things differently. In the main, however, they describe what clergy have managed to do for themselves. It's a story of *technical* changes for the institution, but *adaptive* change for the clergy. We need the reverse of that.

The life of a clergyperson exists in an impossibly complex interweave of pastoral, strategic, and logistical expectations. Technical changes in an institution often only add more expectation and more complexity. We have a structural problem. We have forces vectoring through things that are too old, too big, or too idolised to be modified. Instead, they are dissipated through the clergyperson, and other officeholders, but *not* the system itself. Personally, I've learned to find my place and peace with much of the machinery, and to look for the best in the persons who hold office. I

have done this, in resonance with many of the testimonials in this report, by trusting real people when I can, and by not giving myself, or those I love, to the church system itself.

It's not enough for the ecclesiastical machine to *do* things better. It must *become* different. Take heed of the testimonial on page 25 – “I wouldn't really trust my diocese to make them aware that I have a mental health issue.” Imagine, instead, that the diocese was for that person a fount, a fallback, a refuge, or a hope! In short, imagine if the church (ecclesiastical) really aligned with being a church (theological). That's the redemption we need. I wonder if the “big conversation” alluded to on page 6 will help.

Like most intractable problems, the hard thing is not about noting the problem. It's not rocket science; we “just” need real Spirit-filled personal nourishment and discipleship. It's the getting from here to there that is difficult. Difficult, but not dire. There are times when the right people are in the right place and it just works. For myself, I hold to a glimpse of how things might come to be:

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need an “MDR”, they need to be *overseen*: a regular conversation with a little-e episcopal someone who can cover them, is for them, and who has their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need strategic plans and communication strategies, they need to be treated as the little-p presbyters they are: brought into the loop, entrusted with substantial work without being second guessed, and given space to be themselves without having to watch their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need a “remuneration package”, they need to be *provided for* with decent housing that's fit for *their* purpose, enough money to feed their family and prepare for the future, and an assurance that spouse and children will also be backed and supported without

needing to beg or “apply.”

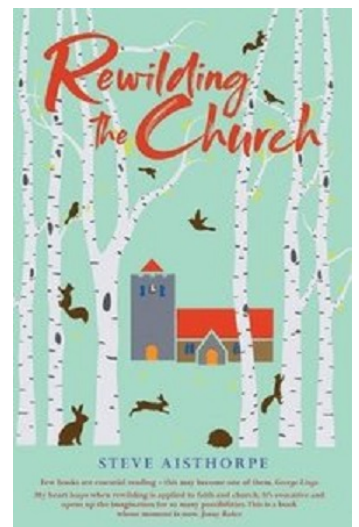
### Footnotes

1 – National Foundation For Educational Research, 2018

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## Review: Rewilding the Church

It is very easy to raise questions about the state of the church. It's harder to provide the answers. This is a decent book, that does the easy bit, but not the hard bit.



You don't have to spend too much time in the ecclesiastical world before encountering a sort of divine discontent.

The *ideal* of the church is so profound, when you dig into it, that St. Paul could only fathom it by calling it a *mystery*. God intervenes in this world *through his people*, through his children, drawn together across time and place, by the Holy Spirit, and counted as united with Jesus himself. All that has come through Jesus to this world – salvation, forgiveness, healing, hope, truth, love, joy, sanctification, peace... – is instantiated, implemented, manifested through his people. We are a “*peculiar people*” reflecting in our very being together, the reality of Christ's resurrection and victory, and the essence of life eternal.

To be fair, this ideal is far from a pipe-dream. I have a

testimony, just like millions of others, of tasting some of this in the life of God's people. I have encountered Jesus in sacrament, song, the proclaimed word of God, and the outpoured care and provision of spiritual brothers and sisters. I have known what is like for Church to be lively, dynamic, provocative, restorative, and free!

Like many, of course, I have also encountered the church as a mere shadow of this; stultified, institutionalised, divided, toxic, and sometimes even downright ugly. I was thinking about these things years ago.

How do we respond to this gap between the ideal and the real? How do we cope with it? How do we seek to *change* it? This is the age-old question that Steve Aisthorpe takes us to with *Rewilding the Church*.

Aisthorpe draws on a defining metaphor. He looks to **the ecological movement of rewilding**. This philosophy seeks to restore the vibrancy of ecosystems not through ongoing strategic management of fauna and flora, but by allowing the space for nature to run its course; it entrusts the land to the original, wild, uncontrollable, organic mechanisms that existed before domestication.

*Advocates of rewilding argue that much of what is done in the name of conservation is little more than the preservation of man-made landscapes through human intervention and management. It's time, they assert, to step back and allow the processes within nature to reshape the environment. Pages 1-2*

The application to Church life is clear. The metaphor imagines a domesticated church, beset by an "appetite to plan, manage, contain, and control" (page 2), and in need of rewilding in order to realise that elusive ideal. It's quite compelling.

**At first and second glance, it aligns with many of my own**

**thoughts** about the plight of the church: We have become fear-and-performance-driven; much of our ecclesiastical structure is an attempt to provide a controlled, and thus usually dead-on-arrival, outcome. There is stability, but little faith, in following a map. A truly Kingdom Church will be blown by the Spirit, and will learn to chart new waters; it will know *why* it's going on the adventure it is called to, but will not always be able to fully articulate what that will look like or where it will end up. Aisthorpe's metaphor articulates something similar: "We cannot convey a vision or an outcome... we must convince people of the integrity of the process" (page 12).

Similarly, I have been known to say that my church growth model distills down to "those who seek to save their life will lose it." That is, it is grounded on *surrender*. Aisthorpe's metaphor resonates:

*I am... suggesting that in our well-meaning efforts to create, facilitate, organise, manage and control, we are sometimes in danger of surrendering authenticity for mere reality... By creating and maintaining congregational models that require certain functions and roles, we forego community that emerges from the gift of its people, shaped by the context of their lives and the realities of the wider community. The distinction I am making may seem obtuse or subtle, but it is certainly important. It is the difference between a community with Jesus at its heart and a club for followers of Jesus. In one we are firmly in control; the other is the result of surrendering the driving seat. (Page 27).*

His chapter on "culling the invasive species" is excellent in this regard. Through this part of the metaphor he deals with the invasive idolatry of *busyness* that feeds much of the toxicity of modern church culture. "For the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated to flourish and expand, " he says, "we don't need to *do* more and we don't need to be cleverer; it

is neither ingenious tactics nor nifty strategy that is required... we need to respond by culling what is unhelpful, live lives of simple and courageous obedience, and trust God that what emerges will reflect the splendour of his kingdom" (page 158). He channels Eugene Peterson's *Contemplative Pastor* in this section, and conveys its richness.

Most fundamentally, (and here he draws significantly on Hirsch and Frost and their *ReJesus*), he centres it on Jesus, the "Wild Messiah", about whom it is all about. I often perceive the church as beyond renewal, revival, or even reformation, and in need of *resurrection*. Aisthorpe speaks, with Hirsch and Frost, of a "refounding." "Rewilding the Church is not a call to spend more hours on our knees," he exhorts, "although for some it might mean that... it is a refocusing of our attention on Jesus, a reinstating of him at the heart of everything" (Page 57). When we lose Jesus, our "self-identity has been eroded" (page 39) and we need to answer that deepest question of "who do we think we are?"

*Rewilding the Church begins here: knowing ourselves to be beloved, putting our roots down deep into Christ, allowing our self-identity to be reshaped in the light of Scriptures, discerning his purposes and stepping out into the adventure of faith. (Page 38)*

I have resonance, agreement even, in my engagement with this rewilding metaphor. His perception of the ills of church – that gap between the ideal and the reality – seems to align with my own. He even touches on the problems of missional language (page 46) that I could have used in a recent article on being post-missional! We have the same vista before us. But it begs the question: What now? What do we with this? What next in the pursuit of God's kingdom, to the bridging of the gap between what is and what can be?

**At this point the metaphor begins to ring a little hollow, and**

his suggestions take on that tinge of theory slightly disconnected from the dirt-under-the-fingernails practice of pastoral ministry.

His weakest chapter, on “tuning in and joining in”, is the clearest illustration of this. It has much that is virtuous; essentially he calls us to discernment and following the Spirit, to a “conscious setting aside of preconceptions and a determination to discern what God is doing and our role in that” (page 74). This is wisdom, and, in the face of a tendency for churches to grab their nearest Alpha course and launch forth into another round of having always done it that way, it is prophetic and useful. But taken too far, as I suspect it might be, it can become an unworkable, deleterious, deconstruction.

Similarly, I admire the work he has conducted in researching the spirituality of the “dones.” I’ve even ordered his *The Invisible Church*. He recognises that legalism and dogmatism are part of the problem, and he rightly exhorts towards “creating environments where asking questions and exploring doubts are positively encouraged” (page 130). Yet he fails to recognise that there are limits to such an approach, which if transgressed, inhibits and hinders and unbalances the kingdom’s ecosystem.

Let me unpack this: What I think Aisthorpe has done is taken a small step off the edge into a prevalent postmodern fallacy that relies on two impossibilities.

**The first fallacy is this: that it is possible to approach the church as a blank slate with no preconceptions.** For sure, the kingdom of God rarely comes by means of a bulldozer, a brash leader with hardened ideas of how things should be. It is far worse, however, when it is attempted with a pretense at blank neutrality. There is a form of unhealthy (even arrogant) piety that purports to purely “leave space” for the “Holy Spirit” or the “natural processes” of wild mission. *Everyone* has an



agenda, a preconception of how things should be. It is healthy to admit it, and much better to bring that agenda forward carefully, gently, and with humility.

This flaw is in Aisthorpe's metaphor. Every example he brings of ecological flourishing embodies a preconception; it *presupposes* what that flourishing looks like. There is a hidden pre-judgment of what should or should not be the end result of the "rewilding", of what would be considered a "successful" attempt at rewilding, or what might be considered to be a failure. Every ecologist has a hope, a dream, a passion for what a renewed ecosystem might look like. Everyone has an agenda on their own terms.

But of course, the point of the metaphor is to consider the church: Consider a pioneering venture, a church plant or a fresh expression, launching out like an expedition into the uncharted waters of organic local ministry. The "rewilding" metaphor may help us remember that the team can't control everything; they don't know what lies around the corner, who will be their "people of peace", and what aspects of their work will resonate and take hold. Flexibility, adaptability, and humility will be required. But so will a sense of vision, purpose; and understanding of *why* the venture is being started, and *why* it is worth the cost. These are preconceptions that must be owned, explored, amended, and released, not wished away by some pretence!

**The second fallacy is related, and it's this: that it is possible to approach the mission of God as a neutral observer.** The rewilding metaphor purports to be a "hands off" approach, and its strength is in its departure from the artificial cultivation of "natural" environments. But it is not really hands-off, is it? Human agency is *involved* in the reintroduction of native species, the elimination of invasive species, and in "creating the environment" in which a new (and usually "better" in some preconceived sense) balance is achieved. Human agency is present, and can't be pretended

away.

Consider, again, his otherwise very helpful chapter about “noticing who’s missing”. He picks up on his research into “the dones” who have left church behind in their Christian discipleship, and, as mentioned above, exhorts us towards creating an environment which allows for “asking questions and exploring doubts” (page 129). It’s a great push back at dogmatism. But notice the tension: At the same time as he wants to allow for questions and doubts, Aisthorpe also has a *kerygma*, a *truth* to assert: We must “refocus our attention on Jesus and the vision he imparted, the kingdom, his certain intention to redeem all of creation and to restore his seamless reign” (page 134).

What’s it going to be? Questions and doubts? Or truth-claims about Jesus? For sure, it’s both, but the rewilding metaphor doesn’t hold that tension. Just as an ecologist cannot pretend that they are not present in their environment; Aisthorpe cannot pretend that the epistemological certainty of the gospel of Jesus – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – can be removed from a church environment of questioning and doubting. To be fair, I don’t think he does, himself, pretend; but his metaphor gives succour to those that do, and they are invariably damaging to the church.

It is good for all mission-minded congregations to listen hard, question well, explore and wrestle with doubts and assumptions. But no-one does this in an absolute sense; no-one cuts themselves off from their epistemological foundations. Those who claim to be moved solely by “listening” are usually unhealthy pursuers of their own certainty; and being self-deceived they tend to hurt and exclude and roll over others blindly. Rather, the strength of the gospel is that it has a certainty in an objective life-giving someone other-than-us, Jesus. In the certainty of *him* is a truly safe place in which to wrestle with our questions and doubts.

**So what's underneath all this?** To be fair, I'm probably amplifying the problem here. Aisthorpe's book is genuine and temperate, and he only takes a small step into these murky waters. Maybe he has simply run into the problem of all metaphors, that they can be extended too far. I'd love to have a longer conversation with him. His insights intrigue me.

What I'm detecting however, and responding negatively to, is a crack left open for a more insidious miscomprehension of the place of human agency in the church, in mission, and in the world at large. It's the flip-side of toxic traditionalism (crf. page 174) and just as bad. It is prevalent in the more Greenbelt-y ends of the Christian economy, which I'm sure is Aisthorpe's area of influence.

In this view of humanity, we are not merely *corrupted* and *corrupting* (as in the classical views of sin, guilt, and shame), we are *innately corruption itself*. We don't *have* a problem, we *are* the problem. By definition, humanity *unwinds* the environment; we are the problem, in ourselves.

The classical view of the human condition at least has a "solution": At the worst (and most worldviews have it) it is answered in some form of judgement and retribution. In the gospel, gloriously, it is answered with *grace, forgiveness, regeneration, renewal*.

This other view has no grace. Can we call it some form of "nihilistic humanism? It's answer is not the *redemption* of human agency it is the *elimination* of it. It's "gospel" is the diminishment, even the eradication, of humanity itself. If we remove ourselves, the world will be pristine.

We detect this view in our post-postmodern "wokeist" world and as we smart against "cancel culture" and other intersectional diktats. There is no grace. There is no redemption. There is just the elimination of voice, and even of personhood. Where corruption is perceived, in, for example, the recent furore

regarding J. K. Rowling's opinion on the essence of womanhood, it can only be solved by eliminating that voice: She should shut up, she should be nothing, her privileged existence is almost an affront. The best we can do is to rid this world of our corruption; to rid this world of ourselves.

Aisthorpe's metaphor allows space for this nihilistic humanism. The rewilding metaphor buys into it: The best form of human agency in ecology is not to act. The best form of leadership is to not lead. The best form of being church is not to be, but to dissolve into the mystery of doubt and of questions without answer. Run to the end of this road and we deny the value of the very humanity that Christ himself inhabited; we deny Christ.

The gospel is *not* a flip to the other extreme in which human agency is absolutised. It is possible to conceive of a *dominion* ecology in which the *telos* of the environment is subservience to human passion. We can easily imagine, in a Trumpist world, the essence of church being nothing but the articulation of dogmatic norms defining human worth around legalistic performance. This also denies Christ.

Rather we must come to the middle: The gospel speaks of *sanctified, renewed, Spirit-led, life-bringing* human agency. God is an *interventionist* God, not a leave-it-alone-to-its-own-devices deity. God intervenes *through* humanity. This is ultimately, of course, in Jesus, who fulfils the heart and soul of human vocation; from the creation covenant of Adam, through Mosaic holiness, and Davidic leadership as a shepherd after "God's own heart." The *telos* of the gospel is not grasped in the disappearance of humanity-as-corruption, but in the emergence of humanity-redeemed.

All creation is groaning, Paul says in Romans, as if in the pains of childbirth. For what? To lose the shackles of it's human parasites? No! "The creation waits in eager expectation for the *children of God* to be revealed." (Romans 8:19). The

children of God will not rape or pillage or ecologically destroy, but neither will they abandon, remove themselves, or deny their image of God by ceasing to be. They will act with careful, loving, Jesus-shaped agency; tending, nurturing, *intervening*, growing, proclaiming life and truth.

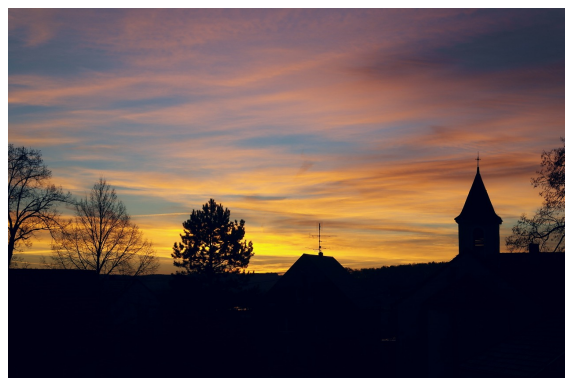
As for creation, so for the church. Both church and creation are eschatologically linked. I long for a true rewilding of both. In the truest sense, we are also creatures, and we also belong there: we hear our Saviour and the call to his wild.

I see glimpses of this call in Aisthorpe. But in the end, his rewilding is more of a *taming* of God's people towards a trajectory that's not entirely benign. There is wisdom and good to glean from this book, but the church's deepest longings are not answered here.

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## Is It Time For The Post-Missional Church?

Useful observations about the world are often made when things shift and change. We can compare the new to what came before. For instance, we talk about “post-war Britain”; it was different, but related, to the Britain of earlier generations. We can make similar observations about the shifts and changes in how we do church.



In recent decades, the greatest shift has been into postmodernity. This worldview took the building blocks that made up “modern man” and reconstructed them. In the modern

world the church's posture was intellectual defence (apologetics), explanation and persuasion. Robust debates and gospel explanation from the likes of Billy Graham were the tools of the time. The question we sought to answer was "Is Christian faith reasonable?"

The postmodern world launched out from modern rationalism and a positive view of human progress and took us to the subjective human experience of truth, and a re-emphasis on belonging and community. The church followed; we began to emphasise the *experience* of the gospel. Early (ca. 1970s) movements formed closer knit relationships, through things like cell church, and enthusiastic charismatic experiences. **The missional church** is grounded in these modes. They became systematised and commercialised through the 80's and 90's, giving rise to the "seeker sensitive" and homogenous-unit (special-focus group) structures that are the defaults of most evangelical churches today. This is the world of the Alpha Course, and the default Sunday pathway for growing up through creche, pre-school, children, and youth programs towards our eventual ecclesial self-fulfillment.

We have also seen a late-stage postmodern pushback at how this became commercialised and conservative. Charismatics have morphed into contemplatives. Greenbelt, which once played the now-oh-so-mainstream Michael W. Smith and Amy Grant, now sits at the feet of secular sages such as Russell Brand. The "emerging" and the "emergent" parted ways. Steve Chalke, Tony Campolo, John Smith (for you Aussies), all jumped to the left. It was a shift in expression, the rise of postevangelicalism, but it was still postmodern underneath.

Throughout the postmodern age we have been playing in a pluralist world. The question we were seeking to answer was "Does the Christian faith belong, and can we belong to it?"

The world is now shifting into post-postmodernity. The pluralist project is dead; we live in a world of competing

metanarratives that are overt in their attempts to totalise and win. So-called “wokeism” coerces through cancel culture and an attempt to establish its own pseudo-religion of signalled virtue. So-called Trumpism, at the other end of the spectrum, does the equal but opposite. Each is anathema to the other, and the demand is to pick a side. The question that is forced upon us is this: “Is Christianity actually ethical and moral at all?”; which is to say, are those Christians on the “right” side?

In the post-postmodern world, our postmodern missional response no longer cuts it. The techniques for weaving worldview and experiences together to spin the narrative, change hearts and minds, and win converts, are now ubiquitous in every sphere, and usually harmful. Our missional methodology buys into that game, whether we mean it to or not. Amidst the cynicism are the real stories of people who are victims and survivors of mission’s cold pragmatism. We used to target the “unchurched and de-churched” who needed to be “won back”; now we have the growing phenomenon of the “dones” – those who have left the church, not because they have lost their faith, but because their faith has lost its place and people. I know from our experience what it means to walk alongside a new young Christian, and realise that the path of discipleship they needed was away from the programmed precision of their local church.

**It’s time for a post-missional church.** Somehow we need to follow Jesus into and through the post-postmodern world, to somehow transcend the culture wars, and by some miracle reach a cynical generation. It seems impossible, it’s hard to imagine; but that’s always the case when things start to change and shift.

There *is* a real danger of slipping into either triumphalism or nihilism. I hear and see both at work. The existential question of the post-postmodern world ties virtue to a reason for being; “I am good, therefore I am,” is the mantra of the

day. With nihilism, the church is rendered as bad and therefore meaningless and unworthy of existence; it's when we agree with the world that the church is toxic, in the same category as toxic masculinity, heteronormativity, and other privilege, and so our moral duty is to fade away and rid the world of our corruption. The alternative takes us to triumphalism; we validate our existence by asserting our infallible, unquestionable, virtue, and we thump our Bibles against the fake news. Both options are untenable; they don't really look like Jesus.

We must discern a way forward. That is a big question, and I don't have the answer. But we *can* look to the changes and the shifts, and pick it up as prayerful project.

**This is something I want to do, and I'd like to do it in community.** Would you join me in observing the shifts and changes around us, and by imagining a post-missional church? Here is my attempt at an initial brainstorm of comparison. Note that these are observations of what has been, and what might be, not assertions of how it should be. I'd very much welcome your input and thoughts. Get in touch with me in the comments or through my other points of connection.

#### **Characteristics of church (initial brainstorm):**

	<u>Modern / "Christendom" Church</u>	<u>Postmodern / Post- Christendom / "Missional" Church</u>	<u>Post-Missional Church?</u>
<u>Placement in Society</u>	Established institution presumed to exist.	Institution in the marketplace, competing for market share.	Heavily localised, perhaps even fragmented; akin to "pop-up" economy. Relationally unified.



<b><u>Structure</u></b>	Hierarchical, pastor-centric.	Semi-hierarchical; devolution to smaller groups as an asset for the larger whole.	Personality and cause-based. Structures reflecting networks of trust akin to social media.
<b><u>Resources</u></b>	Institutional responsibility, legacy finances, tithing.	Congregational giving, side-business investments, and “raise your support” employment.	Bivocationalism. Also patronage (i.e. directed assistance to person or cause, rather than tithes into a common pool).
<b><u>Goal</u></b>	Keep people in church, help them know Jesus.	Help people know Jesus, get them into church.	Be with people who want to know Jesus, make that church.
<b><u>Source of spiritual authority.</u></b>	Qualification and Authorisation; expressed in didactic teaching, liturgical worship, elevation of an order of leaders. We look to who is in charge. We are exhorted to “learn the truth.”	Experience and Pragmatism; expressed in dialogical teaching, stimulating events + small groups, elevation of “effective” programs and people. We look to who or what works for us, and are exhorted to “walk in your gifting and destiny.”	Kenosis and Sacrifice: expressed as a recognition of costly faith, elevation of those (both contemporary and ancient) who have had a proving experience. We look to who has been through the fire, and are exhorted to “lose your life so that you might save it.”
<b><u>Modes of discipleship.</u></b>	Standardised, formal, and curriculum based.	Formalised action-reflection, mentoring, coaching.	Rhythm of life, monastic, familial.

<u>Aspiration in worship.*</u>	Service	Growth	Adoration
<u>?</u>			

\* = Subsequently added in edit.

Photo credit: SimonAr

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# A Short Reflection on a Decade of Weakness

I'm being more introspective than normal, but strangely, I feel I need to mark the day.



Ten years ago today I ran my brain into the ground. I had a “break-down.”

Some people don't like that negative imagery. They would rather speak of a “break-through” or something more positive. But let's not hide the reality; I broke my brain. It came from my own lack of wisdom, my unresolved insecurities and unhealthy drives, which collided with a complex and conflicted context. I used up all my fuel, and then some. I came to a crashing reverting-to-childlikeness traumatised halt.

In the immediate aftermath was much grace from my church, much strength from my wife and family, and much affection and support from my friends. I was helped to a road to recovery.

I have learned to be open about my experience, mostly on the off-chance that someone reading this is going through the same. I know how useful it is to know that you're not the only one to fall off that path. As a grumpy old churchwarden remarked to me on my way back to being functional, with a knowing wry look of an old bloke who's just seen a welp grow up a bit: "So, you're not as strong as you thought you were, Will."

No, I'm not. That was the painful thing to learn. It was the most blessed thing to grasp.

Ten years later, I am well. Well, well enough. Like an old sporting injury, it'll trigger a twinge every now and then. But the lesson remains.

Ten years and one day ago I thought I was strong. I put my shoulder under every burden. I didn't realise that there comes a point when you're not mustering your strength, you're cashing it in... and spending it.

My strength was my weakness. I was achieving outcomes according to my capacity and my skill. It wasn't nothing; I had some game. But it maxed out at the size of me. It wasn't that impressive.

Over these last ten years, I can see where the real fruit has been; the stuff that lasts, the real stuff that lingers. The sorts of things which makes you give thanks to God and trust that he's true. It's when you see lives turned around, and people baptised, and find in brothers and sisters in missional arms a fellowship that lingers across years and latitudes. It's that sort of stuff that lasts, and it's not generated by my strength.

I used to think I could exercise force of persuasion; now I know that the real stuff happens by the the Spirit touching hearts.

I used to think I could exercise strong directive leadership;

now I know that the real stuff happens when good people find themselves together under the apostolic heart of Jesus.

I used to think I could, and should, fix everything and everyone I see; now I know that the real stuff happens when I wait on the Lord.

This isn't passivism or even nihilism. It's still about being present. It's still about being familiar with sufferings. There's still a need for conviction and passion and purpose and excitement. But that only works when it rests on peace. And peace comes not from my feeble strength, but knowing I am weak, and held by very strong hands.

In short: Jesus, all for Jesus, all about Jesus, all to Jesus, I surrender.

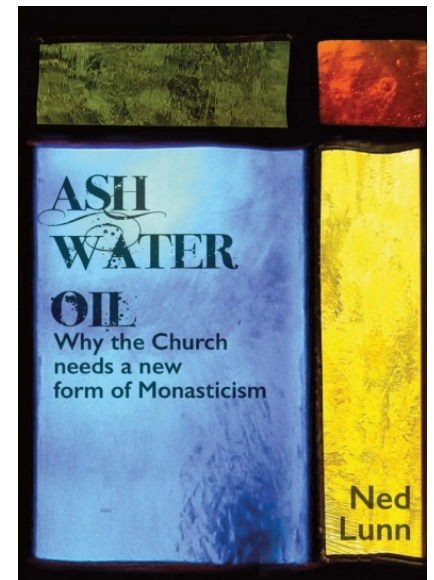
It has been a decade of weakness, beyond anything I ever asked, or imagined.

Thanks be to God.

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## **Review: Ash Water Oil: Why the Church needs a new form of Monasticism**

A common experience of being involved in church life is a *collision*, between vision and aspiration, and the hard reality of what church is actually like. It can come as some sort of crisis (e.g. being on the wrong end of hypocrisy or abuse) or simply a nagging sense that something is “off,” an “I don’t think we’re being who we’re called to be.”



I mention this, not because this is the primary topic of Ned Lunn’s, *Ash Water Oil*, but because those who have had that experience may find particular solace and even inspiration in its pages.

You see, the collision I speak of is not necessarily a bad thing. I often find it in the clash between the joyous *ecclesiological* reality of church (the Spirit-filled, Jesus-led, worshipful people of God seeking to make disciples of all nations) and the *ecclesiastical* reality (institutions filled with politics, anachronisms, and corruptible personalities). I find that the collision exists *within* myself more often than not.

It is a *creative* collision. It’s where we wrestle with God to lay hold of his blessing, clarify his promise, and pursue our shared vocation as real people in a real time and place. It is where we move past faith and church as mere expressions of the pleasure principle, and lay hold of what being a Jesus-shaped community is all about.

For that creative task, *Ash Water Oil*, is an excellent resource. It is the work of an author who clearly loves the church, and he has used his significant intellect and passion to lay out a vision of what might be.

Lunn draws upon “monasticism” as his defining guide, in both its ancient and newer forms.

We are used to examining monasticism through the lens of avowed “poverty, chastity, and obedience.” We understand these words but they are somewhat inaccessible to the life of the ordinary church. Lunn’s distillate is much more helpful. He prefers the principles of “stability, conversion, and obedience.” This is what he explores, carrying them across the liturgical lessons of Ash Wednesday, Easter, and Pentecost (hence “Ash, Water, Oil”), and a matrix of trinitarian themes (“Creation, Redemption, Sanctification”) and practices (“Prayer, Study, Service”).

*What I want to propose... is a set of virtues to seek to inhabit... I wonder what would emerge if we acknowledged together, a sense that the New Monastic call is, like our brothers and sisters of the religious life, a commitment to ‘stability, conversion and obedience’. To explicitly seek to live a life rooted somewhere or with someone no matter what the spiritual weather is like, no matter what temptations afflict you. To respond to the call to stay and remain faithful. [i.e. ‘Stability’] Secondly, to continually engage in the work of personal change; to turn away, step by step, from the things of this world to the Kingdom of God; to intentionally become, in different circumstances and in different ways, more and more Christ-like, poor and dependent on God. [i.e. ‘Conversion’] And, thirdly, to desire to place yourself the decisions of something or someone else; to curb that deeply human temptation to be in control of ourselves and our decisions; to hold onto the power of our own lives. [i.e. ‘Obedience’] (Pages 12-13, [with my annotations])*

For Gill and I, this resonates at the creative collision point. When we think of ourselves and our church (both local and wide), it explains our frustration. We are so often fickle and fleeting, comfort-driven, and not *stable*; we are so often

self-secure, sin-denying, and grace-defying, and unconverted; we are so often individualistic, consumeristic, and voyeuristic, and disobedient to the way of Christ and *unaccountable* to each other. The monastic path expresses a counter-cultural path, in the best sense of it. The Church *needs* a new form of monasticism.

At the beginning, in **creation**, the monastic way reminds us that we are but dust. It speaks to our fundamental identity.

*We are not, despite the depth in which we feel it, the main part in our story... Without Him above us we become drunk on our own achievements as a species. We begin to tell ourselves that we can do anything, be anything, form the world into our own dreams and fantasies; we are the main protagonists and will drive the story. To remind ourselves of our creation, of our createdness, is to place ourselves into the right role in the true story and the story begins with some earth. (Page 35)*

*We are called to embed ourselves solely in the reality of the love of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and taught to us through the lives of the saints, which provokes us to see ourselves and others not as different in gender, sexuality, race or class but as equal under the authority of God. We are to receive our identity in Him and Him alone. In this way we no longer need to fear abandonment or rejection of others because our roots are entwined with the one who gives us life and brings us to our true self. (Page 59)*

The image of the monastic life speaks of a sense of *devotedness*, of having one's entire self set apart for divine purposes. If there is an opposite descriptor, it is of the "secular" life. There is a creative collision when the church *secularises* even as we maintain a religious aesthetic. There is invariably a rub point focused on identity and autonomy. On whose terms do I live my life? On whose terms do we manifest

our shared identity as church? Control collides with childlikeness. Self-definition collides with the numbering of the hairs of our head. Life as a self-made construct collides with life received as gift.

The way through it is to to rediscover our createdness. We need to know this truly religious path.

In redemption we remember we are Christ's. We belong to him now, and this is life to us.

*In his grace, He lifts us out of our world of transaction, karma and Fate, washes us and places us back in the garden of His delight. He can, if we allow Him, birth us anew through the water of baptism. He begins, from the moment we see the Father in His Son, Jesus, shaping the dirt and mud of our lives into new life. He recalibrates our journeys (page 98)*

*If we are called to continual conversion into the likeness of Christ, then we should follow Him into His rich life of kenosis and empty ourselves so that others may become rich by God's grace. Our conversion is an emptying of that which we possess and which possesses us. (page 104)*

I have come to say in recent years that my church growth strategy can be boiled down to one principle: those who seek to save their own life will lose it. The creative collision is real, particularly in my evangelical world, where we tend to default back to mechanistic approaches to strengthening and empowering our organisations at the expense of worship, mortification, and more mystical devotion. At one point Lunn confronts the narrative in which we "must secure our inner identity", and make "our autonomy... a thing to be protected and sustained. The life of poverty and kenosis, however, demands that we follow Christ in dying to self in order that we can be raised with Him in new life" (page 105). It includes acquiescence to the "shared narrative" of Scripture that "gives shape to our interpretation of existence" and without which



"we are forced to make up our own narrative and return to the masks that hide us from truly knowing ourselves." (page 127).

*Whilst we, as God's people, continue to focus on our own survival, perpetuating our own, albeit noble and good activities and arguments, we fail to witness to the power of grace.... God does come and meet us where we are, but He comes to turn us around, to recalibrate us and for our whole lives to be changed. (Page 113).*

Finally in **sanctification**, we remember we are called to be *moved* towards him.

*A sacred community is one that is defined, not by an exoskeleton, a cast around a limb, but, rather, an endoskeleton; a form around which we gather. Sanctification, the redefinition of our being, occurs when we are in pure communion with the divine source of holiness and true life. (page 155)*

That imitation of Jesus, of course, is where we have creative collisions, it is the painful process of *becoming*.

A pertinent case in Lunn's consideration is the question of leadership in the church. As ministers of the gospel, we want to serve as Jesus did, and *lead* as he did. We want to give ourselves, and receive others as he has received. We want to live in the knowledge of his *power*. All of this gets expressed within community dynamics, including the necessities of hierarchy and the exercise of authority, and it often goes wrong. No wonder the monastics had to wrestle with the concept of *obedience* in their walk of holiness.

Gill and I have observed a tendency to resolve this process by a form of avoidance: A falling back of how we see leadership, not into some form of accountability in community, but into a form of nihilism that renders anything other than the

unboundaried inclusion as inherently violent and abusive. Leadership is anathema, not aspiration. Community is merely the gathering of individuals, because personhood will inevitably collide with any sense of moving together; it is best to keep the collective impotent and stationary and allow each one their own self-adventure. In the end, such a mode denies that Christ is present in our (often flawed, but very real) ways of being, and would rather embrace a painless vacuum in which the Body of Christ is close to meaningless.

*I would argue that, for a society to function, authority must remain external to the self. Narcisissistic tribalism is not a healthy way to exist but there are elements of it that should be encouraged; togetherness, sociality, loyalty... (page 164)*

*There is a generalized view that 'millenials', the generation who grew up straddling the millennium, have no respect for authority. In reality I think we do respect authority, but we do not acknowledge them, as an acknowledgement of them would insist that we were not totally independent and 'free'. These more subtle authorities hold sway over their subjects and coerce an unconscious obedience from them. They maintain this power by continuing to challenge the very idea of authority which they freely exert on people in order that any alternative that challenges their influence can be undermined swiftly and easily. This leads to the dangerous tendency to dismiss clear, transparent authority whilst allowing deceptive and sycophantic forms to hold power over us. (page 160-161)*

*And there it is: the mantra for the Church at the present time. No one can tell anyone what is right or wrong. All must be accepted and placed as equally authoritative and by so doing authority is displaced and no longer shared. (Page 163)*

The alternative monastic vision of leadership is more worthy.

Gill and I have attempted to encapsulate it as “church as family.” The focus is on person rather than program, discipleship shaped by devotion to God. We echo Soul Survivor’s Mike Pilavachi who has spoken of a desire to “raise up sons and daughters” rather than “hire and fire employees.” We have become aware of the critiques, e.g. the dangers of heavy shepherding and the avoidance of objective accountability. But this is exactly the value of looking to the long traditions; they can assist and enable the life-giving modes of leadership to be pursued healthily. When, for instance, Lunn desires for bishops to learn the ways of the abbot, he’s calling them to a vocation with a substantial legacy of knowing what it is to be both released and bounded by the way of Christ.

*“It is within this captialist context that leaders have begun to be more obedient to plans, initiatives and strategies than to people. It is after this shift that we being to experience the degradation and humiliation that comes with abuse of power. We become pawns in a game rather than treasured companions in a journey. St. Benedict wants the abbot to model his leadership on Christ who, as we saw... was ‘self-determined and self-limited’ (page 168)*

**In conclusion,** I agree with Lunn, the Church needs a new form of monasticism. The more Gill and I read, the more we realise that this is why we answered the call so many years ago. If we are to be anything more than cogs in a Western World machinery of self-actualisation, or competitors in the marketplace of feelgoods and flourishing, we need to return to some ancient roads. We need a rediscovery of the way of Christ.

*Being sent somewhere to to tell our story is easy. Being sent to live a life dependent on God, to be stripped of all our identities, comfort, power and influence; that’s mission. We are looking not to interrupt our lives with acts of service but to find that our life with God is a perpetual life of*

*servanthood to God, with God and by God. (page 181)*

*The Church needs to recapture a vision for a shared life, bound together by a shared narrative, shared principles and shared practices. (page 177)*

We wholeheartedly agree that “this living out of discipleship in a community distinct by its core will draw others towards the Church” (page 180). At the moment, we are wrestling with what this means in practice.

During the pandemic lockdown we have attempted monastic rhythms within our large vicarage household. We have stumbled in our little community as I’m sure many communities have struggled. Yet we are more convinced than ever that a more monastic mode of life is a vital part of bridging the gospel into upcoming generations. In the midst of our experiment, Lunn’s book is a resource as it gives words to the questions we were asking, but not voicing: As our context turned us inwards into introspection, we were encouraged to realise that “...as we seek a theological framework for the sustainable life of community, we must start with our shared, a-contextual story” (Page 57). We remembered to worship. Surrounded by the expectation to do and perform, we became grounded in the monastic balance of “the prayerful and devoted... and the more overtly missional, serving mendicant” (page 62).

As we come out of pandemic into the season ahead, we ponder, with Lunn, a crucial question: “Could an Anglican parish church create and adopt a Rule of Life? I, myself, have asked the same question and came to the conclusion: no” (page 200) His answer looks to the incompatibility of statutory responsibilities and the devoted way of life.

I think I agree. In the pandemic lockdown, much of the parochial responsibilities were suspended, and we could operate more monastically. Now we are coming back out, the creative collisions resurface. An Anglican parish, as an

*ecclesiastical* unit, is barely fit for purpose as an expression of *ecclesiological* reality. Yet it can, I think, offer a place of harmony: A village around the monastery, the community around the community, intertwined, served and blessed.

The collisions will continue. But so will the creativity.

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## **Thoughts and Talks for Being God's People at Home: Eucharisteo**

The latest in our video series on being God's people at home is now available:

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## **Video Series: Being God's People At Home**

God is leading us and calling us in this strange season. It's an opportunity to invest in a mode of being his people that draws us closer to him, stimulates our call, and increases our delight in the leadership of Jesus. This immediate time will shape us and serve us as we go into what is ahead.

Gill and I and others in our household have been putting together some thoughts and talks about how we might respond.

In particular, how we might grow in the reality that we are currently expressing as “church in our homes” and while our homes are the location of God’s church. In our homes, households, and “telehouseholds” we minister to one another, and draw closer to God.

Two videos have been uploaded, we’ll be releasing more over the next little while from time to time.

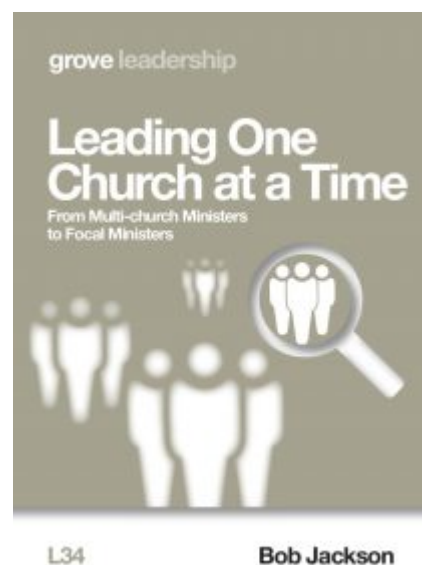
### **Video 1: Introduction**

### **Video 2: Lectio Divina: Being immersed in God’s word**

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## **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 bleedingly 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-episcopal 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 FM’s, and that we should provide them with more flexible and contextual options. That doesn’t raise questions about the training of FM’s; it raises questions about the possible general irrelevance of ordination formation! If ordination formation is relevant, why wouldn’t we offer it to FM’s? If FM’s 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 FM’s 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.