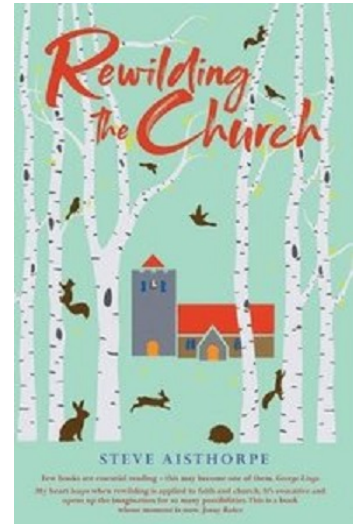


Review: Rewilding the Church

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 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 live 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.

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 /</u> <u>"Christendom"</u> <u>Church</u>	<u>Postmodern / Post-</u> <u>Christendom /</u> <u>"Missional" Church</u>	<u>Post-Missional</u> <u>Church?</u>
<u>Placement in</u> <u>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.
<u>Structure</u>	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.

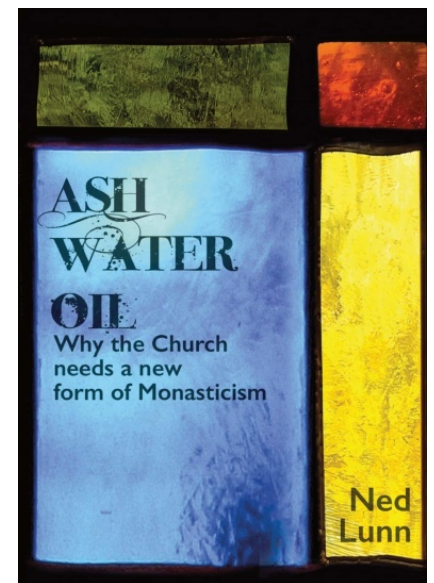
<u>Resources</u>	Institutional responsibility, legacy finances, tithing.	Congregational giving, side-business investments, and “raise your support” employment.	Bivocationalism. Also patronage (i.e. directed assistance to person or cause, rather than tithes into a common pool).
<u>Goal</u>	Keep people 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.
<u>Source of spiritual authority.</u>	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.”
<u>Modes of discipleship.</u>	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

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 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

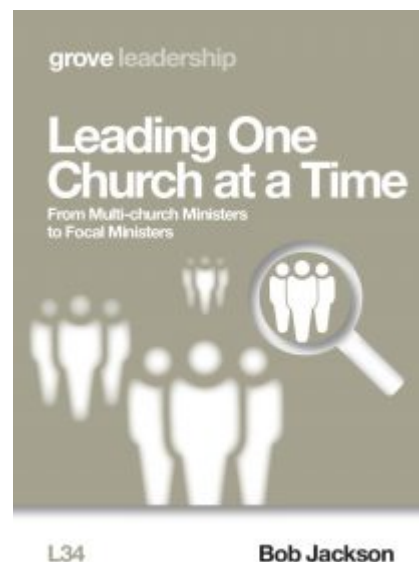
church reate and adopt a Rule of Life? I, myself, have asked the same question and came to the conclusion: no” (page 200) His answer looks to the incompatibility of statutory responsibilities and the devoted way of life.

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.

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-episcopate oversight role” (page 8)). When ESM worked, it worked. When it didn’t two things often emerged: 1) The LMST collapsed into one person, usually the OLM, who effectively became a Focal Minister, and 2) there were times when the Enabler needed to be given some authority in order to resolve conflict etc., and so were often also appointed as Archdeacon-Mission-Support-Officers. I don’t know if Jackson has looked at ESM (or it’s “Total Ministry”, “Every Member Ministry”, or “Local Collaborative Ministry” equivalents) but he’s arrived at a model that aligns with the outcomes.

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

1) Focal Ministry requires a cultural change, but the danger is we only grasp it structurally: Jackson promotes FM as a way of eschewing the “pastor-and-flock model and professional ministry” (page 5). This is a strange contrast; turn over “pastor-and-flock” and you don’t quickly have a “Focal Minister” you have a flatter structure with no clear hierarchy. At best this could look like effective partnership, perhaps within a fivefold shape. At worst, (and I’ve observed this), it looks like bland egalitarianism articulated as “we don’t need anyone to lead us” and often feeling directionless and, ironically, insular. If Focal Ministry can find the balance between assertive leadership and collaborative

inclusion, then that's fantastic, but that's firstly a cultural issue not a structural one. There's no reason why "normal" ordained leadership should not also find that balance. Similarly, without cultural change, it will quickly reduce back to a pseudo-vicar and their flock.

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

We need to think about how Focal Ministers are "searched for, trained, and supported" (page 25). One would hope that Focal Ministers would be assisted in discerning their particular vocation, provided with training in theological reflection and pastoral skill, and offered tangible support (perhaps even some remuneration where possible) so that they are free to exercise their ministry. How is this not the same concept as the pathway to ordination and the provision of a living? It may be that our training pathways

for ordinands are not helpful for FMs, and that we should provide them with more flexible and contextual options. That doesn't raise questions about the training of FMs; it raises questions about the possible general irrelevance of ordination formation! If ordination formation is relevant, why wouldn't we offer it to FMs? If FMs don't need it, why would we require it of ordinands?

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

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

The joy, and beauty, and actual *point* of FM is the local connection and flexible local adaptation of ministry. As soon as you have syllabi and processes that are imposed from a distance (even nationally!), they risk becoming hoops to jump rather than resources to release. Such processes often hinder local adaptation by insisting on irrelevancies, and they undermine recruitment of FMs for

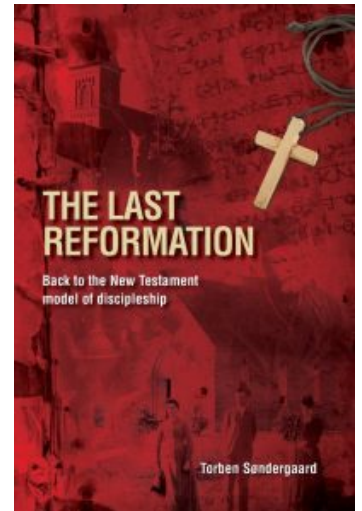
whom that is onerous. Too much centralised expectation and we might as well replicate (or just use) the ordination streams and send FMs off to the so-called “vicar clone factory.” We need to learn the lessons from what happened (or didn’t happen) with the aspirationally contextual Pioneer Ordained Minister schemes of 15-20 years ago.

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

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

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

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



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

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

I've had to check myself continually. Perhaps my unease is appropriate; as a vicar I represent the sort of churchiness that Sondergaard is rightly critiquing. Maybe I'm biased as Sondergaard attempts to deconstruct my current way of life.

After all, I'm a professional churchman; the church institutions house and feed my family. My expertise, my career, my "marketable skills", let alone my sense of vocation and divine purpose are woven into a form of church from which Sondergaard is pulling loose threads. So I've had to question myself: is my unease with this book just a form of self-preservation? I don't think I've fallen into that trap.

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

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

2- Our churches appear spiritually stagnant and ill-prepared. "I look at churches in the West, I can see that they need to be refreshed" (page 23). I have felt this as a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction in the status quo. Even when we are blessed and fruitful, we cannot simply stop as if we've "made it" and be satisfied with the way things are. "*Semper reformanda*," our forefathers said; the church needs continual reformation. We are not pursuing Jesus enough. We are not prepared for difficulty and adversity, let alone persecution, should it come. "The big churches will suddenly become small when they find out that following Jesus has a high price, a price most of them have

never been willing to pay" (page 25).

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

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

– our money, our time, our family, our identity, our career. This is how we worship (Romans 12:1), but we rarely nurture it in our church contexts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The early church model in Acts is intriguing and attractive. However it was far from perfect, even in those early primal years. Read the first few chapters of Revelation and you'll see how spiritually ineffective they could be! Moreover, the evolution of the early church, even before Constantine, was not due to a hardening of heart away from the will of God. It was moved by a desire to remain true to Jesus (apostolic succession, canon of Scripture), to flourish in faith amidst persecution

(liturgical rhythms, appointment of pastors and leaders etc.), and to combat heresy and defend belief (trinitarian theology, apologias). Inevitably these lifegiving currents were, naturally, *systematised*. The assumption that the early church was great and it became increasingly bad does not entirely match reality. Sondergaard doesn't seem to grasp this. e.g. He makes the curious observation that in the early Church "No one but Jesus was the Head of the fellowship, and it was clear to everyone" (p135), and doesn't recognise that the Holy Spirit manifested that leadership through Councils of elders (Acts 15) and the sending of corrective letters from people in authority (Paul's epistles)!

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

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

now do it well!

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

Relatedly,

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

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

Similarly, “Imagine that a matured married couple... come to

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

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

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

3- His vision is too small. Reformations of the church have

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

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

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

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

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

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

Review: Forming a Missional Church – Creating Deep Cultural Change in Congregations

We have noticed a welcome recent trend in thinking about church life. It is a movement away from a fixation on processes and programs, traditions and techniques, mechanistic deliberations about an organisation. It is towards considering the *culture* of the church and understanding it as a social and familial system.

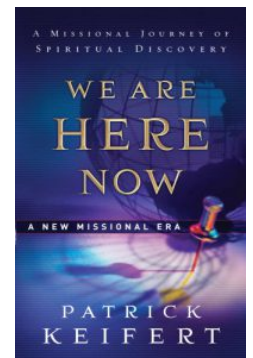
It is towards recognising (perish the thought) that God the Holy Spirit *is* actually thoroughly and presently involved;



church leadership is more a matter of sharing spiritual discernment than reliance upon managerial expertise.

Two books I have recently read—Patrick Keifert's *We Are Here Now*, and the Grove Booklet *Forming a Missional Church* which Keifert has co-authored with Nigel Rooms—do well to advance this trend and make it accessible to local congregations. The two overlap in content and I will concentrate on the Grove booklet here.

The need for cultural change is often recognised and touted albeit somewhat impotently. Rooms and Keifert seek to actually get to a practical outcome. The groundwork that gets them there takes a number of forms:



Firstly, they engage with postmodernity. Cultural connection within a postmodern world necessarily requires pushback against such modern influences as individualism, propositionalism, and didacticism. It means advancing modes and manners of being church that value real and shared experience.

The categorization of faith as private is among the reasons why many Christians do not speak and act as if God were living and active in the here and now of our every days lives. (Page 4)

This basis for their approach is not novel: the juxtaposition of church and the postmodern world has been around for at least two decades. Keifert is right not to be morose about the changing world. Rather than phrases like “post-Christendom” he prefers a “new missional era.” This obvious and positive sense only adds to my bemusement that such cultural thinking has been largely left behind in academia by

church leaders in the field.

Secondly, they bring insights from systems theory. Keifert and Rooms recognise that churches like all “living, feeling, learning human organizations... are not simply machines to be fixed or problems that respond to **technical** solutions” (page 5, emphasis mine). Our tendency for off-the-shelf solutions makes us ill-prepared for “those challenges or problems or complicated situations for which there is not a ready or known fix.” Instead, we must attend to **adaptive** change.

Adaptive challenges require change and transformation on the part of those facing them, in contrast to technical problems where there is a known solution and no change is required.. (Page 6)

Indeed, technical “solutions” can be used to insulate ourselves from the costly self-reflection and honesty that is necessary for the mission of the church to be taken seriously.

*Our task is being born into our world, our culture and context, and **dying to all we do not need** to be God’s church in, but not of, the world—and then living into God’s preferred and promised future. Mission, missional life, missional churches... the missio Dei is cross-shaped. (Page 6, emphasis mine)*

I have found the language of “adaptive” and “technical” to be reasonably useful as a “way in” for people to begin wrestling with the sorts of issues at stake. It is quite managerial in tone, however, and some might find liturgical or reflective language more helpful. After all, as long as the tendency to apply it only to individuals can be avoided, “adaptive” language speaks to concepts such as “being refined”, “amending one’s life”, and being “*transformed by the renewing of your mind.*”

Thirdly, they ground everything on robust missiology. The beginning of this is the now famous adage, which they do well to quote:

It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world but the God of mission who has a church in the world. (Page 10)

Missiology in practice emphasises the centrality of *discernment* in the mode and manner of being church. “We cannot simply bless every good thing” (page 11), they say, clearly understanding the propensity of churches to equate their programmatic busy-ness with effective outreach. Rather, “the main skill individuals and Christian communities require to lift anchor faithfully and sail into the unknown, adaptive, exciting, challenging journey of the *missio Dei* is discernment... asking and finding answers to the question, ‘What is God up to?’” (page 11). Such a journey can seem uncertain and therefore unprofessional or irresponsible for some, but from experience we know that it is, in the end, an *exciting* journey that is literally mission-critical:

...rather than doing mission by conducting a programme of mission activities (Alpha courses, holiday clubs for children and young people, invitational events etc), none of which are unhelpful per se, the church becomes so caught up in the missio Dei that its members are naturally ‘detectives of divinity.’ The church’s very being becomes missional so that all it is and does serves the mission of God. (Pages 11-12)

I was astounded, however, by the claim that in 2008-9 “the missiological concept of the *missio Dei* was only just taking hold at the level of theologically trained clergy” in the English context (page 10). It makes me aware of how ahead of the curve things have been in other less-established contexts around the world. But the fact that it is on the agenda is fruit of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report from 2004 (which

they mention), and seminal works such as Wright's *The Mission of God* from 2006. It elevates the importance of works such as these and other significant efforts (Forge Network etc.) around the turn of the millennium.

These three forms of engagement coalesce and have their natural conclusions in what it means to live and act as a church community. Clearly it also challenges some of the precious ways we have viewed leadership. The challenge for church leaders can be personal and overwhelming; it's one thing to talk about missiological concepts in theory, or even to bring some sort of analysis to the church as an institution, but adaptive change cannot be led except by example. It means dealing with the "trap" of modernity that makes the "professional" leader "the primary basis of identity for both the community and the leader" while at the same time recognising that there is a role for "spiritual discernment, spiritual leadership" (page 13). To avoid this trap the leader must take a "personal spiritual journey, sometimes called a rule of life" (page 14) that faces and avoids "our own desire for control and certainty, especially in choppy waters" (page 15). Personally speaking, I have known the pain and frustration that comes from falling into this trap, seeking a vain fleeting peace in control and drive and avoidance, when the call is to trust God even as impotence and anxiety loom.

In the end, Room and Keifert present "six missional practices" (page 20). These should not be seen so much as steps in a recipe but practices that found and inform a "diffused innovation." The hope is that through them cultural change might advance throughout the community while naturally responding to strengths and weaknesses and the very real human aspects that will either welcome or resist it.

dwelling in the word – a shared method of Bible that seeks to heed what God is saying in his Word, recognising that the Holy Spirit will speak in Scripture not only to individuals

but *through* the members of the body, one to another. It sounds simple but, when taken seriously, allows a shared experience of being undone and remade by the Spirit of God through the Word of God.

dwelling in the world – involves the shared journey of listening and hearing what is happening within and around the community. It allows hard things to be heard, and undiscovered ways to be revealed. It anticipates the *activity* of the Holy Spirit in the real world who calls us beyond ourselves.

hospitality – is engagement beyond the community that comes neither from above or below, but both gives and receives, “taking turns hosting and being a guest” (page 22). It recognises that the best place to encounter both world and word is at the point where relationships open up. It turns us towards those “people of peace”–“friendly looking strangers”–that we often ignore, who are right in front of us, who are possibly not what we had expected or hoped, but who are open to heed and be heeded.

corporate spiritual discernment – is placed not at the beginning, but in the middle, as the shared experience of dwelling in word and world begins to develop a sense of “What is God’s preferred and promised future for our local Church?” “Who is God calling us to join in accomplishing that preferred future in our community?” (page 22)

announcing the kingdom – recognises that there is a gospel to share, and a Saviour to speak about. It is adaptive, not impositional: Putting words to the recognition of how the Spirit of Christ is already at work, it invites others to join him, and to enter into the kingdom not as some abstraction but in how he is present in the here and now.

focus for missional action – urges a further and clearer pursuit of the journey of discernment:

*“Every ministry setting has more good things to do and more good things to love than any local church can rightly or well take on. Without the practise of discerning a focus for missional action, the sixth missional practice, the others lead to a kind of disorderly love and dissipation of energy and life into nothingness. **St. Augustine refers to this pattern of behaviour as sin and it is a very common practice in most local churches.**” (Page 23, emphasis mine)*

These six applied practices require further thought on my part to fully understand how they are meant and why they are emphasised over other actions and disciplines. The groundwork on which they are based certainly matches my own experience.

By laying this groundwork Rooms and Keifert have helped answer my own questions of “*What is going on?*” in a mission-adverse church. In the six practices they also attempt to answer the “So what” question: “So what can we do about it?”

Given the veracity of their starting point, they certainly cannot be lightly dismissed. Critical and biblical enquiry would serve to strengthen what should be strengthened, and correct what might be askance. This is something I hope to attend to at some point.

My main caution (which is not insurmountable) is this: behind these books is an ecclesial **product**. *Partnership for Missional Church (PMC)* is a church consultancy framework through which churches who want to explore these practices can “buy in” facilitation and support over a three-year process. Monetisation like this isn’t necessarily bad; it is akin to 3dm (focussing on discipleship and missional communities) or NCD which takes an inventory based approach to balanced growth. But there is a little discordance when a framework which resists a culture of faddish quickfixes is promulgated as something that literally needs a ™ symbol. Nevertheless, PMC does better than most to transcend the irony; a non-linear messy frustrating journey of discernment is not the stuff of populism. To the extent that it will play its part in the

developing trend-changing culture until mission is a natural rhythm—it will do itself out of a job and, in that possibility, it would rightly be seen as a success.

Navigating Theological Dialects in a 3D Church

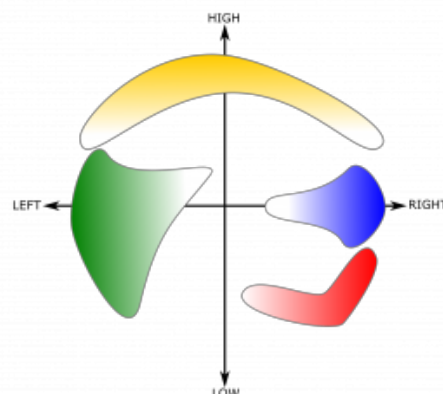
In the last little while I've had a couple of conversations with people who are trying to get their head around the amorphous complexity that is the Church of England. This is partly administrative ("What on earth is a Deanery for?") but mostly to do with what I call "theological languages" (or "dialects") and what we might have once called differences in "churchmanship."

It is not helpful to arbitrarily split people into factions and put them in boxes. Underlying it all there are some unifying commonalities (in the name of the law, if nothing else). **But understanding the diversity is necessary** for good relational reasons. This is particularly so if you're new to it all. If you're trying to understand, converse, or collaborate, you need to have some sense of the theological landmarks and boundaries, the buzzwords and shibboleths; you need to know how the same word might mean something slightly different depending on who is saying it. You need to know something of the stories, the varying priorities and values and why they exist. By this you can avoid needless scandal, and express "brotherly charity" (to quote the law again).

So none of this is by way of disparagement. Nor is it naive oversimplification. But just as maps simplify reality to that which helps with navigation, so it is sometimes helpful to try

and locate oneself, and others, on a theological map that is described and shaped by some simple, relevant markers.

It has been common to describe ecclesial markers using words such as “high and low” and “left and right”, forming something of a two-dimensional plane. So-called “liberalism” is on the left, and “conservatism” is on the right. Traditional formality is “high” and informal flexibility is “low.”

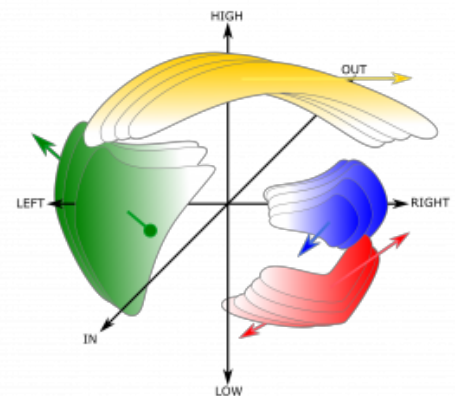


In reality, the church population is scattergraphed all over these spectra. But we can identify some communities within the community, different camps or theological dialects. And so, for instance, we can speak of “Anglo-Catholic” who are “high” and emphasise traditional forms of worship, symbolism, contemplation, mysticism, and organisational integrity. Within this camp the “left” wing might emphasise the symbols-in-themselves, and make use of them as means for social action or radical inclusion; the “right” wing might emphasise the referent of the symbols, and so emphasise the connection with apostolic roots.

Similarly, the “Charismatic” groups emphasise the spontaneous experience of the Holy Spirit in the everyday. They are therefore “low” in their formality and express “leftwards” tendencies as they desire freshness and renewal. The “conservative evangelical” group is closely related, but values theological precision (placing them slightly higher in terms of formality) and adherence to the revelation of Scripture, which is a conservative, rightward, trait. The “left” or “liberal” wing of the church is wide-ranging, but emphasises the general revelation of the social sciences, affirms the multiplicity of different journeys with God, and champions human capacity.

I'm sure that those who identify with any of these communities will find my precis unsatisfactory. That's OK. My point is simply to recognise a simple way of summing up the variances that exist along the whole board of theological subdisciplines: epistemology, soteriology, eschatology, etc. etc. For better or for worse, while not a complete picture, a map like this reflects at least *something* of reality, and might help people to navigate their way through this broadest of landscapes.

Interestingly, though, in recent weeks, **I have found myself wanting to add a third axis.** We might call it an "inwards"/"attractional" and "outwards"/"missional" spectrum.



There are ecclesial movements such as "pioneering" or "fresh-expression" that emphasise getting out of the four walls of the church and focusing on "going" with the gospel into the world. Similarly, you can find elements of the church that have an inward emphasis on the Sunday-to-Sunday rhythm, and bringing people into the building and the organisation.

My small realisation is that this inwards-outwards marker shouldn't simply correlate to positions on the normal axes; that is you can't say that Anglo-Catholics are more outwards focused, and charismatics are more inward focused. Rather the inwards-outwards dynamic variance can be found across the board.

For instance, Anglo-Catholicism can be expressed inwardly, inviting people into a sacred space of holy service.

Conversely, Anglo-Catholicism can be expressed outwardly, taking service, symbols, and sacraments into the

highways and byways, so to speak, and doing so by drawing upon monastic precedents. Charismatics can be inward, drawing upon seeker-sensitive models, managing the church with homogenous units, and providing an appealing, attractive face. They can also easily operate outwards, in modes such as that of the evangelistic street healer, or through models such as missional communities. Liberalism can be expressed inwardly, shaped around intellectual treatise, or outwards in social action. Conservative evangelicals emphasise their pulpit ministry inwardly, but can just as easily commission apologists and planters of new churches.

Having said that, however, I have one concern: a gap in the map perhaps. Because there is a tendency to identify the provocative, edgy, and creative with those parts of the church that are low and left; the ones who are meant to be socially aware, and who give relatively less value to existing structures. But I don't think that's a necessary consequence: There's room on the map for "high and right" pioneering. There are many ways of taking that which is considered "ancient and true" outwards to the world – seeking the touchstones of the gospel in the local culture. The missiological frameworks and traditions exist. There is room for some more imagination on our theological map.

Can Churches Be Too Churchy?

What is a church? I don't mean as a denomination, or as a theological entity. I mean in terms of the *local* church: the St. Somebody's that's in the town, or village, or just down the street. What is it?



It's a place of worship, for sure (one hopes). For many it's where the milestones of life – births, marriages, deaths – are marked and solemnified. And, of course, it's not just a building but a community which provides fellowship, companionship, and belonging.

But all of this only speaks to one aspect of the local church. In technical terms, this is the church as a *modality*: the universal church expressed in a local mode. Each particular geographical place is cared for by one local expression of the one church. It's why we think of "parishes" and why even non-established denominations still have local congregations with the name of the town in their own name.

But there is another aspect of church. In technical terms, it is the church as a *sodality*. This aspect reflects more of the sense of a church as a *movement*. The word itself comes from the latin *sodalis* meaning "comrade" and so portrays a group of people moving with common purpose. When we think of things such as monastic orders and mission agencies we are thinking of sodalities.

There has often been tension between the two: from historic power plays between monasteries and local bishops, through to a local pastor bemoaning yet another appeal for energy and resources from a parachurch organisation.

But my reflection here is about this: **our churches are too churchy.** The *modal* aspect has become the overwhelming characteristic; we need to learn to act more like

sodalities, like *movements*, like purposeful communities.

To be sure, there are many blessings in modal ministry. At its best the church acts truly as the community's chaplain.

It is a steady presence, available in season and out of it.

It is a refuge for people with busy lives. It's a place where the solace of word and sacrament are regularly offered for regular folk. It is a provider of pastoral care, particularly for those who would otherwise be forgotten.

In this, those who serve the church (in everything from flowers to singing) can rightly see themselves as also serving the community in which the church exists.

But the purely modal church has missed something major: the church's task is not simply to serve the world, but also to *change* the world. There have always been those who have caught a vision for some sort of renewed mission, evangelism, or social activism. And many times they have found the local church unwilling or unable to embrace this form of movement, and they have formed a parachurch organisation.

A consequent phenomenon is the "hidden" mission of volunteerism. Christians are by and large excellent volunteers, devoting resources and energy to worthy causes.

They will give time and energy to the church in its modal chaplaincy mode. And they will also give much time and energy to "sodalities": other charities, agencies, and programmes that bless and build the wider community. This is excellent in so many ways! But it does mean that the various forms of activism are *divorced* from church life; they are merely competing opportunities to serve. A volunteer can serve the church, or they can seek to change and bless the world by volunteering with other groups; the two don't go together. I have known a congregation where a significant section of the membership was doing wonderful good works together through another organisation but this common movement was simply not a factor in how they worshipped and shared in fellowship. The church simply did not matter for that part of their lives.

These days it is further amplified. As the church's chaplaincy role in society wanes, so service to the church begins to feel more and more like self-serving. Anecdotally, there is an increasing number of those who are "done" with church. They want to serve the Christian community, but towards an *end*. Without that missional movement, the church seems self-referential. Things like, "we were just playing at church," "we were talking the talk but not walking the walk", "devoted to Sundays and nothing else", "we just never *did* anything", "a nice friendly church that in the end was an inch deep" is the sort of language that gets used. It is usually a justifiable critique.

The reflection is simple: a local church must recapture a sense of "sodality", not content to simply just *be* in the place, but to be an *active movement*. Collectively, a church must be seeking to answer the question of how it is being called to engage, confront, and improve the world. It must therefore not just offer solace, but also good and godly *provocation*. It must be more than a place of solidity, but a generator of *instability*, of discontent with the status quo, providing the tools, language, and opportunities to push ahead down gospel-shaped paths. The church needs to not just be a worthy end of charitable acts (amongst many) but an effective *means* for them. We must be a movement, shedding our churchiness so that we can truly be the church of God.

The Good and the Bad of the Self-Referential Church

In an article on churchleaders.com Thom Schulz talks about the growing numbers of those who are “Done with Church.” His insight is the distinction he makes between this cohort and what we normally mean by the de-churched. These



are not those who have simply drifted away out of boredom or a sense of the church’s irrelevance. They are not consumer-Christians, takers-not-givers, dissatisfied with the product and unwilling to ask-not-what-your-church-can-do-for-you.

Rather, these are active, involved, motivated leaders and contributors who have thrown in the towel when it comes to the church machine. They retain a strong faith, and even a strong call to ministry, but find, for some reason, that their involvement in a church organisation is no longer tenable.

As an employed pastor, whose very livelihood and expertise is dependent upon the organised church, who has invested time, money, health, and youth into the organised church... this is a scary thought. It’s scary for two reasons:

1) What does this say about the the organisation(s) to which Gill and I belong, and depend upon, not only for our bread-and-butter, but also for the way in which we seize the depths of life’s purpose and aspirations? and

2) I often want to join their ranks, for I share much of the disillusion.

The second of these places me at the beginning of my thoughts into the question of what is wrong. The first of these forces us to the heart of the matter.

The question of what is wrong is a problem with two-sides, **the self-referential church:**

Here’s one side of the coin:

You know it when you see it: when the organisation becomes its own ends. There is a caricature: the highly-institutionalised bureaucratic husk in which the performing of sacred rituals is the centre of life. Mission is reduced to the maintenance of those rituals and, apart from acts of service that maintain the necessary infrastructure, only passivity is expected. The time, focus, and energy of individual members, and of the collective as a whole, goes into the maintenance of the organisation's own existence. The self-referential church.

It *is* a caricature of course. While some may readily apply it to churches that are further up the candlestick than most, that is not the marker that I'm using. There are traditional churches who have avoided this plague. And there are many, many evangelical seeker-sensitive churches that have not.

These involve a functionalised "evangelism" aimed at getting bums on seats in order to listen to a weekly monologue and give their tithe. They are served by many hours of volunteers and staff devoted from everything from the building to the entertainment of youth, from the music and sound desk to the morning tea roster, and everything in between and surrounding.

These churches can just as easily fit the caricature.

The self-referential church: when the spiritual journey becomes a sterile lurch from Sunday to Sunday.

No wonder the motivated ones are leaving. These are the ones who have DNA grounded in the stuff of a life-changing gospel.

They often have had experiences in, with, and through the gathered people of God that have been life-changing encounters with their Saviour and Lord. They have gifts that have been tempered through some fire. And they long to be part of God's mission – to build the kingdom, change the world. They invested in the church with this in mind, even as they were aware that it wasn't all glitz and glamour and breakthrough, it was often about serving in season and out of it, and times of self-denial and menial work.

They leave, not because of the type of the labour, but the nature of the seed being planted by the well-oiled machine. When that seed is found to be church-shaped and not Jesus-shaped, well, it's either time to break the machine and fix it, stay in the machine and be broken by it, or leave.

Many leave.

Here's the other side of the coin:

Jesus loves his church. The church is the point, for Jesus is about drawing people to himself and making them a people that reflect his truth and his love.

You should see it when it works! A crisis happens, and the community rallies – people are supported, embraced, loved, helped. A lost person is encountered – and they are welcomed, and fed: supported, and embraced, and loved, and introduced to Jesus who does all that also, but in the deeper parts, as exhorters, intercessors, truth-speakers, carers, and leaders speak life, life and more life. The church must exist, and needs to exist!

It is necessary for a healthy life-giving church to be self-referential in some sense. A healthy community is one in which the members deliberately invest in themselves, who choose to spend time together, who are honest with one another, and seek to fix whatever fractures appear. Mission and church go together: “by this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another...”

I know of a missional community meeting in a large city. A good church community of this sort should have a clearly defined “out” – an outward looking missional activity. They do some of that sort of stuff, but in the main they have realised that a lot of their “in” is also their “out.” In a large city full of disconnected people, their cohesive community, an “extended family” of sorts, speaks of the love and life of Christ and reaches out as much, if not more, than

any outreach program.

It can be a joy for a church to come together weekly, and for people to serve one another in that gathering. Sundays can be a highlight, a time of celebration and thanksgiving; and a true way of being fed and resourced and lifted up for life and the work of life. God bless those that help this weekly machinery turn, to bless their brothers and sisters in this way.

Why would you want to leave?

But they are, and we must get to the heart of the matter:

Two sides of the “self-referential” coin. What is the difference?

It’s not “mission.” The first generation of the “Done with Church” left many years ago. They formed or joined parachurch organisations and mission agencies. They promoted evangelism or social work. And this blesses and has it’s blessing. But “mission” is also its own self-referential coin. The organisation that lurches from outreach program to outreach program fits the problem with it’s “mission” as much as another organisation fits with it’s Sunday formula.

It is partly bureaucracy. Sometimes bureaucracy serves, and sometimes it demands service. The organisation that is unable to reform its bureaucracy and hold it loosely and flexibly ends up conforming reality to its own shape. This almost defines negative self-referentiality, and those leaders who are unable to fix it, flee.

It is partly traditionalism. Sometimes tradition serves, and sometimes it demands service. The organisation that throws out everything disconnects itself from motivational currents and beaches itself. The organisation that clings to all hides in the lee of a self-made rock and goes nowhere. Leaders who look to where the river runs may end up searching for another

boat.

It is most definitely about discipleship. This is the heart of the matter.

Gill and I have been in full-time ministry for 18 years or so now. We've seen some fruit. And very little of it is in the church organisation. Whatever outcomes have existed within the organisation are fleeting – congregations come and go, groups band and disband, structures are built and fall – and this is good, because these outcomes are not “fruit”, they are gardening tools or garden beds that have helped the fruit to grow. They work for a time, and then they wear and have had their day.

No, we have found that the real fruit is in people: Relationships that now transcend continents. Lives that have gone from a broken A to a delightful B in a way that can only be the work of Jesus. Strangers welcomed, and life shared, even if only a little bit. Leaders raised up. Cruel people resisted. Broken people embraced. Authentic community formed, sustained, enjoyed. Family as team, and (in different but related way) team as family.

Church organisations are good at investing in programs: outreach programs, growth programs, educational curricula, administrative efficiencies etc. We have processes and procedures. But these are *nothing* without investment in people, as persons.

You can send someone off for theological education (or bring it to them), but unless you disciple them and walk alongside them you will have, at best, a lonely theological clone; at worst an arrogant know-it-all with knowledge but little of the spirit, correct but rarely right. You can assess someone for ministry, and give them regular reviews; but unless you invest in them, pray with them, mentor them, and walk with them as they seek the path of their obedience to God, all you have

done is make them a cog in the machine, not a member of the body of Christ. You can introduce a new program to church; but unless you raise up the leaders, invest in them, help them to see the vision, seize the reigns, and grow in their own gifting, you will only burn your people out and grow bitterness and dissent. You can teach from the pulpit; but unless you also help people to worship and thirst for the things of God, the best you will do is build your own preaching pedestal and further divide Sunday from Monday in the lives of those that matter.

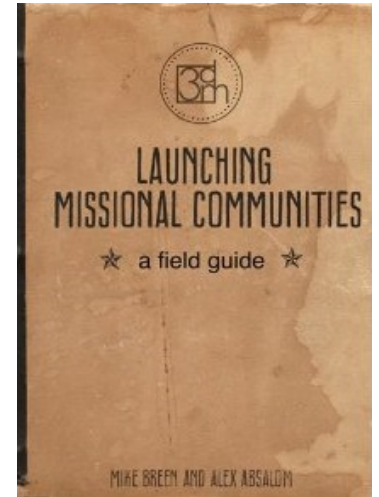
You see, the self-referential church *does* work, but only when it references itself in, with, and through its people. When it references itself by its organisation, or its structure, or any other ecclesial tool, it is fruitless and those who are motivated to see real fruit may, eventually, leave.

It is why we are tempted to join their number. But it is also why we currently stay: while the fruit of God can be found in with and through us in our current context – the real fruit, of God at work in real lives including our own – of investing and being invested in, of forming and being formed.

That's the call of life. That's the purpose. That's the task. Whatever happens next, wherever we find ourselves, we'll *never* be done with that.

Review: Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide

I've finally read this book. Those who know me will wonder why. After all for many years I was the leader of a church plant that had the hallmarks of the "Missional Community" brand. But at that time I hadn't heard of the movement, although it was there amidst that heady mix of the 00's which sparked up buzzwords like Fresh Expressions, Emergent, Emerging, Reformission, and had voices that sounded like Graham Cray, Rob Bell, Mark Driscoll, John Piper, Brian McLaren, and a bunch of others who tapped the Gen X energy as it came of age: as we set our sights, gritted our teeth, and pushed on with our vocation, irrespective of whether the baton had been passed on or not.



And we learned some things. My wife and I certainly did. Although we never got to writing them down. We were (are?) too busy recovering.

But someone else did write them down. And they wrapped them up in a phrase called "Missional Communities" and blew away some of the chaff, and distilled the principles. And this handy little practical book is an excellent summation of it all.

The authors (Mike Breen & Alex Absalom) are clearly trying to avoid our natural tendency to fad-ism. This is the danger of "Missional Communities" – that it becomes a program that is a hit in a few places, helpful in others, and fades quickly away everywhere. Normally the only way to avoid this is steer away from the "how" and stick to articulating the principles. But this is a "field guide" – they have to do both without collapsing the organic heart into some form of methodology. They do a good, but imperfect, job at this.

They do a very good job at articulating some of the **principles** of missional communities. This is the stuff that stirs my

heart.

- The term “Missional Community” encapsulates “mid-sized communities, led by laity, [which] are ‘lightweight and low maintenance’, and most often gather formally and informally numerous times a month in the groups’ missional context.” (p18, see also p 124). More importantly, it is this form of organic community that is most readily effective at growing the kingdom, particularly in the Western World. It is *small enough care, large enough to dare*.
- MC’s are organic and seek to tap into a “welling up” of a mutual passion. But they remain deliberate, and holistically led. They do this within and through a culture of *discipleship*. This is the muscles of church leadership that is often ignored in favour of the administrative “bones” – leaving heavy carcasses that cannot move. The “huddle” model of discipleship (I hate the term, but like the concept) incorporates both horizontal (peer) and vertical forms of discipleship. The culture of “low control, high accountability” is *essential*, particularly in church systems which have become dominated by the line-management corporate-space idols of the last century. Even the corporate sector is moving away from this, and the church remains stuck. The authors quote from a Harvard Business Review article:

‘We have found that contrary to what many CEOs assume, leadership is not really about delegating tasks and monitoring results; it is about imbuing the entire workforce with a sense of responsibility for the business.’ They [the HBR authors] call this mutualism, whereby staff are measured against qualitative values such as trust, responsibility, and innovation. (p 55)

- MC’s both express and encourage a cultural shift from static programs to dynamic mission. Programs, demographics, models, professionalism, and decision-making processes remain important. But such things

become self-referential and stultifying. Enlivening happens, rather, in transitioning processes, discernment, on-the-ground context awareness, passion and discipleship (see p26). Such enlivening is naturally holistic and therefore naturally breaks down the secular/sacred divide and other curses of the Western church.

- MC's do not replace the "wider" church but are a natural structure within it, and a deliberative structure that can be embraced. It embraces a "space" (p 42ff) that has, historically, been absent from the church – that of the size of an "extended family." The church has operated in the "public space," and since the advent of small group ministry, the "personal space" – it thus expresses "corporate" and "individual." But it has ignored the "social space" – what Breen and Absalom call the *oikos* (household – p33) space – the "community" space which naturally connotes a longing for "belonging" in the Western world.
- The *outward* movement of MC's relies on discernment and discipleship before it relies on strategy and management. Absalom and Breen make reference to "Persons of Peace" (p 38) as the hub of their mission dynamic. This relies on the Holy Spirit to bring about the natural connection points where the gospel will find traction. MC leaders are discipled as they are encouraged to exercise this discernment. It is naturally "organic" and:

the church grows best through natural organic relationships, rather than through institutional structures. The invigorating part of the Person of Peace strategy is that it stops mission being yet another thing to cram into our busy lives. (p 39)

There are many chunks of wisdom throughout the book. Many of these articulate some of the things that have been unearthed

in my own practical experience. e.g. The “out” of mission builds community and grows the church – “There is nothing like shared battle stories (and battle scars!) to enhance a community’s sense of togetherness, so the very action of going out in mission strengthens the group’s life with one another” (p 32). The practicalities articulated in the latter are the same – how to exercise a teaching ministry in such a context, the role of children at the missional front, venues for meeting, smaller groups within the larger group, the manner of exercising pastoral and practical care: these are questions that we have had to wrestle with over the years and have arrived at similar conclusions.

While many of the points in the book were articulations that expressed something I already knew (even if I hadn’t articulated it yet), I was still extended. The chapter on “spaces” (p42) has some good things to explore for teasing through what the role of the “Sunday” church is and how the organic messiness of MC’s can still be made coherent and coordinated. Breen and Absalom talk about “minster” models and I particularly appreciate the recognition of the celebratory (worship) and commissioning/apostolic role of the centre.

There are parts of the book that don’t resonate with me. I am not convinced by their launch strategy of pilot MC followed by “launch Sunday” and the implied wholesale of converting an entire church to participation in MC’s. Perhaps the quote from Machiavelli (p 78) warned me off! For me their launch strategy cuts across the “welling up” “organic” nature that is the life of the whole thing. I think it would be better to start with discipleship – that is, begin by discipling the leaders of “MC” size groups that already exist, or of leaders that have a passion for an outward mission that has some legs, and encourage, train and release them. This “infection” method of cultural change is in my experience much more effective, reduces unnecessary risk of disillusionment, and

avoids the fad-ism.

Similarly, the “Growing your MC” section (p109) seems to speak more to the tools of the trade than to the heart of the matter. The variation of the Engel’s scale that is employed leans more towards those on the fringe (and the People of Peace) being treated as targets in themselves, rather than objects of genuine love. Like other tools (e.g. Bolt’s *Mission-Minded*) there is no natural space for worship and communal adoration and runs the risk of making the mission of the Missional Community overly-utilitarian in nature.

The whole thing still excites me though. This vision of how the church can be still gets a “Yes and Amen” from my slightly less youthful lungs. And the various forms of ecclesial inertia that frustrate this vision now sadden me more than frustrate me. The long goodbye of the non-missional church is almost upon us. We will grieve and bury our parents, and help to launch our children. And Christ will be known in our season.