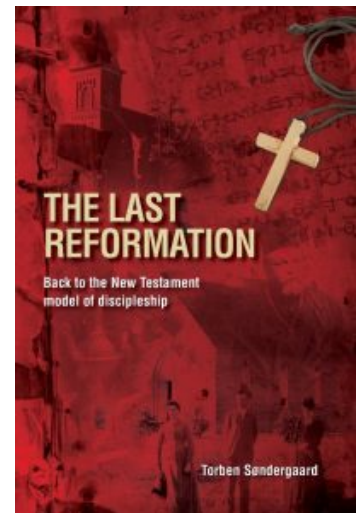


Review: The Last Reformation – Back to the New Testament Model of Discipleship

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.

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.