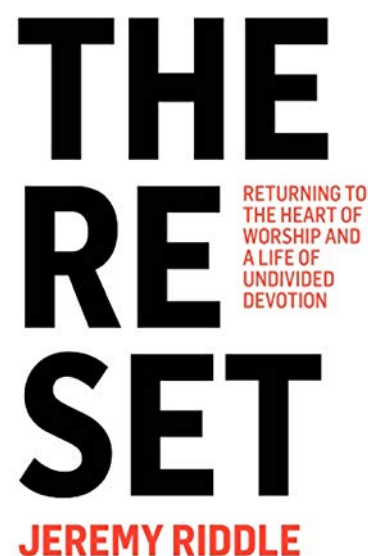


Review: The Reset – Returning to the Heart of Worship and a Life of Undivided Devotion

The deconstruction is real. The pandemic season is lingering and the waves of its wake are more disruptive, more disturbing, more confusing than the sudden crisis with which it struck.



It's real everywhere. It is, certainly, in the church. Now is the time when things are being questioned. Now is the time of being undone.

We used to have forms and structures and predictable routines; we could hide in them and deflect away those deeper things we feared to face. Perhaps we imagined easing back into comfortable unchallenging modes of common life. But covid has ripped the covers off of us, and the substance, or otherwise, of our exposed core cannot be unseen. It *moves us*, it *frightens us*, it *shakes us*. Is it any surprise that even the biggest American denominations are being rocked and refined by scandal after scandal. It's in the UK too. Covid was not a *crisis* for the church, it has been a *catalyst*; the crisis is coming. Are we ready?

Jeremy Riddle is a world famous worship leader, currently on the team at Vineyard Anaheim in California, and formerly of

Bethel. You *will* have heard his music. There might perhaps be one higher level in the pantheon of professional praisers (the Order of St. Tomlin perhaps?) but he's up there at the pinnacle of the religio-industrial complex. Wonderfully, beautifully, and above all *Christianly*, he's questioning it all.

I'm writing this book in the midst of a global pandemic that has shut down church services, programs, conferences, and Christian events of almost every kind. This is a moment of reset (Page 119)

The book isn't long. It isn't actually all that insightful, in the sense of saying something new. For instance, we've all known for some time that there is something "off" in the industry of Christian worship. It's refreshing to have it explicated from someone in the know. "The model [of the "Christian" music industry"] may still be useful to Christian music artists and bands," he says (page 88), "but apart from a deep work of repentance and reformation, I don't believe this industry is fit to carry and release the new sound of worship God is about to pour out." Later, he writes about the "lack of kingdom ethics and practice", "secular leadership", and the lack of witness and accountability within the supplier space of the Christian market. He looks for reformation with regard to event management, stage production, performance drive, social media, and influence. They are important critiques, and this isn't merely a tearing-down whinge; it's the launching place for a positive vision (more on that in a minute). And he shows his working.

Chapter by chapter he reveals his heart that we might "cease playing Christian music games" (Introduction). He reveals (Chapter 1) his perspective on the recent history of Christian music, and the "worship movements" which have dominated the charismatic world; he wants to reclaim something of the purer creativity that was there at the beginning of the charismatic

renewal. I know what he means; I still separate the charismatic world into “old-school” Spirit-driven wing-and-a-prayer crazy-but-faithful, and the stage-managed program-driven risk-averse-consumerism dominant variant. He lays the foundation:

Worship is the sound of a covenantal people; a people betrothed to Jesus. It is the sound of their love, adoration, and zealous devotion to the only One found worthy! (Page 8)

He appeals for a greater purity (Chapter 2) that opposes idolatry, particularly that of *popularity*. He imagines worship that sounds a lot like **discipleship** – costly, eternally-minded, driven by love, and built on our weakness and the gift of life’s pains in which we have nothing left but a life of faith. He wants to get our eyes off of our ourselves and onto Jesus (Chapter 3) and so be marked for a zeal for reform, beginning in the “internal temple” of our own hearts (page 37). Indeed, the shape of what it takes to become “wholehearted” (Chapter 4), is to embrace “*our death*” (page 41), the cruciform road of a life surrendered to God. This is the heart of worship, informed by the “joy set before” us (page 50).

If the call doesn’t require you to lay your life down, it’s less than the call of Jesus. If the call doesn’t cost you everything you have to obtain it, it’s less than the call of the gospel. (Page 47)

It was at this point, that my reading become less academic and more soul-searching. His deconstruction resonates with my own. In his chapter on “dreams” (Chapter 5), my own heart ached. I know what it’s like to dream youthful dreams, and launch forward with missional zeal. I also know what it’s like for my dreams to be my idols that were “keeping me from surrender” (page 53). But without dreams, the joy of the Lord is elusive. The chapter explicates the problem, and it took

the rest of the book for that tension to resolve. Chapter 6 ("Born of the Spirit") begins to prod at that path. "The presence is a person", he says (page 64), and this is the beginning of the touchpoint for me. Here's **something I've learned from my own deconstruction: I miss Jesus.**

I've got a pretty good handle of the *doctrine* of Jesus. That is necessary and good, and I appreciated how Riddle asserts the place of Biblical truth (Chapter 7). But, (to quote him quoting J I Packer), the goal of theology is *doxology* (page 77), and *that's* what I miss. In my youthful zeal, I was David dancing before the ark. In the desert of my undoing, I am Elijah in a cave of depression, missing the still small voice. I have struggled to yield to the Word of God, not because I despise it, but because, like Jeremiah, I don't want it to burn in my bones with nowhere to go. We often sit in silence, my Lord and I, and he is more patient than me.

I think, this is where I'm at in my deconstruction: I am learning to speak. Not the preaching, praying, performing type of talk, rather I am learning to talk to Jesus again. He is present as a person, you see. I am learning to trust. I am no passivist, but I cannot generate the Kingdom of God. I cannot even build it. My agency is not my own, it is his, and all I can do is be used each day. I've spent too many years hiding in the striving, or curled up in a wearied whirl. Now it is time to simply be, *with him*, content to know and be known by him. I *miss* it, because I know it from my childlike youth. I want to *discover it*, because I've never been here before.

So come on, Jeremy Riddle! Tell me about "mothers and fathers of worship who have allowed their voices to be silenced, quieted and tamed" for whom "the pain of life, disappointment, personal failure and misunderstanding have taken the wind out of your sails" (page 119). There is prophetic truth in your words about old flames burning in our latter years, hungry for true, deep, yielding, cruciform, intimate, worship. This shakes and wakes my heart.

Here is a picture of “the future” (Chapter 10). We have encountered a similar vision in a number of places; it’s not about a particular plan or movement, but a bringing together:

Here is what I desire to see: I desire to see the worship movement marry the prayer movement and the missions movement. I firmly believe that if worship is re-anchored in ministry to the Lord and ministry to the world, it will explode with fresh life, creativity and power. (Page 111)

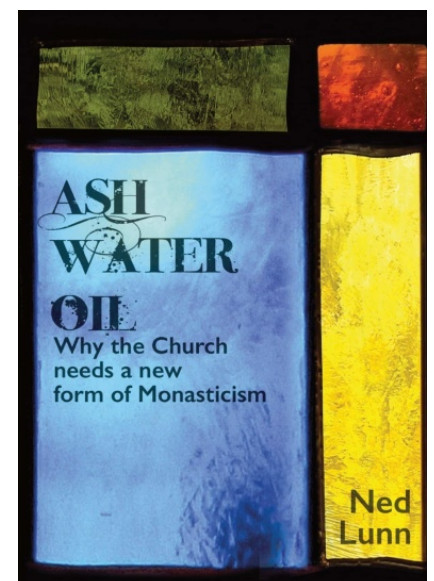
Time and time again, at the moment, we find a visceral reaction against “going back to the ways things were.” No one has the passion to *merely* put back the forms of church. Rather, we are hearing language of *integration* at every level. At the structural level it’s there – a push back at specialisations and homogenous units (imagine worshippers and evangelists and prophets and pastors together in community!). And it’s there in a desire to integrate worship life and work life and home life and inner life. There’s a yearning to live out of rhythms of grace in a Kingdom that is not just for Sunday mornings, but breakfast tables, and conversations in the park, and for when life sucks. At the same time as churches are starting to count how many are “coming back”, dispersed monastic communities like the Order of the Mustard Seed are facing surges of interest. In fact, they put out a podcast this year on “apostomonasticism.” It captures a similar vision to Riddle’s.

In the end, though, it’s a challenge. It challenges me personally. This book imagines “a new expression of an ancient kind of worship leader... leaders whose lives of devotion are once again rooted in the rhythms of prayer and the mission of Jesus” (page 112). I yearn for this, I *aspire* to it. And here’s the rub: It can’t be striven for, not by myself. It challenges us leaders because it gets to the heart of it all, the necessary “mark of intimacy” (page 114). I miss Jesus. I need to talk to him again.

As covid begins to wane, the real crisis is appearing. For us leaders it will be a new set of expectations, perhaps some pressure to perform in some wonderfully Christian, churchy way. It's easy to cry "let's get back into it." My self-exhortation is to only have one primary pursuit: prayer first, intimacy with Jesus first, to be the sheep that knows the shepherd's voice. It feels like we're starting from scratch, but that's ok. This is a waking-up season, an open-the-door-after-the-storm season, a sort-through-the-rubble season. It's a stripped-back-to-the-only-one-who-is-truly-real season. It's the season to sit at his feet. We are in a grace-filled reset.

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

I think I agree. In the pandemic lockdown, much of the parochial responsibilities were suspended, and we could operate more monastically. Now we are coming back out, the creative collisions resurface. An Anglican parish, as an *ecclesiastical* unit, is barely fit for purpose as an expression of *ecclesiological* reality. Yet it can, I think, offer a place of harmony: A village around the monastery, the community around the community, intertwined, served and blessed.

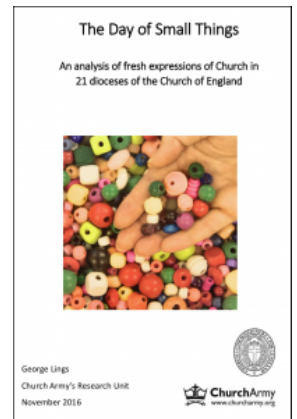
The collisions will continue. But so will the creativity.

Review: The Day of Small Things – An Analysis of Fresh

Expressions of Church...

If there was any sense in which we were once starry-eyed about the Church of England it had something to do with what we now call “fresh expressions of Church.” Gill and I were church planters once, inspired by the *Mission Shaped Church* report and the growing call for a “mixed economy church.” The Church of England was, from an outside perspective, a place where missiology could be lively, and the ecclesial machinery would even appoint a bishop to lead a Fresh Expressions team.

The Day of Small Things is a recent report from the Church Army's Research Unit. It's a statistical analysis of fresh expressions (they abbreviate to “fxC”). It considers their number, their size and shape, and the manners and means of their missional and ecclesial effectiveness. It draws on over two decades of data; it is thorough and informative.



It is an encouraging picture in many ways. The crucial role of fresh expressions in the Church of England is revealed.

They may not be definitive metrics, but headline numbers such as 15% of church communities being fxC attended by 6% of the C of E populace show that the effect has been far from negligible (page 10, Executive Summary). It also indicates that much more can be done.

Between January 2012 and May 2016, Church Army's Research Unit examined fxC across south and central England, with the backing of the Church Commissioners. All the fxC examined were established between 1992 and 2014. Here are some interesting facts that have emerged from the findings:

FxC's impact on community and church life:

- Over **50,600** people are attending fxC across the 21 dioceses surveyed.
- There are **four times** as many fxC starting up now compared to a decade ago.



Who are the leaders?

- The so-called lay-leaders make up more than **36%** of the existing fxC leadership.
- The fxC are as likely to be led by women (**49.5%**) as men (**50.5%**).



Who attends fxC?



- The leaders of the fxC reported that their attenders are made up of **40%** Christians, **27%** de-churched and **33%** non-churched.
- They attract double the number of under-16s (**38%**) compared to parish churches (**19%**).
- Most types of fxC get-togethers are relatively small, with 35-55 members.
- FxC have a strong presence on some of the poorer housing estates.

Food for thought:

- Over **80%** of fxC are taking some steps to grow disciples, not just attract attenders.
- They are vulnerable because only **10.8%** of fxC have any legal status within the Church of England.
- Half of the fxC surveyed have remained the same size, **28%** continue to grow, **17%** of them experienced growth but are now shrinking, while **11%** have died all together.



To read the full report, a summary of the main findings and to watch a video on this topic, visit www.churcharmy.org/fxCresearch

There is no need to summarise all the detail of the report here. It's impossible to do it justice in a blog post. Church Army have, themselves, put together some excellent resources, even producing a lovely infographic (see to the side). I do, however, want to record my own observations, highlighting some of the aspects that are close to my heart and our experience:

#1 – This report helps us understand what a fresh expression actually is. On the ground, this has both a positive and a negative component.

From the **negative** side, I note with a growing cynicism the propensity for churches, even if well-intentioned, to borrow

“off-the-shelf” language and so avoid some of the deeper challenges of mission activity. The survey invited responses from dioceses regarding activity that was classified as fresh expression and more than 40% of these activities simply had to be excluded as not only being “not an fxC” but not even readily identifiable as an “outreach project” (Section 12.10, pages 202-204).

Clearly there is confusion about the term “fresh expression”, and the excluded activities are not without value. But I share these sentiments:

We detect a disturbing tendency for increased use of any new label that becomes popular to be in inverse proportion to accurate understanding of its meaning. The same could be said for the use of the word ‘mission’ in parish and diocesan literature. It is almost now there by default, and as has been said: ‘when everything is mission, nothing is’. (Page 204)

This tendency is disturbing. In our experience, we have seen those with a heart for mission be led up the garden path towards projects and positions that were only whitewashed as such. We have seen those who would otherwise be fully on board with a fresh expression baulking at the idea because of a previous negative or insipid encounter with a project that wore the name only as a brand. Experiences such as these are damaging and stultifying.

The report, however, brings a **positive** initiative. In pursuing the complex and difficult work of classification of an entire ecosystem of missional activity we are given clarity. That clarity is not simply technical, narrowly encapsulating branded programs, but reveals, in both breadth and depth, the essence of what fresh expressions

What is an Anglican fresh expression of Church? – Tim Chester

The Church of England's mission & evangelism department has published a fresh expressions survey report. The report is available in full on the website of the mission & evangelism department.

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are seeking to be. The discussion in section 2.4 and further development in 12.10 is worthwhile reading.

The **ten indicators of a fresh expression** that are used as criteria for inclusion in the survey are of great value. They draw upon classifications in *Mission Shaped Church* and are simple observable ways of ensuring that we are talking about groups that are *missional* ("intends to work with non-churchgoers"), *contextual* ("seeks to fit the context"), *formational* ("aims to form disciples"), and *ecclesial* ("intends to become church"). Church Army have a single-page summary of the ten indicators, but a summary is worth reiterating here:

1. Is this a **new and further group**, which is **Christian and communal**, rather than an existing group...
2. Has the starting group tried to **engage with non-church goers**?... understand a culture and context and adapt to fit it, not make the local/indigenous people change and adapt to fit into an existing church context.
3. Does the community meet **at least once a month**?
4. Does it have a **name** that helps give it an identity?...
5. Is there **intention to be Church**? This could be the intention from the start, or by a discovery on the way...
6. Is it **Anglican** or an Ecumenical project which includes an **Anglican partner**?...
7. Is there some form of **leadership** recognised by those within the community and by those outside of it?
8. Do at least the majority of members... see it as **their major expression** of being church?
9. Are there **aspirations for the four creedal 'marks' of church, or ecclesial relationships**: 'up/holy, in/one, out/apostolic, of/catholic'?...
10. Is there the **intention to become '3-self'** (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing)?...

(Page 18)

A personal impact for me from this is a re-evaluation of *Messy Church*. I have only seen Messy Church run as an outreach project at best, often merely as an in-house playgroup. The fact that so many of the included fxC's (close to 33%, Table 11, Page 41) were denoted as Messy Church has made me ponder them anew, especially with regards to criteria 5 to 10.

#2 – The diversity of leadership raises provocative questions. But one of the most crucial questions is absent.

Section 6.13 and Chapter 10 give the data on the forms of fxC leadership, looking at details such as gender, remuneration, time commitment, and training received. Much is as expected. For instance, male, ordained, stipended leaders predominate in traditional church plants; female, lay, volunteer leaders predominate in child-focussed fxC such as Messy Church (Table 53, page 106 and Table 74, page 176).

The report does well to highlight (in Chapter 11) the phenomenon of the so-called “lay-lay” leader who “has no centralised formal training, or official authorisation” (page 181). A leadership cohort has manifest without a clear reference to the institutional centre. I wonder how much this is a “because of” or an “in spite of” phenomenon: has the centre created space, or has it simply become ignorable? There is a gentle provocation for the institution in this:

Writers in the field of fxC have urged that the size of the mission task facing the Church of England will require many lay leaders and this is evidence that it is already occurring. The wider Church may need the difficult combination of humility to learn from them, as well as wisdom to give the kind of support, training and recognition that does not lead to any unintended emasculation of their essential contribution. (Page 189)

I note with interest that the correlation of lay-lay leadership with cluster-based churches (Chart 39, page 184)

and its association with discipleship (page 187) demonstrates the crucial role of missional communities (as they are properly understood) in the development of fxC and the Church more widely.

A striking and concerning part of the data is the relative diminution of Ordained Pioneer Ministers (OPMs) with only 2.7% of fxC leaders (Table 76, page 177) being classified as such. In the seminal period of the early 2000's, OPMS were seen as a key innovation for mission development, a long-needed break away from classical clerical formation that was perceived to produce ecclesial clones emptied of their vocational zeal and disconnected from the place and people to which they were called. Anecdotally, our experience is that missional illiteracy is dismally high amongst the current cohort of ordained persons. The traditional academy can do many good things, but the action-reflection-based contextualised formation of OPM more readily leads to the deeper personal maturation upon which adaptive leadership rests.

The absent question in the data on leadership is this: **there is no recognition of couples in leadership.** This is a dismaying oversight. The number of clergy couples would, I suspect, be a growing phenomenon. Similarly, in our experience, much innovative practice (particularly forms of ministry where the home or household is a key component) is led by lay couples. The Church in general, and the Anglican variant in particular, is all but inept when it comes to adequately recognising and supporting couples who lead together. It would seem to me that fxC would be the best place to explore and experiment with what this might look like. To have no relevant data, therefore, is a significant oversight. This is a topic on which I will be writing more.

#3 – Ongoing structural concerns are indicated. Structurally, fxC remain at the periphery. Moreover, while the contribution of fxC *in themselves* can be measured as independent units, more work needs to be done to see fxC as an integral part of

the system.

The headline statistic in this regard is that 87.7% of fxC have no legal identity (Table 91, page 206). The report does well to reflect on how this increases the insecurity of the “continued existence” of an fxC. A more general point illustrates the key concern:

An analogy, designed to provoke further discussion, is that many fxC are in effect treated like immigrants doing good work, who have not yet been given the right to remain, let alone acquired British citizenship. There is active debate about whether they are to be regarded as churches or not but little to nothing is said about giving them rights and legal identity within the Anglican family, unless they can become indistinguishable from existing churches, a move which would remove their raison d’etre... We recommend that this present imbalance of so many fxC having no legal status, and thus no right to remain or not working representation, be addressed. (Page 206)

It has been an aspect of our experience that much is demanded of fxC – Success! True Anglican identity! Numbers! Money! – in order to perpetually justify institutional existence. It’s a rigged game. Existing forms of church happily, and without comment or query, lean upon legal standing, guaranteed livings, central administrative support, legacy bequests, and even the provision of curates/trainees. It has a propensity to keep them missionally infantile. Yet, without this support, are fxC unfairly expected to run before they can even crawl?

I think of the concerning admission that in some cases “numbers of fxC attenders were deliberately not reported in order to avoid parish share, on grounds that these early attenders do not yet make a financial contribution” (page 49).

Even metrics like “attendance” presuppose a structural shape that may not apply, “not counting a wider fringe” (page 57)

and unfairly diminishing the value of fxC.

Perhaps the report's suggestion that a "control group of existing parishes" (page 215) be included in subsequent reports, would go some way to balancing the picture. Such a control group would at least allow a comparison. What would be even more valuable would be a way to assess *integration*, i.e. to consider fxC as part of a system. Two particular aspects of this that are worthy of further consideration are:

1) The nature and need of so-called "authority dissenters."

The report recognises the importance of the diocese within the ecclesial system (page 62). It also points out that "local visions for growth have always been more common than a diocesan initiative, welcome though the latter is" (page 192, emphasis mine). An "authority dissenter" is a person or office that covers and connects new initiatives into the system.

Does the high level of "localness" indicate that such provision is not needed, or that it has not been forthcoming? I suspect the latter.

I have a growing sense that the *deanery* is the ecclesial unit that can most readily provide a covering. Chart 46 (page 194) demonstrates at least some sense of this: Current fxC that are not "in benefice" or "in parish" are far more likely to be "within deanery." The "cluster church" fxC type intrigues me the most – 41% of these are classified as "within deanery."

Deaneries are peculiar ecclesial creatures. When they work, they work. But they generally have limited authority, overstretched leadership, and few resources – almost the exact opposite of the three-self maturity they might want to foment!

Yet they are uniquely and strategically placed between the local and the large to nurture fxC and to protect them from diminution from both above and below as we learn to "think both culturally and by area" (page 96). An exploration of how Deaneries have fitted (or could fit) into the fxC picture would be helpful.

2) The impact on sending and surrounding churches. The report does well to distinguish between the sending team, and the participation of non-churched, de-churched, and churched cohorts. A more detailed picture would be helpful in a number of ways.

Firstly, it would help inform those who are considering being a “sending church.” The cost of an fxC in terms of financial and human resources can often be readily counted. It would also be good to know how to look for benefits, and not just in terms of the kingdom contribution of the fxC itself (i.e. it’s own sense of hoped-for “success”). A sending church is also changed in its act of sending. From a stimulus to looking “outside of ourselves” through to being able to learn from the fxC as a valued “research and development” opportunity, it would good to be able to describe and measure the sorts of blessings that attend to those who generously produce the fxC.

Secondly, it would help inform those who are wary of new kids on the block, so to speak. A typical fear is that an fxC would “steal sheep” away from existing structures, and the zero-sum calculations are made. What data exists that might address these fears? Do fxC have impacts, negative or positive, on existing surrounding ministries? What mechanisms best work to allow mutual flourishing to occur?

Finally, discipleship is key. And some personal thoughts.

The correlation of fxC mortality with “making no steps” in the direction of discipleship (page 208) is well made. The “ecclesial lesson” (page 214) is a clear imperative: “start with discipleship in mind, not just attendance... it should be intentional and relational.” It seems Mike Breen’s adage has significant veracity: “If you make disciples you will always get the church but if you try to build the church you will rarely get disciples.”

To conclude my thoughts, though, it is worth considering **New**

Monasticism. It's a new movement that the report has only just begun to incorporate. "Their focus is on sustaining intentional community, patterns of prayer, hospitality and engaging with mission" (page 222). But here's the interesting part:

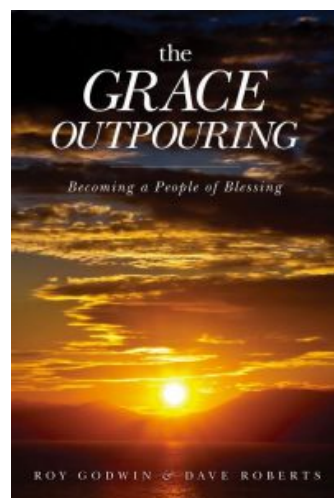
More often the instincts for this [new monasticism] are combined into another type of fxC, rather than existing on its own. (Page 222)

I note with interest that the type of fxC with the largest proportion of leaders that had had *prior experience with fresh expressions* is the New Monastic Community (48% – Table 70, Page 166). This intrigues me. As Gill and I continue to have conversations about pioneering and fresh expressions, the longings and callings that we discover in ourselves and in those we converse with, invariably sound like new monastic characteristics. Watch this space.

Review: The Grace Outpouring

This book comes from Welsh retreat centre Ffald-y-brenin, but that place, and author, Roy Godwin, are not the point.

Here's something from the book, in Roy's words, that gets to the heart of the real issue for me:



A number of years ago I felt a cry rising up in my inmost

being – “There has to be more than this.” As I remembered my dreams of what living as a child of God would be like, there was that cry again. There has to be more than this. I was stirred by memories of great days in the past when God had seemed so close, but that’s where they were – in the past. Oh God, there must be more than this.

Looking at church initiated the same cry. *There is so much good, so many signs of blessing in many local churches and fellowships, but looking more broadly at the national scene raised the question “Is this really all that the Father has in mind for the bride of his Son?” (pp180-181, emphasis mine)*

This book taps into a divine sense of dissatisfaction. I don’t think it’s unique to our time and place; I see it echoed in the lives of many Christian saints, both historical and contemporary. It’s a dissatisfaction that is eschatological in nature (*Romans 8:22-23*) and speaks to the sense that until our Lord returns there is still more gospel work to be done. The Great Commission to go and make disciples remains in place.

In our experience, Gill and I have encountered people and places that are entirely satisfied with the status quo. Any dissatisfaction is a commiseration about the good old days rather than a cry for more. This is a dry place to be.

But for those who are dissatisfied the next question, of course is “What do we do with it?” How do we act on it? We have seen a variety of responses. All are well-intentioned, but some are problematic. The essence of the problem is this tension: in order to get good things done we take control, but nothing will satisfy if we do it in with and for ourselves.

We’ve seen it in mission agencies where the dissatisfaction leads to impatience, lack of care, vision without process, and ineffectiveness. We’ve seen it in congregations where that dissatisfaction turns into yet another program which is an

attempt to scratch the itch so as to return to comfort, or prove worth, or not seem lazy, or simply “do what good churches should do.” We’ve both been driven in these sort of ways. It’s a frustrating place to be.

There’s a difficult tension at the heart of an effective ecclesial spirituality – to be dissatisfied, stirred, motivated, urgent, expectant; and let God be God and *build through us*, not in spite of us. It isn’t quietist or passive – things get still get done. But it *is* built upon a foundation of prayer, and being attentive to God’s Word and the providential promptings of His Spirit.

The Grace Outpouring hits us at the sweet spot of that tension. It promotes the dissatisfaction, it stirs us to action, and so it pivots us to turn to prayer, expectant prayer.

Roy, and co-writer Dave Roberts, do this simply by sharing the story of Ffald-y-brenin. Yes there’s some explanation and some reasonable theologising and all the other things that get a point across, but in the end they just want to share what God has been doing. Dave writes in his foreword:

...as people who model our lives on a storyteller, we’re best advised to do as he did and tell the stories of what God has done. So we invite you to join us as this story unfolds. We’ll draw out principles and go to the root sources in Scripture, but we hope that what you read will help paint pictures on the canvas of your imagination that will allow you to be provoked by the Holy Spirit to prayer, compassion, and a mind-set that desires to bless others. (p14)

I can’t do justice to the story here, but it truly does creatively provoke.

Along the way we do encounter some of the definitive Ffald-y-brenin experiences. To consider two of them:

Blessing: In the story Roy shares how his was initially an “accidental” tradition – to speak a blessing over all those who come to Ffald-y-brenin. To be a recipient of it is profound. Gill and I experienced this first-hand when we travelled to the centre a few weeks ago; tired and exhausted from a long day of travel and some of the complexities and perplexities of life we were shown to our room, and then to the chapel, where life-giving utterly-relevant personal words were spoken over us in Christ’s name. I hadn’t read the book before we went; I wasn’t expecting it! It set us on course for a deep and meaningful time with God.

We don’t always know what to do with “blessing.” In some popular thinking blessings are almost like magic, talismanic words; this is usually unhelpful, and inhibits access to the gospel. For others, “blessing” is simply an indistinct form of prayer. Roy is right when he distinguishes blessing from intercession; as he points out to offer a blessing in Christ’s name is a bold, daring, and necessarily humble action of someone who takes seriously the priesthood of believers and the ambassadorial nature of the Christian vocation, and seeks to exercise it with generous care. It may not be a rigorous theological treatise, but I admire the thoughtfulness:

We’re invoking the very character of God himself into the lives of those we pray for. They’re getting a foretaste of being adopted into God’s family. We’re opening a door for them to glimpse something of the kingdom of God. God is saying, “I’m going to bless you with everything I’ve blessed my children with.” (p36)

There is something right and properly kerygmatic in turning our holy dissatisfaction into words of blessing, to articulate, to *proclaim* the creative life-giving heart of our Lord and Saviour specifically, personally, and locally.

House of Prayer / New Monasticism: In the story a Welsh

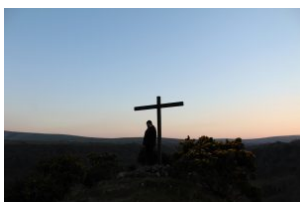
Christian retreat centre becomes a “House of Prayer” and Roy expands and expounds this by referring not only to the daily rhythm of prayer that is exercised at the centre, but also to the outward-looking movements that are as near as hospitality and acts of service, as far as intercessions for nations and global movements, and as deep as the revivals of the Celtic and modern Welsh church. I reflected earlier about how this compares to our English context.

Gill and I have brought the daily rhythm of prayer into our home and are seeking to share it in some form with our church.

The daily reminder, using words of Scripture to cause us to bring to mind the characteristics and promises of a faithful God, has blessed us. We have somewhere to give that holy dissatisfaction a proper beginning, a turning to God, a daily repentance, a discipline of intercession and expectation.

Towards the end of the book Roy connects the dots with the amorphous movement that is becoming known as the “New Monasticism.” It has deep and ancient roots of course. In current manifestations it invokes simplicity, purity and accountability in ways that express the holy dissatisfaction in profoundly counter-cultural ways. They are ways that tear down middle class idols.

...Local House of Prayer involves sacrifice, just as it did in the Old Testament times. Among our offerings we will bring our worship (not necessarily singing) and the spirit of the community around us. We will need to set aside our rights, judgmental attitudes, pride, and self-righteousness. We will lay down our bodies and our patterns of thinking as living sacrifices for God’s glory and his purposes. (pp167-168)



After returning from our recent visit to Ffald-y-brenin, Gill and I have been pondering these things. What I have read of here, and what we have encountered has informed our

dissatisfaction. It has renewed our passion for God's Word and Spirit, and a determination to rely on him, rather than to burn-out in our own strength.

These things have been stimulated by our visit, and we will return. But it's not about the place, or the person. It's about doing the hard yards of following God. Of seeking him in the dissatisfaction, not collapsing it, not running away from it, but facing the pain and patience of it, and actively pursuing his way; so that at the end of it all he is glorified as God's people are blessed to be a blessing.