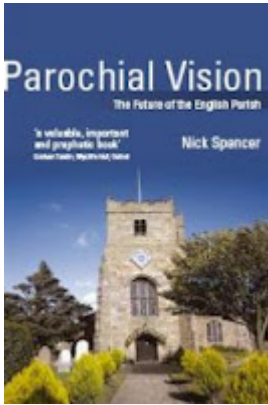


Review: Parochial Vision



I had heard of Nick Spencer's *Parochial Vision* because it has come up as an input into the strategic plan for the Diocese of Tasmania. One of the aspects of the plan is the exploration of a so-called "Hub" model and other ways of reenvisioning Anglican structures for doing ministry in this state. The plan has drawn support from Spencer's key purpose of reappropriating the historic "minster" model.

"This book is a contribution... It looks at the parish system that has dominated the English landscape for a thousand years and proposes a new approach based on the system out of which parish churches grew." (Pages xii-xiii)

There is a deep exploration to this purpose. Unlike other books I have read recently Spencer gives a thoroughly enjoyable and graspable insight into English church history. This made the book an excellent take-with-me-on-planes-and-trains book for my travels last week.

The first two chapters give an excellent overview of the rise of the parish model – essentially a model for ministry shaped around dividing a region into smaller and smaller heavily demarcated areas in which an individual minister has the so-called cure of souls.

In this overview Spencer has a rhetorical intent and he presents some of the perhaps-less-than-honourable reasons for the genesis of the parish model with its benefices and rights of tithe etc. He makes comparison with methodist and non-conformist post-reformation models and so demonstrate the inherent flaws in the parish model. This leads into the consideration of the industrial and post-industrial eras in the second chapter that leaves us seeing the cracks in the

edifice held together only by the fact of the English church's establishment.

"At the turn of the twenty-first, the Church matters less in people's lives than it has done at any time over the past 1,000 years. Most people neither know nor care which parish they are resident in... For 500 years, the parish had been a natural community in rural areas. It may have originally been a secular unit, it may have evolved in the most ad hoc manner, there may have been a multitude of stresses and strains that twisted and tweaked the structures here and there, but the power of authority kept it in place..."

"The deep roots that have kept the parish structure alive for so much longer than might have been predicted a century ago are also the reason why, ultimately, it cannot survive."
(Pages 56-58)

Spencer suggests the *minster model* as a solution. In pre-modern pre-Parish times, within the celtic foundations of the English Church, these were "communal churches" (Page 69). Not yet a nation of Roman-esque Christendom, England had not been fully converted, and not able or ready to be split into small ecclesiastical and bureaucratic "parish" regions. Rather, minster churches – large churches with relatively larger regional affiliations (*parochiae*) – acted as "missionary churches, whose task was to educate the people in the faith just as much as it was to pastor to them or administer the sacraments." (Page 73)

"Anglo-Saxon minsters became centres for missionary activity from which small groups ventured out into the nominally Christian but often culturally pagan territory which surrounded them, and preached and ministered from bases established within local settlements, such as stone crosses in villages... at which local devotions would be performed."
(Page 74)

The parallels with a post-Christian western world are clear (see Page 95) and Spencer suggests a number of related reasons for a “return to minster churches” (Page 83) including social, ecclesiastical and historical aspects.

He speaks of the benefit of “collegiality” (Page 107) in having larger team-ministered regions rather than many single-minister parishes. He promotes a synergistic balance between having *local* ministries supported by the resources of a *larger* unit able to bring training and encouragement and providing other aspects of large-scale spectacle and collaboration. He recognises the outcome of the myriad reports and experiments over the years and sees minsters as their end. One thing he draws out from, for instance, is a consideration of a cooperative arrangement of small groups, team-lead local public congregations, and a larger “local church government” level (Page 138). He even begins, in the last chapter, to tentatively suggest some practical ways in which minster model regions may be begun.

I am a supporter of our diocese’s strategic plan. My region, in North-West Tasmania is strongly in need of, and ideally placed for, a reimagining of itself as something akin to the minster model. We are not the same as the Church of England, but many of the problems – particularly with regard to nominalism and inefficient parochial insularities – are replicated here. It would work: a cooperative structure that embraces brother collegiality and individuality – common and particular expressions of a general mission – where congregations (some currently existing as parishes) can walk together, doing the good things of old and exciting new things as well.

Sometimes I disagree with the detail of what Spencer suggests as a way forward – nitpicks about the meaning of membership, the focus of financial arrangements etc. – but these are all peripheral to Spencer’s main purpose. The parish structure now hinders the church from being the church. A

minster/hub/network model looks better.

Time to make it happen.

