



ANVIL

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MISSION
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MISSION AND DISABILITY

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WELCOME TO THIS EDITION OF ANVIL

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Kt Tupling

THE EDITORIAL

In beginning to think about mission and disability,

I was keen to avoid the danger of focusing on the church's mission being to offer something to disabled people by way of good news, healing and cure. Rather, I wanted to turn this around and reflect on disabled people themselves having a mission to others (including the church!) and offering good news about Jesus from their disabled experiences.

The "Great Commission" in Matthew 28 tells us to "Go, and make disciples of all peoples..."¹ For generations this has been modelled as "the able-bodied, physically well church will go to the margins and seek out 'the lost', telling them the good news and bringing them back into the church". For some time I have questioned whether the margins need to go to the centre, and tell them the Good News! I have long admired the woman Jesus meets (on the margins of her village, and societal relationships) in John 4, who engages in theological debate over water, thirst and belonging, then goes to her own village and invites them back to the margins where Jesus (the centre) is waiting, with the words, "Come and meet a man who knows me..."²

This interdependence of discipleship and mission, the interchangeable nature of the centre and the margins, and the challenge of where Jesus is to be found has been the subject of many fabulous conversations I've had with people within the disabled community – both within and without the mainstream church models. These conversations have formed the foundations for this edition of ANVIL.

I am hugely grateful to my colleagues who have written for this edition of ANVIL.

Naomi Lawson Jacobs has done extensive research with disabled people around social justice and experiences of church. Naomi offers us a resistant reading of the encounter Jesus has with the man with leprosy (in Mark 1), and reflects on mission done *to* disabled people, rather than *with* or *by*.

Rachel Noël is an Anglican priest writing about "sanity" and mission from a place of "instability", from her own experience of psychosis.

Mark Arnold considers how mission is often done *to* families of children/young people with additional needs and invites us to consider mission *with* as a collaborative act.

The Japanese art of kintsugi, and the intentional value of "cracks" in our mental health, is the subject of Bill Braviner's article.

Disabled people – adults and children – are often described within a "tragedy narrative". Kay Morgan-Gurr explores this and her own experiences of loss and gain, and the impact it has on the church's mission among disabled people.

Attitudes, access and agency are often missing when the church talks about mission and the disabled community – Tim Rourke writes about this in the context of research done in the Derby diocese.

Emma Major reflects on the interplay between mission, disability and creativity, from within her lived experience as an artist and church leader living with a variety of medical conditions and sight loss.

Each of these writers has lived experience of disability, and faith in Jesus that is rooted within those experiences and not "despite" disabilities. I am humbled that they are my friends.

Kt Tupling was an Anglican parish priest for 16 years before becoming diocesan disability advisor and lead chaplain amongst deaf people for the Diocese of Oxford in March 2019. That changed in September 2020 to part-time disability adviser. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of two and a half, Katie is now the proud owner of purple crutches, a purple wheelchair, and a red scooter (it didn't come in purple!). Katie is co-founder of Disability and Jesus, a user-led task group wrestling with theology, discipleship and church practice through the lived experience of disability. She co-authored the book *Pilgrims in the Dark* – the story of how Disability and Jesus came into being, and a Grove booklet *Worship and Disability, a Kingdom for All* (both 2018). Katie's social media presence includes working with UCB1 Radio and BBC local radio, occasional live feeds on Twitter (@KtTup) and Facebook, a weekly "recorded as live" Sunday service with Disability and Jesus, and a YouTube channel.



¹ Matt. 28:19 (GNT)

² John 4:29 (MSG).



A MAN WITH A MISSION:

**Mark 1:40–45 and “mission
with” disabled people**

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Naomi Lawson Jacobs

INTRODUCTION

Nicki is a wheelchair user. She is also a former church planter, with experience of leading churches and a heart for those on the edge. For years, she has been seeking a church where she can use her gifts and be of service to others, in the church community and beyond. When I interviewed Nicki for my research on the experiences of disabled Christians, she remembered how one church had perceived her:

I told them that I worked full-time and that I did normal things, but it was like they didn't hear it. It was so against what they assumed about me that they couldn't take it on... Even when they knew that I didn't need them to do it, it was almost like they felt like they had to be a good Christian and take care of me.¹

She shared a simple, powerful cry to participate in her church and reach out to others with God's love:

When we get our new building, the first thing I want to do is join in and do normal – just basic, normal stuff in the service. I want to share communion. I want to take the offering. I want to just go and ask someone if it's okay to pray with them or share something with somebody, just so that people realise that I'm not different.

Nicki cannot yet participate this fully in her church and its outreach. Church buildings and attitudes have disabled her, including the attitude that she is only in church to be looked after. When churches see disabled people solely as objects of mission, they cannot see us as fellow Christians with ministries of our own. They cannot see us as a blessing to their community – only as a burden.

But the Holy Spirit is at work beyond the church gates. Out here, on the edge, mission and ministry are happening among communities of disabled people, who have often

found churches inaccessible, inhospitable or exclusive. In this article, I will reflect on one biblical model for disabled people's mission to each other, and to churches. Then, reflecting briefly on the history of mission and its impact for disabled people, I will ask what it would take for churches no longer to reach out in *mission to* disabled people, but to share in a new vision of *mission with* us.

A RESISTANT READING

The Bible and the Christian tradition have had a profound impact on disabled people.² In churches and theology, the Bible has long been interpreted using a "normate hermeneutic".³ As we read the Bible, we read our own ableist cultural attitudes into the text. Instead of allowing the nuanced silences in the stories to speak, readers tend to centre our own perspectives. Non-disabled readers are unlikely to think about the disciples as disabled – even though the disciples worked in a dangerous industry and lived under occupation – because they imagine the Bible's central characters as having bodies and minds like theirs, and only notice disabled characters who need help or healing.⁴ Churches rarely ask about the impact of their theology or biblical interpretation on their attitudes to disabled people's access, participation and outreach. Reflected in the mirror of ableist readings of the Bible, disabled Christians are easily reduced to objects of pastoral care – and mission. As Fiona MacMillan puts it, "In a Church which professes the Gospel paradox of strength in weakness, [disabled people are] often objects for pastoral attention rather than agents of change."⁵

And yet, many disabled Christians resist these marginalising interpretations of the Bible. We are looking for more authentic biblical models of our lives as disabled Christians, often inspired by disability liberation theology. "Biblical texts are living traditions," says disability biblical scholar Holly Joan Toensing, "that are challenged and renewed by lived experience of ongoing generations

¹ All participants cited in this study were interviewed for my primary research. Some of their stories are told in my thesis; others will be shared in a forthcoming book on disability and the church. Participants chose to use either their first names or pseudonyms, as approved by the SOAS University of London ethics committee. Naomi Lawson Jacobs, "The Upside-down Kingdom of God: A Disability Studies Perspective on Disabled People's Experiences in Churches and Theologies of Disability" (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2019), <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/32204/>; Naomi Lawson Jacobs and Emily Richardson, *At The Gates: Disability, Justice and the Churches* [working title] (London: Darton, Longman & Todd: forthcoming).

² It is always important to point out that "disability" is a modern category. The texts of the Bible, which speak to us from across ages and cultures, have different ways of categorising those we would now call disabled. Still, the Bible has helped to shape our modern category of disability. I have not attempted to define disability here, as it would derail the article, but I recommend reading disabled people's own writing on disability oppression in society, e.g. Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan Education, 1990); Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Sins Invalid, 2019). For scholarship on the Hebrew Bible's categories of disability, see Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

³ Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives" in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 92.

⁴ Janet Lees, "Enabling the Body" in *This Abled Body*, ed. Avalos, Melcher and Schipper, 162.

⁵ Fiona MacMillan, "Calling from the Edge," *Thinking Anglicans*, 9 February 2018, <http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/uploads/Calling%20from%20the%20Edge%20-%202018%20-%20Final.pdf>.

of Christians.”⁶ By reading the Bible in ways that reflect disabled people’s experiential reality, we can all reflect more honestly about how the churches have responded to disability – through disempowering concepts of mission, for example.

In this first part of this article, I’m going to reflect on Mark 1:40–45, using the story as a “way in” to help us think about disabled people and mission. This will be a *resistant reading*,⁷ in which we allow the silences in the biblical text to speak, as we listen to the people it has silenced. The man with leprosy in Mark 1 has a new vision of mission to tell us about. Then it will be the turn of today’s disabled Christians to speak, as I share a few stories from my research. Disabled Christians are calling churches to a transformed vision of outreach and ministry. In a kingdom where Jesus rewrites the story, this vision could turn the churches’ approach to mission upside down.

THE MISSION OF A MAN WITH LEPROSY

In Mark 1, a man who has leprosy seeks out Jesus. No doubt the man has heard rumours of this teacher’s power and authority, even this early in Jesus’ ministry. But this man is no passive recipient of mission. He takes initiative, boldly telling Jesus, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”⁸ In some versions of this story, Jesus becomes “indignant” – angry. We are not told what he’s angry about. But we know that Jesus answers boldness with boldness. “I am willing,” he says, and touches this untouchable man, whose stigmatised skin disease would have led fearful people to keep him at arm’s length. Once the man is “made clean”, Jesus gives him instructions not to tell anyone, but to go and offer sacrifices to the priests,

presumably at the Temple, who can declare that the man is clean. In double disobedience of Jesus’ order, the man does *not* go straight to the Temple to allow the priests to judge whether he is worthy or unworthy. Nor does he follow Jesus’ instructions not to tell anyone. Instead, he goes out to “talk freely, spreading the news” about Jesus.

As a result of the man’s fruitful witness, Jesus is mobbed by so many people, he has to retreat to the wilderness – to the “lonely places”, as the NIV has it.

This man is marginalised by the text, and that can make it a challenge to listen to the silences in his story. He is unnamed – the ultimate sign of someone who is “only” a side character – which is unlikely to encourage readers to identify with him. We know almost nothing about him, and

though we can infer quite a bit about his situation, that means drawing on some contested contexts. And, like all the disabled characters in the Gospels, after this man is healed, he seems to disappear from the story.⁹

To open up the silences in the story, we start not with the disabled man himself, but with Jesus. In that strange reference to Jesus feeling “indignant”, there is a key to the lived experience of the man with leprosy. Some manuscripts have Jesus feeling “compassion” for this man, but many biblical scholars think “indignant” is the earlier meaning.¹⁰ What did Jesus have to be angry about? Perhaps, as some scholars have argued, Jesus was angry at Satan for causing illness, or even angry at the leprosy itself.

But this is a resistant reading. We find new answers when we centre the perspective of the man with leprosy. This is a story about purity and impurity – all the language is about *cleansing*, not healing.¹¹ Here is a man who has been excluded from society, stigmatised as a result of his impairment, which led him to be perceived as impure.

“By reading the Bible in ways that reflect disabled people’s experiential reality, we can all reflect more honestly about how the churches have responded to disability...”

⁶ Holly Joan Toensing, “‘Living Among the Tombs’: Society, Mental Illness, and Self-Destruction in Mark 5:1–20” in *This Able Body*, ed. Avalos, Melcher and Schipper, 133.

⁷ Resistant readings centre the readings of marginalised groups, while acknowledging that interpretation is influenced by our social and historical perspectives. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

⁸ All quotations are from Mark 1:40–45 (NIV).

⁹ Sharon V. Betcher, “Saving the Wretched of the Earth,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2006).

¹⁰ Seth M. Ehorn, “Jesus and Ritual Impurity in Mark’s Gospel” in *For Us, but Not To Us: Essays on Creation, Covenant, and Context in Honor of John H. Walton*, ed. Adam E. Miglio *et al* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 223.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 217–33.

The Jewish purity system, laid down in Leviticus and other texts, is likely to have kept many disabled people out of the Temple. It might have pushed them to the edges of community life, too. Even worse, this system kept them *poor*. If people with leprosy recovered, and hoped to be restored to religious and social community, they had to bring sacrifices to the Temple before they could be declared clean – and those sacrifices cost money. As Sam P. Mathew puts it: “The rich and the powerful always interpreted the purity laws to their advantage. Thus the purity system became instrumental in oppressing the poor and marginalising the people.... Those persons who were considered lepers were oppressed socially, religiously, economically and psychologically.”¹² I can hardly imagine Jesus’ indignant rage at this unjust system, which had kept this man isolated and destitute. The priests had the authority to do something about this – to declare the man clean. They did not.

For disabled people, Leviticus is another powerful representational text. There is lively debate among biblical scholars as to how the purity laws were followed, and there were probably diverse views about ritual impurity in first-century Judaism.¹³ But once an idea has been written down in the Bible, it has representational power in our culture. Disabled people are stigmatised in, and by, this passage of Scripture. Anthropologist Mary Douglas says that, in Leviticus, people and things that are *irregular or out of place* are represented as impure. As the place where God dwells, the Temple must be kept free of the pollution of impurity.¹⁴ Disabled people have “leaky bodies”, inspiring fears that we will contaminate non-disabled people, so we are shut out of the holiest places.¹⁵ Whatever the actual religious and social situation for people with leprosy in first-century Palestine, this Gospel story *represents* the exclusion of people with leprosy. For the man in Mark 1, exclusion from religious community and society is a lived reality. So it is for many disabled people today. Churches and society push to the edges

those people who confront us with the reality that we all so often deny – our frailty, our mortality, our humanity.

Jesus is different. His mission has already taken him outside the Temple gates, to be with outcasts, poor people and disabled people – those on the edge. And, unlike the priests, Jesus is willing to do something about this man’s profound social oppression. As the Messiah, Jesus has the priestly authority to cleanse the man and restore him to community. But then Jesus does something unexpected.

He tells the man to go to the priests at the Temple, and offer those expensive sacrifices required by the Mosaic law. We might be tempted to wonder why. But this is a resistant reading, and what the man does next is far more interesting.

Because the man who once had leprosy *ignores* Jesus. In a power move that speaks of resistance against unjust authority, the man refuses to go and show himself to the priests at the Temple. Why would he go back there, and pay to offer sacrifices, only to be judged and declared “in”

or “out” of religious and social community by the same priests who have shunned him, stigmatised him and cast him out?

Today’s disabled people know all about this kind of exclusion from church and society. Like the Temple, many modern churches reject people whose bodies and minds do not fit their norms. When disabled people are pushed to the edge, churches do not need to change to make room for a more diverse range of bodies and minds. We call this system *ableism* – an oppressive structure in which normative bodies and minds are valuable, and different bodies and minds are disposable.¹⁶ This system keeps disabled people marginalised in many ways that resonate with Mark 1. Today’s disabled people might not be required to pay priests to declare us clean, but we are still an impoverished community. A third of disabled people in the UK live in poverty, and many of us face a dehumanising, humiliating fight for the benefits we need

“Today’s disabled people know all about this kind of exclusion from church and society. Like the Temple, many modern churches reject people whose bodies and minds do not fit their norms.”

¹² Sam P. Mathew, “Jesus and Purity System in Mark’s Gospel: A Leper (Mk. 1:40–45),” *Indian Journal of Theology* 42, no. 2 (2000): 102–03.

¹³ Joel S. Baden and Candida R. Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *sāra’at* in Leviticus 13–14,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 4 (2011): 643–62. Although some biblical scholars believe this purity system never existed, others think that, by the first-century Judaism of the Gospels, at least some disabled people were pushed to the margins of society by the stigma it created.

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1966).

¹⁵ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁶ From a video conversation between disability activists Patty Berne and Stacey Milbern, “My Body Doesn’t Oppress Me, Society Does,” *Barnard Center for Research on Women*, 8 May 2017, <https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/my-body-doesnt-oppress-me-society-does/>.

to survive.¹⁷ In Jesus' words "show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices... as a testimony to them",¹⁸ some disabled people will hear echoes of society's constant demand that we prove that we are "disabled enough" – or human enough – to be treated with dignity.

That's why I find it so powerful that this man does not go to the Temple. Instead, he does everything he has been told not to do. He goes out to "talk freely" about Jesus – κηρύσσειν, meaning to proclaim or preach. It's a word sometimes used for Jesus' own preaching, and for that of his disciples, proclaiming the kingdom of God. I imagine the man running to tell his own disabled community about Jesus first – all his friends with stigmatised illnesses, who have lived on the edge with him. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, I imagine him telling them, "Come and see a man who..." – a man who is angry at the way the community of people with leprosy has been treated by priests and Temple authorities. A man who is willing and able to restore the outcasts to society, without demanding a profit for the powerful. No wonder Jesus is mobbed by new followers. No wonder Jesus has to retreat to the "lonely places" – where, I imagine, he meets yet more lonely outsiders who have been pushed to the margins of society.

When we leave the man who once had leprosy, he's a Man with a Mission. But this is not a mission of the priests or religious leaders. They are back at the Temple, waiting for people to come to them, to be judged as clean or unclean, valuable or disposable.

No, this is a mission of the marginalised, *to* the marginalised. Jesus is inspiring a movement of outsiders, who want to live in his upside-down kingdom,¹⁹ where the powerful are dethroned, and those who have been cast out are restored to a diverse community. Where all bodies and minds are valued by God. Where Jesus sees the way disabled people have been stigmatised and impoverished and pushed to the edge, and he gets *angry*. And then he does something about it. For the man who once had

leprosy, the Man with a Mission, that foretaste of the kingdom changes his life. He has a gospel to proclaim.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCHES

When churches think about mission, they tend to think about *mission to*. This charitable, pastoral approach to mission has a long tradition in church history, as churches reached out to people who had been thrown on the rubbish heap of society. They set up schools for those whom society would not educate, hospitals for those whom society would not treat, and soup kitchens for those whom society had left destitute.²⁰ When the world considered people untouchable, churches reached out to touch them, sharing the gospel through words and hospitality alike.

But this history has a dark side. Christian pastoral care and mission have marginalised and disempowered disabled people. When the powerful reach out to those on the margins, it is easy for them to believe that they have everything to offer, while the objects of their charity only have need. What began as mission can easily become paternalism and colonialism.²¹ Postcolonial theorists have described the mission of western Christians to the majority world as "the politics of rescue" of the white saviour.²² Disabled people, too, have been used by Christian mission to motivate charity, as Christians imagine they are saving the "wretched of the earth".²³ Thanks in part to this history of mission, a powerful "disability business" now defines and controls the lives of many disabled people.²⁴ Like the Temple priests waiting to judge the man who once had leprosy, these professional services decide whether disabled people are "deserving" enough for help, rather than working with us to create equity for all. A Christian model of outreach to the "needy" has shaped this disempowering system.

In my decade spent interviewing disabled Christians, I have heard many stories of people whose churches saw them as the object of ministry and mission, rather

¹⁷ "UK Poverty 2019/20," *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/54566/download?token=nBjYDICV&filetype=full-report>, 8; Frances Ryan, *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled People* (London: Verso, 2019).

¹⁸ 1 Mark:44 (NIV).

¹⁹ Some of my disabled research participants talked about the "upside-down kingdom of God", in which society's ableist values would be transformed and Jesus' values would reign. Their theology was probably influenced by Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, revised ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011).

²⁰ Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²¹ These mixed impacts of church pastoral care and mission for disabled people have been written about by deaf and disability liberation theologians. See Hannah Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

²² Sherene H. Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 15, no. 2 (2000): 91–130.

²³ Betcher, "Saving the Wretched of the Earth."

²⁴ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95. See also Gary L. Albrecht, *The Disability Business: Rehabilitation in America* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992).

than people with ministry of their own – and even with a mission to the churches. Earlier, we talked about Nicki’s disempowering experiences in churches that wanted to serve her but could not imagine how she could serve them. Then there was Deirdre, who has a chronic illness and can rarely leave her bed. She longed to offer prayer ministry to the church where she remains a faithful member, at a distance. Deirdre not only had the gift of prayer, she had the rare gift of time to pray. But Deirdre’s offer to be part of the church prayer rota was never taken up. Her gifts went unused. There was Victor, a committed member of his church, who wanted to lead an Alpha group. His church leadership worried about how, as a blind man, he would serve dinner during the evening. In their failure to imagine a more inclusive, cooperative vision of Alpha, this church’s real failure of imagination lay in being unable to see Victor as a potential leader. For Nicki, Deirdre, Victor and many others, their churches could only see disabled people as objects of mission and ministry.

Instead, these disabled people longed to *participate* in their churches, through service, leadership and shared mission. Nicki knew she was a valued part of a church when she was able to serve her community through the youth group, connecting with young people in difficult situations. Another participant, Jane, believed that disabled people should be in church not just to receive outreach, but to play an active role in church life. Jane described this as mutual participation: “being helped and helping – reciprocal use of what skills we all have to crowdsource the desired result.”²⁵ Being church together means being part of an interdependent community, where we all minister to each other. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, we are all given unique gifts, and the parts of the body that “seem to be weaker” are indispensable. If the eye says to the hand, “I don’t need you,” the body is incomplete.²⁶

A MISSION FOR JUSTICE

But this vision of a missional kingdom is about more than inclusion. It’s about justice.

When we listen to the story of the Man with a Mission, we come to understand why inclusion is not enough. Too often, disabled people are invited to churches, but not

truly welcomed there just as we are.²⁷ In *mission* to disabled people, when churches assume that disabled people are only here to receive, they may miss the ways disabled people are already being church together. “Come to the places from which you have been cast out,” churches say, “so that we can minister to you.” Why would disabled people respond enthusiastically to this invitation any more than the man healed from leprosy was willing to go to the Temple to be judged? The echoes of missional paternalism are evident. And when churches reach out in *mission* to disabled people, they do not always ask why there are disabled people on the margins of society to reach out to at all. Like the priests in Mark 1, not enough churches are asking the uncomfortable questions about how they

contribute to disabled people’s marginalisation, casting us out to the edge. That’s when we see how a sole focus on pastoral care can distract from questions of justice.

But this is a resistant reading; shift your perspective. There is church out here, in the wilderness. Disabled Christians are seeking communities where we are valued just as we are. When we can’t find that

in the inaccessible buildings and inhospitable cultures of institutional churches, many of us are forming these communities for ourselves, ministering to one another and reaching out to the churches. In the UK, two examples are YouBelong and Disability and Jesus. Both have a mission to reach disabled people online, while working with churches to help them become more accessible. At the Living Edge conference on disability and churches,²⁸ we have spent the past decade reimagining a more just and inclusive church, through events uniquely led by disabled Christians for disabled Christians. In my research, I heard stories of prayer and fellowship groups where two or three disabled people gathered, and of disabled Christians ministering to each other in the corridors and kitchens of churches, when they could not get into the sanctuary. Here, on the edge, we call to each other: “Come and see a man who is angry about oppression and injustice, and wants to restore us to the church – through, and with, each other.” This is a mission to the churches as much as to those outside their gates. The Jesus of the upside-down kingdom is a Jesus that non-disabled members of churches might need to meet.

What does this mean for the institutional churches, and

²⁵ Used with permission.

²⁶ 1 Cor. 12:21 (New International Version).

²⁷ Lamar Hardwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021).

²⁸ The Living Edge disability conferences are a partnership between Inclusive Church and St Martin-in-the-Fields church, now in their tenth year.

their tradition of *mission to* disabled people?

One of the great insights of liberation theology is that God is on the side of the oppressed. In the Mark 1 model, mission is about justice. Like Jesus, those in the churches may need to start by getting angry, asking why disabled people have been pushed to the margins – even if the answers are uncomfortably close to home. Just as Jesus often did, they may need to ask questions, and truly listen when disabled people share the gift and resource of our answers. Those willing to follow us to the “lonely places” may see that that God is already at work here, in *mission by* disabled people, *to* disabled people.

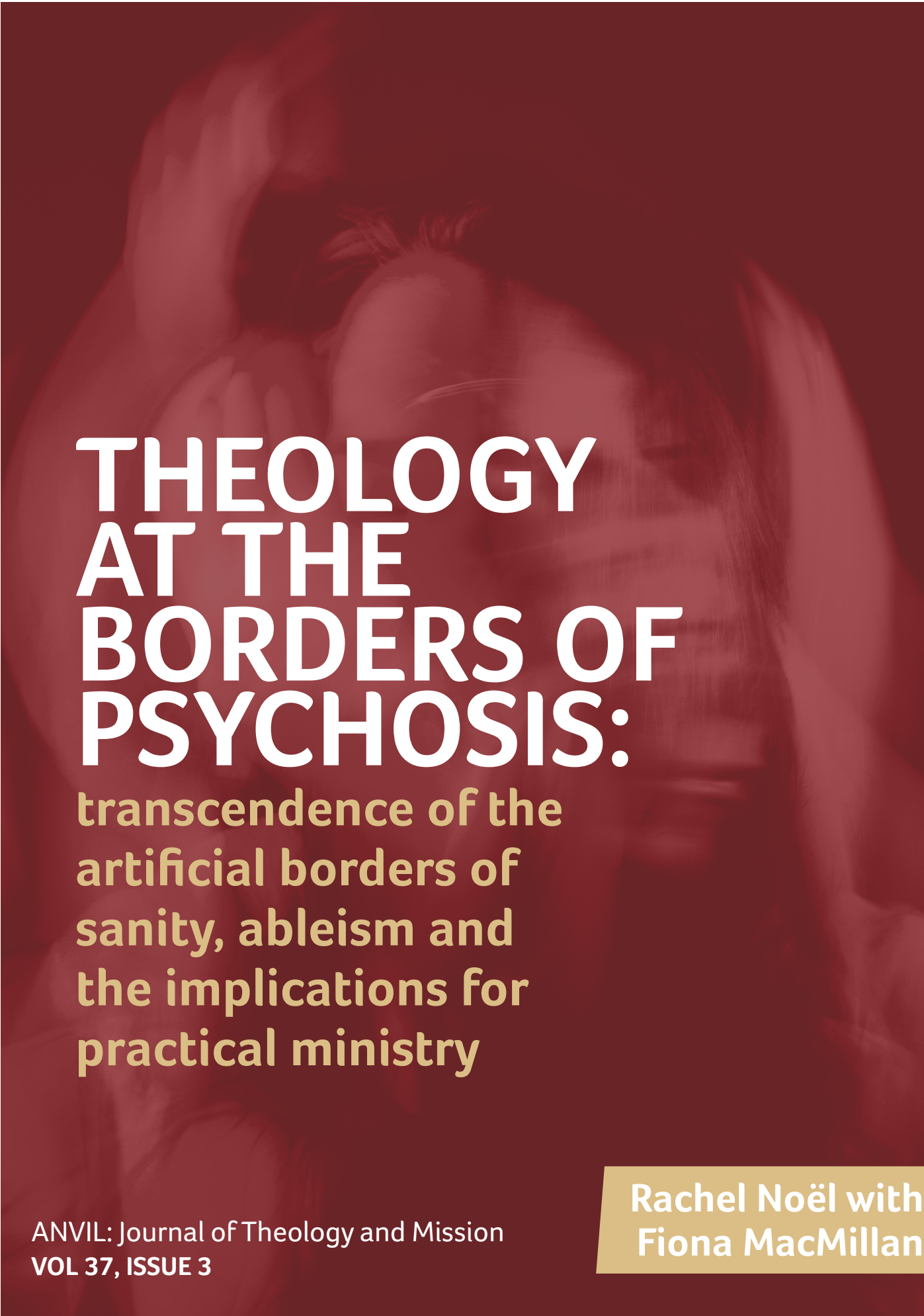
As churches learn to listen to our silenced stories, they may be confronted with some difficult questions. How can they empower disabled people’s mission and ministry where it is already happening, out on the edge? How can they enable the access, participation and leadership of disabled people, not just in our own communities, but in the churches where many of us have yet to be made welcome? This is mission, but it is not disempowering *mission to* disabled people. It does not position the outsiders as those who receive and the powerful as those who hold the keys to salvation. Instead, this is mission together *with* disabled people, in an upside-down kingdom of God.

Disabled people have a gospel to proclaim. If churches are willing to join us on the edge, they might learn to see disabled people not just as objects of ministry, but as fellow Christians with gifts and revelations to share with each other and the church. A blessing, not a burden. The church is renewed from the edge, Sam Wells tells us.²⁹ Together, we can be enriched by a new vision of *mission with* each other.

Dr Naomi Lawson Jacobs (they/them) is a disabled, neurodivergent social researcher, writer and trainer. Naomi completed a PhD on disabled people’s experiences of churches in 2019, and aims to use their research to support a growing disabled Christian movement, where a new thing is taking root on the edge of the church. Naomi’s book on disability, churches and social justice, co-written with Emily Richardson, is due out in 2022. Naomi can be found on Twitter @naomi_jacobs, at home in Islington with spouse and cats, and sometimes even in church at St Luke’s, West Holloway.



²⁹ Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 29.



THEOLOGY AT THE BORDERS OF PSYCHOSIS:

transcendence of the
artificial borders of
sanity, ableism and
the implications for
practical ministry

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Rachel Noël with
Fiona MacMillan

INTRODUCTION

Implicit in theology is the expectation that the author is “sane”. In Western society there is a widespread labelling of “madness” that serves to isolate and separate perceived “mad” voices from the so-called “serious” work of theology.

Drawing on my own lived experience of psychosis, this article takes the work of Catherine Keller into conversation with Isabel Clarke’s work on psychosis, spirituality and madness in order to examine and critique the borders between psychosis and spirituality. Keller articulates a theology from the deep, that has to learn “to bear with its own chaos”,¹ while Clarke links the highest realms of human consciousness and the depths of madness, challenging the primacy of rationality and encouraging a paradigm shift in how we view the (often perceived hard) borders between psychosis and spirituality. This article draws together the themes of chaos, depth and the transliminal state of psychosis to redeem the voice of madness in theology and to dispute the borderland between psychosis and spirituality.

In this article, I will go on to explore what implications this may have in our practical ministry, connecting with themes of shame, ableism, disability theology and art.

THEOLOGY AT THE BORDERS OF PSYCHOSIS: TRANSCENDENCE OF THE ARTIFICIAL BORDERS OF SANITY²

Why is this important?

Public Health England states: “Psychosis is characterised by hallucinations, delusions and a disturbed relationship with reality” and states that “psychosis is one of the most life-impacting conditions in healthcare”.³ Six per cent of the UK population says they have experienced at least one symptom of psychosis.⁴ Those diagnosed with severe mental illness such as psychosis die on average 15 to 20 years earlier than the general population.⁵

Joanna Collicutt states that:

While premodern culture had little difficulty in accommodating divine madness, tolerating a blurred boundary between madness and religiosity, the rise of modern psychiatry has rendered this problematic. Following on from the Enlightenment, public discourse has located madness firmly in the mind of the individual, conceiving it as a kind of sickness – a “mental health” issue. It is not considered appropriate or enlightened to describe people with psychosis simply as “strange”; it is more usual to describe them as “very unwell”.⁶

This individual model of mental illness is connected with the medical model of disability and although we’re starting to view disability through the social model lens,⁷ there remain aspects of mental health that often still seem to be regarded outside of this model: in particular, psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar and borderline personality. These conditions seem to invoke fear. They challenge our desire for predictability and control.

Peter Kinderman is professor of clinical psychology at the University of Liverpool and is leading work challenging this. He writes:

Traditional thinking about mental health care is profoundly flawed, and radical remedies are required.... We must move away from the “disease model”, which assumes that emotional distress is merely a symptom of biological illness, and instead embrace a psychological and social approach to mental health and well-being that recognises our essential and shared humanity.⁸

He describes his work as “a manifesto for an entirely new approach to psychiatric care; one that truly offers care rather than coercion, therapy rather than medication, and a return to the common-sense appreciation that distress is usually an understandable reaction to life’s challenges”.⁹

According to French psychoanalyst Lacan, psychotic thought has a high degree of freedom, but by not conforming to accepted standards of thought, it

¹ Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York, Routledge: 2003), 29.

² This part of the article was first presented by Rachel Noël as a paper at the Society for the Study of Theology conference in April 2021.

³ Public Health England, “Psychosis Data Report,” September 2016, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/774774/Psychosis_data_report.pdf 5, 7.

⁴ <https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/research-and-evaluation/mental-health-statistics/>

⁵ Public Health England, “Psychosis Data Report,” 9.

⁶ Joanna Collicutt, “Jesus and Madness” in Christopher C. H. Cook and Isabelle Hamley (eds.), *The Bible and Mental Health: Towards a Biblical Theology of Mental Health* (SCM Press: London, 2020), 46.

⁷ For medical/social models, see e.g. “The Social Model of Disability,” *Inclusion London*, <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/disability-in-london/social-model/the-social-model-of-disability-and-the-cultural-model-of-deafness/>.

⁸ Peter Kinderman, *A Prescription for Psychiatry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, back cover.

is therefore not capable of being part of religious discourse. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states that “while psychosis is at the heart of psychiatry, psychiatrists have often dismissed or regarded with distrust the spirituality that is valued by many of their patients”.¹⁰

In 1999, the Royal College of Psychiatrists Spirituality Special Interest Group was initiated. Isabel Clarke has edited two editions of their work on psychosis and spirituality. There exist deeply culture-bound limitations of how we conceive and describe psychosis and spirituality. She writes, “Boyce-Tillmann discusses the tendency of cultures to favour either this, intuitive and spiritual or the more scientific and logical style of discourse as the existence of a dominant and a subjugated way of knowing.”¹¹

Anthropologist Natalie Tobert explores the ways different cultures have different ways of articulating and valuing these experiences, including shamans and mediums who claim to go between the worlds, and those who describe out-of-body experiences and near-death experiences.¹² By contrast, in the West, “Warner notes that in societies where experience of the spiritual/psychotic realm is valued, people diagnosed with schizophrenia have a far better prognosis than in modern Western society.”¹³

There have been various models developed to try to account or describe the different ways of knowing that are encountered. As ever, language starts to get tricky, and our human desire to want to categorise and define neat boundaries is challenged. Most models use terminology that explicitly “incorporates a distinction between the psychotic and the spiritual, and so impedes discussion of the common state” that Clarke argues

“As a church leader, I’m teaching people how to consciously enter the transliminal, through the experiences of stilling and centring the mind”

underlies both.¹⁴ Much of this language includes positive or negative connotations, assumptions deeply embedded in the descriptive words. A hierarchy of experience is embedded in the language we choose. Moreover, we are talking about individual, subjective experiences, during different states of experience that make this inaccessible to objective study.¹⁵ “Psychoanalysts talk of the emergence of un- or sub-conscious contents into consciousness... The downward spatial metaphor implies inferiority. Words such as spiritual and mystical, with wholly positive connotations, tend to exclude anything dark or pathological.”¹⁶

Clarke “starts from the recognition of two possible modes in which a human being can encounter their environment. The most normally accessible of these two modes can be described as ordinary consciousness. The

other mode is a less focused state in which both psychotic and spiritual experience becomes possible, as well as being the source of creativity and personal growth.”¹⁷ She describes this as transliminal, following psychology professor Gordon Claridge – the echoes of threshold – to distinguish between transliminal and everyday functioning. Clarke suggests that following on from this, “it does appear

that transliminal experience is mediated by a loosening of boundaries and greater connectedness within the brain, whereas focused cognition relies on inhibition of extraneous influences”.¹⁸ While we might want to see psychosis and spirituality as two very discrete, separate, neat categories, everyday functioning and transliminal functioning are both states that we all have some experience of. In sleep, we naturally enter deeply into the transliminal.

As a church leader, I’m teaching people how to consciously enter the transliminal, through the experiences of stilling and centring the mind,

¹⁰ Susan Mitchell, “Spiritual aspects of psychosis and recovery,” presented at the Royal College of Psychiatrists Annual Meeting in Edinburgh 2010, https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/members/signs/spirituality-spsig/susan-mitchell-spiritual-aspects-of-psychosis-and-recovery-edited.pdf?sfvrsn=23c8dab0_2_1.

¹¹ June Boyce-Tillman, quoted by Isabel Clarke, “Psychosis and Spirituality: The Discontinuity Model” in Isabel Clarke (ed.), *Psychosis and Spirituality: Consolidating the New Paradigm*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 103.

¹² Natalie Tobert, “The Polarities of Consciousness” in Clarke (ed.), *Psychosis and Spirituality*, 43.

¹³ Richard Warner, quoted by Clarke, “Psychosis and Spirituality: The Discontinuity Model,” 111.

¹⁴ Clarke, “Psychosis and Spirituality: The Discontinuity Model,” 103.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

contemplative prayer and meditation. This is part of our tradition and practice. Simone Weil says that “absolutely unmixed attention is prayer”.¹⁹ We see this in Buddhist practice, in hypnotherapy, in mindfulness; there are so many ways that people are seeking to access the transliminal.

Transliminal space is a place of paradox; it’s “both/and”.

However, it seems that there is a really strong desire for professionals (both psychiatric and clerical) to want to categorise – to be able to name an experience as either psychotic/breakdown/disorder or as spiritual/religious experience. Why do we need to do this? Clarke argues that this “absolute distinction is invalid and essentially meaningless”.²⁰ Moreover, I would argue that seeking to enforce this distinction is, in fact, dangerous.

Karen O'Donnell, in her work on trauma theology,²¹ speaks of the importance of meaning-making, of narrating our own story. For example, when we talk about Black theology, about trans theology, there is an importance of these voices not being narrated, defined and enforced by others. People need to be able to tell their own stories and develop their own meaning.

Why would we want to seek to categorise someone else's meaning-making as either spiritual or as disorder, and to enforce the separation of these? In doing so, frequently the meaning-making is disrupted/corrected/deemed so dangerous that it needs to be sedated/numbed/silenced. The naming and labelling of these experiences by others can be part of the creation of trauma.

Defining with big disorder labels brings with it questions of medication (often by coercion), of shame, of hiding. Assumptions that there is nothing of value, no “truth”, nothing of meaning within what has been experienced when it's classed as disorder. This is ableism. “Ableism is a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in

one form or the other.”²²

In society we hear that many people on the edge are having to justify their voice, their experience. I would argue that those experiencing psychosis, psychotic disorders, are still being taught to deny their experiences, to reject their experiences, to suppress and numb them; they are being medicated and silenced, and we're still questioning whether their voices are even valid.

MY STORY

It is helpful if I explain why this is so important to me. I'm an Anglican priest. I spent part of my curacy in psychiatric hospital. Not as a chaplain, but detained

under the Mental Health Act. I was sectioned. I experienced mania and psychosis in reaction to a medication. Within the depth of these experiences, I also encountered the most profound spiritual experiences too, of peace beyond all understanding. Repeated experiences of deep unity and connection, of awe and wonder; alongside the fear and disorientation, the pain of psychosis. I lived in both/and space. Soon after one week in hospital I was labelled with bipolar disorder, with ADHD, with sensory processing disorder, and

suspected autism (later confirmed). Lots of labels, that come with judgements on how I perceive the world, on how I process information, and on how I communicate.

My voice became “othered”: one that couldn't be trusted by other professionals – medics, clergy. I was labelled heretical. Clergy wanting to pray to cast out demons (for future reference, if this ever happens to you, whatever response you give gets categorised as further “proof” of demons). Senior church leaders deciding if it was possible to be a priest with any of these labels or experiences, let alone all of them. I was told that I shouldn't speak publicly of my experiences, of my labels. That it would be better if I were silent. That it would be better if I went elsewhere.

In my openness, I have encountered many others who have been excluded from churches, from religious communities, who have been forced to accept priests

“Why would we want to seek to categorise someone else's meaning-making as either spiritual or as disorder, and to enforce the separation of these?”

¹⁹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁰ Clarke, “Psychosis and Spirituality: The Discontinuity Model,” 111.

²¹ Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross (eds.), *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture & Church in Critical Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 2020).

²² Leah Smith, “#Ableism”, *Center for Disability Rights*, accessed 9 January 2022, <https://cdrnys.org/blog/uncategorized/ableism/>.

naming them as heretics, naming their experiences as all illness, naming the depth of their experience of God, of other, of deep connection as so wrong, as so ill, that it is dangerous. Of no longer speaking of their experience, of others abusing their power by defining, closing down and silencing their stories. Of living with the shame, the trauma.²³

As a priest, as a theologian, in the West, where do I go with this?

KELLER AND THEOLOGY OF BECOMING

I'm going to take this into conversation with Catherine Keller, and the first few verses of Genesis. In her book *The Face of the Deep*, she presents the case that most orthodox theology has assumed as "fact" the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. Keller argues that this doctrine, of *creatio ex nihilo*, has developed as a preferred dogma in Western theology, as a way of keeping theology consistent in what it is rejecting, in what it's labelling as scandalous, heretical and demonic.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. Gen. 1:1–3 (NRSV)

She suggests that Western tradition prefers to jump from verse 1 to verse 3, from the beginning with God, to the divine speech "let there be light", choosing to see God working against the formless void that's in between. In this work, Keller focuses on the first two verses of Genesis, and throughout the book she is articulating a theology from the deep, from the chaos, *tehom*. She says, "It refuses to appear as nothing, as vacuum, as mere absence highlighting the Presence of the Creator, as nonentity limning all the created entities. It gapes open in the text: 'and the earth was tohu vabohu, and darkness was upon the face of tehom and the ruach elohim was vibrating upon the face of the mayim.'"²⁴

Just as with Clarke, for Keller the nuance of words is deeply significant. Keller's book is in four parts. Part 1 sets out the continual contrast between a theology of

the deep (*tehom*) as opposed to the Creator/creation theology with God as the Lord and owner of the world (dominology)²⁵ – suggesting that this dominology brings with it a "loathing of the deep" and leads to the desire to master chaos, to control the "origin" (perhaps setting up theologically a deep fear of the perceived chaos or lack of control of psychosis). Keller suggests that Irenaeus first set up the virtual elimination of *tehom*, with his critique of the gnostic usage of the term. She goes on to highlight Athanasius's understanding of eternity, power and nature, that plays out in denial of difference, in purity of culture. Keller identifies Athanasius as displaying a homophobia, that's paired with *tehomophobia*.²⁶ She finds a similar ambivalence to *tehom* in Augustine too.

And while Karl Barth does reject *creatio ex nihilo* as unbiblical, his understanding of God still leads to a very strong Christian dominology. Describing Genesis 1:2, Barth says "this verse has always constituted a particular *crux interpretum* – one of the most difficult in the whole Bible". For Barth, "deep is not nothing, but worse than nothing".²⁷ For Barth, God is creating not from the nothing, but against the nothingness... which is the chaos.

Deeply embedded in so much of our theology is a profound fear of the chaos, of the deep.

I suggest that witnessing psychosis plays into this fear and is why there is quite such a strong desire in so many to distinguish between psychotic and spiritual experience, to see them as separate and distinctive. This is to silence, remove or eliminate the voice of chaos from the purity of spirituality, of theology that many hope for.

Keller reminds us that "creation is not a beast to be tamed, but a deep mystery – a mystery that we experience the echo of in our own times of chaos and deepest prayer, and over which the 'wind from God', the ruach elohim, 'vibrates'. We are, in our most primordial reality, vulnerable creatures of this earth in which the 'formless void and darkness' from time to time reasserts itself."²⁸ In Keller's articulation of mystery, of chaos, of the depth of prayer within that, there is a theology that has to learn to bear with its own chaos, a theology in which there is space for voices from the transliminal states.

²³ Further insight in stories in Jean Vanier, Bob Callaghan and John Swinton, *Mental Health: The Inclusive Church Resource* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014), particularly by Mims Hodson's story of bipolar and faith, and being closed down in sharing experience of psychosis and spiritual experience.

²⁴ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁸ Jason Goroncy, "A Note on Catherine Keller's *The Face of the Deep*," *jasongoroncy.com*, 6 August 2014, <https://jasongoroncy.com/2014/08/06/a-note-on-catherine-kellers-face-of-the-deep/>.

What difference might it make to our shared life as the body of Christ if we were to let this theology shape our worship, our ministry and mission together, our pastoral care?

CREATION THEOLOGY AND ABLEISM²⁹

The dominant *creatio ex nihilo* theology has shaped so much of our thinking, our liturgy, our art. In our creation stories, we find Adam and Eve. These are almost always portrayed as able-bodied, idealised, “perfect” beings.

For example, the beautifully constructed creation of Adam, by Michelangelo. Clearly placed colours and forms, everything in its place, directed exactly by God.

Genesis 1:

So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.³⁰

Genesis 2:

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt **no shame**.³¹

These first people were at home with each other and with God.

WITH NO SHAME

Eve and Adam, the apple, the Fall. We’re told that this is where pain comes in for the woman. Pain becomes associated with theology of the Fall. There enters the language of brokenness.

And shame.

Brene Brown describes shame as being “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.... Shame thrives on secrecy, silence, and judgment.”³² Judith Rossall writes more about this in her book *Forbidden Fruit and Fig Leaves*, saying: “If shame is intimately linked with our sense of how others see us, then it is even more intimately linked with a fear of exposure. For many of us our greatest fear is that if our real naked self is seen, then we might be rejected.”³³

Paintings of creation don’t seem to show pain, or differently shaped bodies, or different ways of being. Adam and Eve are a bit like the original Ken and Barbie, or the Photoshopped images in magazines.

Disability theology as a liberation theology challenges these very starting points. Shane Clifton points out that:

If creation is good, as Genesis¹ repeatedly claims, then disability is good.... [The] same life-giving processes also generate disability. The paradox of life is that potency and vulnerability go together. And because this is so, far from being a consequence of sin, disability is a good, a symbol of potent, creative, beauty, a testimony to the generativity and limits of nature.... Just as God is wholly other, the divine image is not captured in the ideal of a singular “manly” reasoned perfection, but in the vulnerable untamed chaotic potent limits of disabled bodies.³⁴

Ableism becomes both implicit and explicit in our language, in our art, in our liturgy, in the hymns that we sing – embedding the deep belief that able is superior, that living without mental illness is superior, and reinforcing the prejudice that disabled people require fixing, that their voices should not be heard unless or until they meet our definition of “well”. Entwining ableism in our liturgy creates and reinforces a sense of shame.

June Boyce-Tillman talks about the language of liturgy and says: “We need to work hard at a change of attitudes: ‘[It may] involve learning new skills and expanding the meaning of concepts, often “unlearning” what was formerly believed to be true.”³⁵ This is costly for our churches; it could mean new songs, new books, challenging the use of treasured hymns. It means being uncomfortable, noticing where we silence, where we discount, where we exclude. This isn’t something that can be tackled with lip service. Are we willing, individually and collectively, to let this sink in?

One of the particular challenges is that ableism is often disguised within the best of intentions. Boyce-Tillman describes how:

Disabled people came to be viewed as “worthy

²⁹ This section was first put together by Fiona MacMillan and Rachel Noël for a HeartEdge “Shut In, Shut Out, Shut Up” seminar: “Shut In Shut Out Shut Up 3 2 Ableism, Faith & Church”, YouTube, 31 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnwyXM2OT04>.

³⁰ Gen. 1:27 (NRSV).

³¹ Gen 2:25 (NIV).

³² Brene Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (London: Ebury Publishing: 2021), Kindle edition, location 2311.

³³ Judith Rossall, *Forbidden Fruit and Fig Leaves* (London: SCM Press, 2020), 5.

³⁴ Shane Clifton, “Crippling Christian Theology: Reflections of a post-Pentecostal Disability Theologian,” *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 5 December 2020, accessed 31 October 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/crippling-christian-theology-disability-faith-and-doubt/12952958>.

³⁵ June Boyce-Tillmann, “Language” in *Something Worth Sharing* (Inclusive Church, 2018), accessed 31 October 2021, <https://www.inclusive-church.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Something-Worth-Sharing-WEB.pdf>, 15.

poor”, as opposed to work-shy “unworthy poor”, and given Poor Law Relief (a place in the Workhouse or money from public funds). Disabled people also became more and more dependent on the medical profession for cures, treatments and benefits and were shut away. Separate special schools and day-centres were set up that denied disabled and non-disabled people the day-to-day experience of living and growing up together.³⁶

This was done out of “good intentions”. Christian institutions set up, churches supporting, seeking to do good. Able-bodied people making decisions, seeking to help, to fix; accidentally othering disabled people, seeing those with mental illness only as the objects of charity, the recipients of care, people to be done to, the vulnerable, the weak, expected to lead life as passive victims.

Revelation 21:4, “[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes,”³⁷ has led to an idea of a disability-free afterlife, because disability is unworthy and linked with sin. The idea of disability needing to be healed is another source for the marginalisation of disabled people in this world, but Christ is resurrected with wounds. In his book *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, Biblical scholar Amos Yong writes:

[E]ach person with disability, no matter how serious, severe, or even profound, contributes something essential to and for the body, through the presence and activity of the Spirit; people with disabilities are therefore ministers empowered by the Spirit of God, each in his or her own specific way, rather than merely recipients of the ministries of non-disabled people.... [P]eople with disabilities become the paradigm for embodying the power of God and manifesting the divine glory.³⁸

Paul describes a “theology of weakness” – in which qualities that are normally devalued, such as “foolishness, frailty, fragility, and vulnerability” are marks of how God empowers his people. Paul tells us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”³⁹

Jesus starts his teaching in Matthew’s Gospel with the words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁴⁰ In Acts 2:17 we read, “Pour

out my Spirit upon all flesh.”⁴¹ All people, not just some, not just those deemed worthy, not just those whose minds work in particular ways. All flesh includes all minds.

God’s Spirit blows through all of us.

I wonder if we are willing to accept that this is true even when someone is experiencing psychosis?

In his book, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church*, Sam Wells articulates a theology of “being with”, arguing that the heart of Christian faith is God’s commitment to be with, revealed most deeply through Jesus. For Wells, being with starts with people’s assets, not their deficits,

and models enjoying people for their own sake, not to “do for” them, or to “use” them.⁴²

This can be really uncomfortable. Are we really willing to treat all people as valuable in God’s sight, as beloved children of God, as individuals where the Spirit is already at work, whose story may open up to us more of God’s love and work? Brene Brown describes true belonging as “the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to

“Are we really willing to treat all people as valuable in God’s sight, as beloved children of God, as individuals where the Spirit is already at work, whose story may open up to us more of God’s love and work?”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁷ Rev. 21:4 (NIV).

³⁸ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 95.

³⁹ 2 Cor. 12:9–10 (NRSV).

⁴⁰ Matt 5:3 (NRSV).

⁴¹ Acts 2:17 (NRSV).

⁴² Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2017).

change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.”⁴³

Are we willing for our churches to be places where it is safe for people to share their most authentic selves with us? If we accept this, how might this challenge our worship, our choices of stories that we hear, of voices that we allow to lead? What might this mean for our pastoral care, for our intercessions, our prayers for people?

BEAUTY IN CHAOS

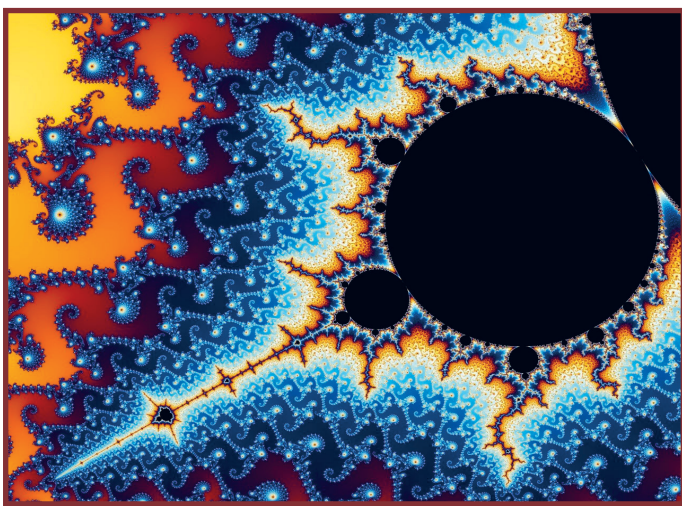
In contrast to the Michelangelo creation image, this image is the beauty of a Mandelbrot fractal. It is a reminder of the emergence of chaos theory in maths, of

how order arises out of fluctuations, of the complexity and beauty, of the patterns and connections within chaos. Keller says that “whirlwinds in meteorology are complex chaotic systems that suggest not pure chaos but rather turbulent emergence of complexity at the edge of chaos”.⁴⁴

This next image is a painting I made by acrylic pouring. Colours in a cup, tipped onto canvas, colours and beauty revealed, as breath is blown over the surface of the paint. This painting, making an eye, out of chaos, an eye that is a representation of God’s eye, gazing on me, on you.

It took me a long time to be able to sit with an image of God’s eye, gazing on me.

Ableism runs so deep, reinforced by so many around us. As I sat, I let God’s eye gaze on me, to see me without shame, made as I am; my response is the words written around the painting.



Partial view of the Mandelbrot set, Wolfgang Beyer (2006) Image created by Wolfgang Beyer with the program Ultra Fractal 3. Used under Creative Commons licence: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mandel_zoom_08_satellite_antenna.jpg (accessed 31/10/21).



Rachel Noël – “God’s Eye” painting (2021).



Rachel Noël – work in progress (2021); wet acrylic paint, poured onto canvas

“In the beginning, silence, depth, chaos, vibrations, becoming breath. Let there be differences. Deep calls to deep. Sink deep and feel that I am God. Let there be creativity and compassion, diversity and connection, spirituality, joy and paradox. God saw it was good.”⁴⁵

This article just tickles the surface. This raises so many questions:

⁴³ Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*, Kindle edition, location 2528.

⁴⁴ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 140.

⁴⁵ Rachel Noël – “God’s Eye” painting (2021).

- asymmetries of power, questions of control
- who gets to tell the stories, to make the meaning
- the potential for people to live without shame within our communities, for their stories to be heard, for their lives to be longer
- stigma, risk... to individuals experiencing psychosis, and to those around them
- healing
- purity
- social vs medical model of disability
- intersectionality with neurodiversity
- questions of not seeing experiencers as victims, or disordered, but perhaps as seeing them as having the luxury of spending time in the complexity on the edge of chaos, and of the depth of insight into *tehom* that they might bring.

I'm hoping that I've whet your appetite and encouraged you to consider a paradigm shift away from creating hard borders between psychosis and spirituality – that we may be willing to let God look at us, to look at each other and to allow ourselves to accept that God sees that we are good.

If you want to explore further, I encourage you to look at the “Shut In, Shut Out, Shut Up” seminars created by Fiona MacMillan with HeartEdge, which draw together different disabled and neurodivergent voices, opening up the conversation around neurodiversity, disability, ableism, faith and the church.⁴⁶

Rachel Noël, known locally as the Pink Vicar, is Priest in Charge of St Mark's Church, Pennington, a HeartEdge church in the Diocese of Winchester. Creative, colourful, enthusiastic, autistic, ADHD, bipolar and vulnerable to COVID-19, she is passionate about diversity and inclusion. Rachel leads a church that has embraced online, and is a member of the Community of Hopeweavers.

Fiona MacMillan is a disabled and neurodivergent disability advocate, practitioner, speaker and writer. She chairs the Disability Advisory Group at St Martin in the Fields, is a trustee of Inclusive Church, leads the planning team for their annual partnership conference on disability and theology, now in its 11th year, and convenes the Shut In, Shut Out, Shut Up disability seminar series on the HeartEdge platform. Fiona is a member of General Synod and of the Nazareth community.



⁴⁶ I owe personal thanks to Fiona, for her courage, persistence, perseverance and hard work in making these events happen, in educating, in supporting, in challenging the deep language that is throughout so much of church culture. Fiona has also worked with me in putting together the part of this article on ableism, helping me accept God's Spirit at work in me, in the reality of the body and mind that I have, and that that same Spirit is also at work in you.



MISSION WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Mark Arnold

One in five of the 13 million children and young people in the UK have additional needs of some kind.¹

That's approximately 2.5 million children/young people, yet even before the COVID-19 pandemic at best only 10 per cent of them had any kind of contact with church. More recently, the #LeftInLockdown research carried out in 2021 by the Disabled Children's Partnership highlighted that over 90 per cent of disabled children still found themselves socially isolated despite lockdown easing.² That includes isolation from church.

Many children and young people with additional needs, and their families, have found the last couple of years overwhelmingly difficult, as much of the vital support that they had relied on has been cut back or stopped altogether. I'm co-founder of the Additional Needs Alliance and over the course of the pandemic we asked families to tell us how it had been going for them. Words like "horrendous", "exhausting", "anxious" and "lonely" were common.

PRACTICAL AND MISSIONAL

So, what does being missional, reaching out to children and young people with additional needs and their families, look like for us as church in 2022? How can we respond to the needs of these struggling families? Before we can even think about supporting them spiritually, we need to be thinking about how we can support them practically – we need to *show* them the gospel before we can *tell* them the gospel.

We could offer to do some shopping for them or pick up a prescription. We could arrange to deliver a meal, or take a cake around as a welcome treat. We could create a small team to provide occasional respite support for a family, or accompany them to some of the many, often intimidating, meetings that they attend. Perhaps transport is an issue; we could help there too. Most of all, we need to keep in contact, making sure that no family feels forgotten. As a parent who responded to the Additional Needs Alliance survey put it:

"As always, we can learn from the examples that Jesus gave us: how through his encounters with people he showed us how to be loving and inclusive of all"

Notice us. We will always cope and be "OK" because we don't have any other choice. See beyond the bravado and offer us something to make sure we know you're taking us with you.

And as we think about those practical ways to provide support, we need to be aware that many families will have had years of rejection, exclusion, discrimination and negativity, and that might have been from the church, too. I've heard too many stories of children and their families being told that they are no longer welcome as their child might be "a health and safety risk", or that "this isn't a special needs church", or even a disabled child, a *child* for goodness' sake, who was told by their Sunday school teacher, "Don't come back."

As always, we can learn from the examples that Jesus gave us: how through his encounters with people he showed us how to be loving and inclusive of all, creating belonging and community for everyone, leaving no one out. Children and young people mattered to Jesus during his ministry on earth; he healed them, he raised them from the dead, he rebuked anyone who turned them away and he didn't discriminate against any of them. Neither should we.

BARTIMAEUS (MARK 10:46–52)

A favourite Bible story of mine is when Jesus met Bartimaeus, a man who was blind and who

begged on the road near Jericho. Jesus had been going around teaching, preaching and healing people, and a large crowd was travelling with him. As he passed by where Bartimaeus was begging, Bartimaeus heard the commotion and asked what was going on. Someone told him that it was Jesus and his followers, and so Bartimaeus shouted out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"³ What happened to Bartimaeus next is what can commonly happen to children, young people or adults with additional needs; Bartimaeus was told to be quiet, to keep out of the way, to not be a bother. But the more they tried to stop him, the more Bartimaeus kept crying out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus heard him and asked Bartimaeus to come to him.

¹ Department for Education, "Reforms for children with SEN and disabilities come into effect," GOV.UK, 1 September 2014, accessed 4 October 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/reforms-for-children-with-sen-and-disabilities-come-into-effect>.

² Disabled Children's Partnership, #LeftInLockdown - Parent carers' experiences of lockdown," 2021, accessed 4 October 2021, <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LeftInLockdown-Parent-carers-experiences-of-lockdown-June-2020.pdf>. Further information in <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Loneliest-Lockdown.pdf>

³ Mark 10:47 (NIV).

You can imagine the scene: Bartimaeus is in front of Jesus; a large crowd is gathered around jostling for position to see what happens. The expectation is reaching fever pitch among the people who have heard about the miracles that Jesus has been performing. Then Jesus does something unexpected, something that takes the crowd by surprise, something that teaches us about how we should be with someone who has additional needs. Jesus asks Bartimaeus a question, “What would you have me do for you?”⁴

The crowd must have been incredulous; it’s Bartimaeus, he’s blind – you’ve been going around healing people, so what do you think he wants from you?! Now I’m sure that Jesus, as a human being, knew that Bartimaeus was blind; and I’m sure that as God made flesh, he knew what Bartimaeus wanted from him, but Jesus didn’t assume. Jesus didn’t decide on Bartimaeus’ behalf; he gave Bartimaeus the dignity and respect to allow him to ask for himself, for his *own* voice to be heard. Bartimaeus said, “I want to see,” and so Jesus restored his sight; but in Jesus’ encounter with Bartimaeus – the way he was with him, the question he asked him – he teaches us some very valuable lessons, 2,000 years later.

ASK

A starting point for missionally reaching out to families with children and young people with additional needs is to work “with” them and not “to” them. So often, children and young people, and their families, can have inclusion “done unto” them poorly by well-meaning people who could have done things much better if only they had asked. By using the simple **ASK** approach below, the input of children and young people with additional needs, and their families, can help us know the best way to reach and support them. It recognises that helpful phrase, “Nothing about us without us.”

A. Ask – Simply ask. Get in touch with families of children and young people with additional needs and ask them to help you to get this right in your church. Tell them that you really value their input and that together you can make a difference. You might have to apologise

if your church hasn’t sought their input before or has ignored their previous suggestions. Ask them what barriers they have experienced – there will probably be some you haven’t thought of – and agree to work on removing them together. Other adults with additional needs or disabilities in your church might provide useful pointers here too.

S. Seek – What solutions can they think of? Are there ideas that have been helpful for them/their child or young person in other settings, such as school, home

or other clubs, that could be adapted to work in church? We don’t have to invent the wheel, there is likely to be a perfectly good one rolling along elsewhere in a child’s life!

K. Know – Learn from the families and from the children and young people themselves. They know most about their/their child’s best ways of experiencing and navigating a safe and successful way through the world and will have a wealth of knowledge to share that can help us in our church context; let them be your guide!

“Now I’m sure that Jesus, as a human being, knew that Bartimaeus was blind; and I’m sure that as God made flesh, he knew what Bartimaeus wanted from him, but Jesus didn’t assume.”

The language we use when journeying with families or the young people themselves is vitally important too. Do we include a box on a form for something that asks, “Does your child have any special needs?” and then be surprised when that box is left blank and yet a child subsequently arrives who needs support? Think about those families that have been told that their child isn’t welcome at church anymore; how likely are they to declare their child’s additional needs again?

Ask families how their child best likes to be supported and helped, what they enjoy doing, what positive things people say about them; these are all questions that are much more likely to help us get to know a child or young person better, unlock useful and helpful information, and be great conversation starters. A useful tool to help with this is a “one-page profile” and sample templates for these can be found in the resources area of the Sheffkids website: www.sheffkids.co.uk. I suggest you try using these with all of the children and young people that you journey with; you will find out more about them than you might think!

So, as we reach out into our community, looking to

⁴ Mark 10:51 (RGT)

minister and be missional with children and young people with additional needs and their families, practically showing them the gospel of love, let's recognise how difficult the last couple of years in particular have been for them, let's apologise for when we've got it wrong, let's ask them how we can help, and let's journey together with them to support them practically and spiritually in the future.

RESOURCES

If you would like a study pack to help you as a church to journey with this some more, including video resources and 10 study questions to explore, to help you to create a church where everyone belongs, you'll find everything you need here: <https://theadditionalneedsblogfather.com/2019/07/18/10-ways-to-belong/>

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THE GOLDEN LIGHT OF GOD'S KINTSUGI: MISSION AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Bill Braviner

There is a poem by Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, available in translation as “Childhood Friends”, which contains the following lines:

Let a teacher wave away the flies
and put a plaster on the wound.
Don't turn your head. Keep looking
at the bandaged place.
That's where the light enters you.
And don't believe for a moment
that you're healing yourself.¹

Rumi seems to have been the first person who explicitly talks about the light entering a person through a wound, but it is an image that has been taken up and used by many people since.

Benjamin Blood wrote in 1860:

“There is a crack in every thing that God has made;”
but through that crevice enters the light of heaven.²

In 1929, Ernest Hemingway wrote:

The world breaks everyone and afterward many are
strong at the broken places.³

And famously, Leonard Cohen sang of the light coming in through the cracks in his 1992 song “Anthem”. Cohen's own comment on the song was, “There is a crack in everything that you can put together: Physical objects, mental objects, constructions of any kind. But that's where the light gets in, and that's where the resurrection is and that's where the return, that's where the repentance is. It is with the confrontation, with the brokenness of things.”⁴

How do all these quotes help us explore mission and mental health?

As someone who has experienced severe mental health difficulties in the past, I write from the perspective of that experience, and of the healing I continue to experience, as well as the insights I have gained over a decade's reflection on and learning from the experience.

In common with many people who have suffered psychological, emotional or spiritual trauma over the years, one of the concepts and images that became, and remains, very resonant for me is that of the Japanese art of kintsugi – the repairing of a broken object by incorporating new material that highlights

and celebrates the repair, the joins, the “cracks”, and makes the resulting object into something that celebrates its story and identity as something that once was broken and is now more beautiful, because of the repair rather than in spite of it.

This image became very profound for me, as it has for others, because I experienced a deepening of my understanding of God, of the world and of myself, as a result of the process of living through and living with mental health issues, and the experience of how God wrought healing in me.

My healing noticeably began when I was brought up short by the realisation (obvious in so many ways!) that the story of Easter, of the resurrection, contains the central truth that Christ was raised *with his wounds* – and that, in fact, it was the wounds themselves that were offered as a proof of his resurrection, for example in John 20:24–29. Just as the risen Christ bore his wounds, so my healing would be not in spite of mine, but with them – and in some ways, through them.

We live in a world where many are wounded, in many ways. The psychological, emotional and spiritual wounds that so many people carry are not more important than the physical wounds inflicted on so many in our world, but neither are they less so. We recognise far more acutely today the seriousness of, for example, PTSD – something for which a century ago, brave men were being shot as “cowards”.

Healing from such woundedness need not, and often does not, involve a recovery from something so much as an adapting to it, a living with it. We are not called to a God who says, “Come back when you are fixed,” but to a God who is with us in our walk through the valley of the shadow of death, a God who promises that the weary and heavy-laden can cast their burdens on him and find rest for their souls. Our healing is less about “being fixed”, and far more about finding peace, wholeness, *shalom* in God.

This becomes very important when journeying with people who have psychological, emotional or spiritual burdens that are impacting negatively on their mental health, on their ability to interact with and cope with the context in which they are living, the circumstances of their lives, the filter through which they are able to see the world.

Where, for those of us who live with woundedness in

¹ “Childhood Friends” in *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 139–41.

² Benjamin Blood, *Optimism: The Lesson of Ages* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1860), 91.

³ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (London: Arrow Books, 2004).

⁴ Reported in Cassie Weber, “‘There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in’: The story of Leonard Cohen's ‘Anthem’”, *Quartz*, 11 Nov 2016, accessed 22 October 2021, <https://qz.com/835076/leonard-cohen-anthem-the-story-of-the-line-there-is-a-crack-in-everything-thats-how-the-light-gets-in/>.

our psyche, our emotions and our spirit (and I would argue that to some extent at least, this is all of us), do we find the deepest activity of the Holy Spirit? Surely it is at those very places of brokenness, where God seeks not so much to undo our woundedness but to transform it, not so much to “fix” as to heal, not so much to bring repair as wholeness? It’s at those places, those parts of who we are, where God finds the cracks through which the light – the light of God’s love and life – gets in.

In mission, therefore, in working with people, or communities, or societies to enable and encourage an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit as God seeks to reveal his kingdom more and more fully, it is the places of brokenness, of woundedness, of crucifixion, that ought to be a central focus. It is those places, those cracks, where the healing God seeks to bring, needs to pour in – and it is in transforming those aspects of people, communities, societies and so on that the glory of resurrection begins to be seen, that new life begins to flourish, that the glory of God transforms trauma and brings beauty from brokenness.

As the golden light of God’s kintsugi pours in through the cracks, part of the healing is that people, communities, societies begin to discover anew what they are and what they are called to be, what potential they have and what they can do. Often this is in new or unexpected directions, through new perspectives opened up by the processes of brokenness and healing. My own engagement in the field of disability and theology would be a case in point, but so would the stories of so many others. Some good examples are recounted in Pastor Mike Mather’s *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*,⁵ and in Fr Greg Boyle’s *Tattoos on the Heart* and *Barking to the Choir*.⁶

It is my conviction, borne out of over 30 years engagement in parish life, 26 of them in ordained ministry, that it is when we pay attention to beautiful work of healing that God is doing and seeks to do in people (including ourselves), in communities and in society, that we come to an appreciation of where God’s mission is focused, and where God’s activity is directed. This is not to suggest that God is only interested in particular people or places – only in those who have some recognisable psychological, emotional or spiritual difficulty but it is to suggest that there is something of this in us all, and in all the ways we live together, that God seeks to work on, to heal and yes, to use as a strength – for his power is made perfect in weakness.

God calls us, not so much to “the broken”, as to engage individually and corporately with our brokenness; not so much to “the poor”, as to engage individually and corporately with our poverty; not so much to “the needy” as to engage individually and corporately with our needs, and with our abilities and assets, so that the golden light of his wholeness can both pour into us through the cracks in our being, and also shine out of us through those same cracks, for the healing of others and of the world.

The wounds we carry, then, are not so much burdens to be shed as anchors of grace. Not so much shame to be borne, but openings to love. Not so much faults to be fixed as openings to healing, to wholeness, to the kingdom and to Christ.

May we help one another to let God pour in the golden light of his kintsugi, that all may see the enhanced beauty and blessing of those who know that they are made whole.

Originally from South Shields, County Durham, Bill Braviner trained with Price Waterhouse as a chartered accountant after university, before responding to a call to ordination. He was ordained in 1995 and recently moved to the Diocese of Leeds, where he is the archdeacon of Halifax.

Having experienced a period of mental health difficulties some 10 years ago, Bill was led to develop his engagement in issues around disability, working with and journeying with others who brought a perspective from the “inside”. This led to the formation of Disability and Jesus, a “user-led” group that seeks to encourage change and foster access and inclusion across the church. Bill was also disability adviser to the bishop and Diocese of Durham from 2015 until leaving the diocese to take up the role of archdeacon.



⁵ Michael Mather, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

⁶ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010); *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).



MISSION, AND DISPELLING THE DISABILITY/ TRAGEDY NARRATIVE

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Kay Morgan-Gurr

“I’d rather be dead than in that.”

This statement is often thrown at me by people as they wave a hand towards my wheelchair. I’m not alone in this. Many people I know have similar comments made about their various disabilities. Friends with learning disabilities are dismissed with a “Well, they don’t know any different, the poor things,” along with “But I feel so sorry for their parents.”

Where does this judgement come from? Why do people think that it is better to be dead than disabled?

It comes from what is known as the “tragedy narrative” and it speaks into every stage of life where disability is concerned.

It speaks into life before birth. When parents find out their child will have a disability, the first thing they are offered by the medical profession is a termination. The tragedy narrative says any child with a disability will have no quality of life. This pronouncement is often made by medical people who have no lived experience of children with disabilities (other than in a medical capacity) and do not

understand their worth or their quality of life. A friend who had a doctor that just could not understand why she was fighting so hard for the treatment her son needed asked some of her friends – me included – to write something about her son to show the amazing quality of life he had. She got the treatment he needed, but she should not have had to do this.

If the narrative of disability is only of tragedy, there is no worth. This is clearly seen in the prenatal screening now given to detect Down syndrome.

Since this has been in place, terminations for Down syndrome have risen hugely and are regularly offered, along with much pressure to do so, right up until birth.

This narrative is also seen in the reaction of people to a child born with a disability – the “I’m so sorry” response when they learn the child has “something wrong with them”. Even as a 50-something I get the same reaction from people, usually said with a slight tilt of the head to the side along with a pained expression. My reaction is often, “Why be sorry – I get to sit down all day, and I can wear heels without fear of blisters and tripping over!”

Another reaction I get is: “That must be so hard!” The

truth is, it wouldn’t be so hard if the world were more accessible and disability weren’t seen as the worst thing in the world.

Disability seems to be an upsetting and uncomfortable word for many people who have no experience of it. People try to cancel the word out and replace it with something more palatable because the word is just so... “tragic”. The phrase “differently abled” is from this stable, and it makes many disabled people shudder when they hear it.

This idea of disability being a tragedy also impinges on working or having a job. A friend on social media recently received private messages saying she must have been lying about being disabled because she had a job and disabled people don’t work. Of course, this isn’t true – disabled people do work. But I suspect the struggle for many disabled people in finding work is not only driven by fear and not wanting to make accommodations, but also this view of disability being so awful; because disability is so horrible you can’t work, and if you do work you won’t be good enough and

need sick leave all the time. Statistics actually blow this out of the water. Generally, disabled people with the right accommodations have less time off, work longer and harder, and are loyal to their employer. I don’t see that as a tragedy.

Over the pandemic, many disabled people have been given “do not resuscitate” (DNR) orders without their knowledge. At other times, many of us have been asked time and time again about our resuscitation wishes. Sometimes this starts with, “Are you still refusing the DNR?”

Why is this? It’s that tragedy narrative again, where we’re told our lives aren’t worth living, so why should they bother resuscitating us? They think they will be doing us a favour.

The truth is, our lives have worth. I have a full life. I laugh a lot, enjoy a lot and I live a lot. Yes I have a job I love, but that shouldn’t be a measure of my worth.

All these reactions overflow into church life too. I’ll start with the elephant in the room: why do so many Christians chase after people with obvious disabilities and demand to pray for healing, or say awful things like, “If you trust in Jesus, you will be able to get out of that chair”? This tells disabled people that they are not

“Disability seems to be an upsetting and uncomfortable word for many people who have no experience of it. People try to cancel the word out and replace it with something more palatable because the word is just so... ‘tragic’.”

acceptable to God unless they are cured. Now that IS a tragedy.

When disability is seen as a tragedy, and the compassion response is only driven by this narrative, disabled people will struggle to find their place in the church in the way that God intended. This will be the case for not just those of us with the noticeable disabilities, but those with invisible disabilities, neurodiversity, mental health struggles and more. Of course, when we don't fit the narrative of "disabled person now fixed – job done", we get a secondary tragedy to add to the list: our faith becomes the perceived problem.

We need to change the narrative.

Through my acquired disability, I have learned much. I have gained more than I have lost. God has been in that place with me, and when I am struggling with extreme pain, there is divine beauty in that place. As I've worked alongside children who have additional needs I have learned much. There have been many holy places as I have sat with them.

My own disability has been a bonus in many areas of ministry, but where it hasn't, it has often been due to this view of disabled people only being receivers of ministry, not those who minister. Many see my ministry as awkward and even a "bad advert for the church". Yet I believe my disability is a unique gift to ministry and something that God can use. Once again that tragedy narrative creeps in; I cannot minister as a disabled person because there is nothing positive about disability. Therefore I find few platforms I can access to preach and even fewer theology books I can listen to instead of read.

My journey with disability began when I was 14. I didn't know at that point I had a genetic condition that would rear up and bite me later! I was asked to "help" on a church camp for young people with disabilities. The language was very much around "doing to", not with or alongside. This was about pity and doing something about it. The word "tragic" was constantly in the background. I even won an award for "helping on a

camp for 'handicapped' children" from a para church youth organization! The bus journey to the campsite soon bashed the saviour attitude out of me. The girl I was to "be responsible for" quickly became a friend; she taught me much and set me on a path of ministry that affected my whole life. We were equals. I made many other friends on this camp who have continued to teach and influence me and helped me on my own journey with disability. I carried on with those camps for years. By the time I stopped, the tragedy narrative was nowhere to be seen. But it reappears without fail when my friends try to enter our churches.

Throughout society, including our churches, the narrative of tragedy filters through everything. It's like a water leak that can erode tiles, ceilings, floors and concrete – it affects everything. It may not look like the culprit, but there is always a channel back to it.

As a church we need to shift our thinking and change the narrative. Why are children with disabilities and additional needs never mentored – especially for leadership? Why are disabled people often overlooked for ministry roles? This is just one area where we need to change the narrative.

Disabled people should be seen like any other. They should be in leadership roles; they should be teaching our children, leading mission teams and allowed to be on the mission field. This not only gives worth and dignity but dispels the myth of tragedy. It also shines a light to the rest of the world about how we value the voice and the presence of disabled people in our lives and our churches.

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MISSION AND DISABLED PEOPLE

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Tim Rourke

In 2013 I attended a course called Self-Management of Long-Term Health Conditions. There were people on the course who lived with a range of different impairments, from Parkinson's disease to spinal conditions and ME. We had different conditions but shared many of the same experiences of living as disabled people in the UK today.

Having shared with the group a prayer activity that I use on my bad days, a discussion about church began. I discovered that since we received our various diagnoses, every member of the group had been to a church. 12 people searching for help in a time of hurt and pain had tried to connect with God through various Christian communities. I also discovered that from that group, I was the only person still going! As a disabled evangelist this shocked me and made me wonder why, and what can we as disabled and non-disabled Christians do about it?

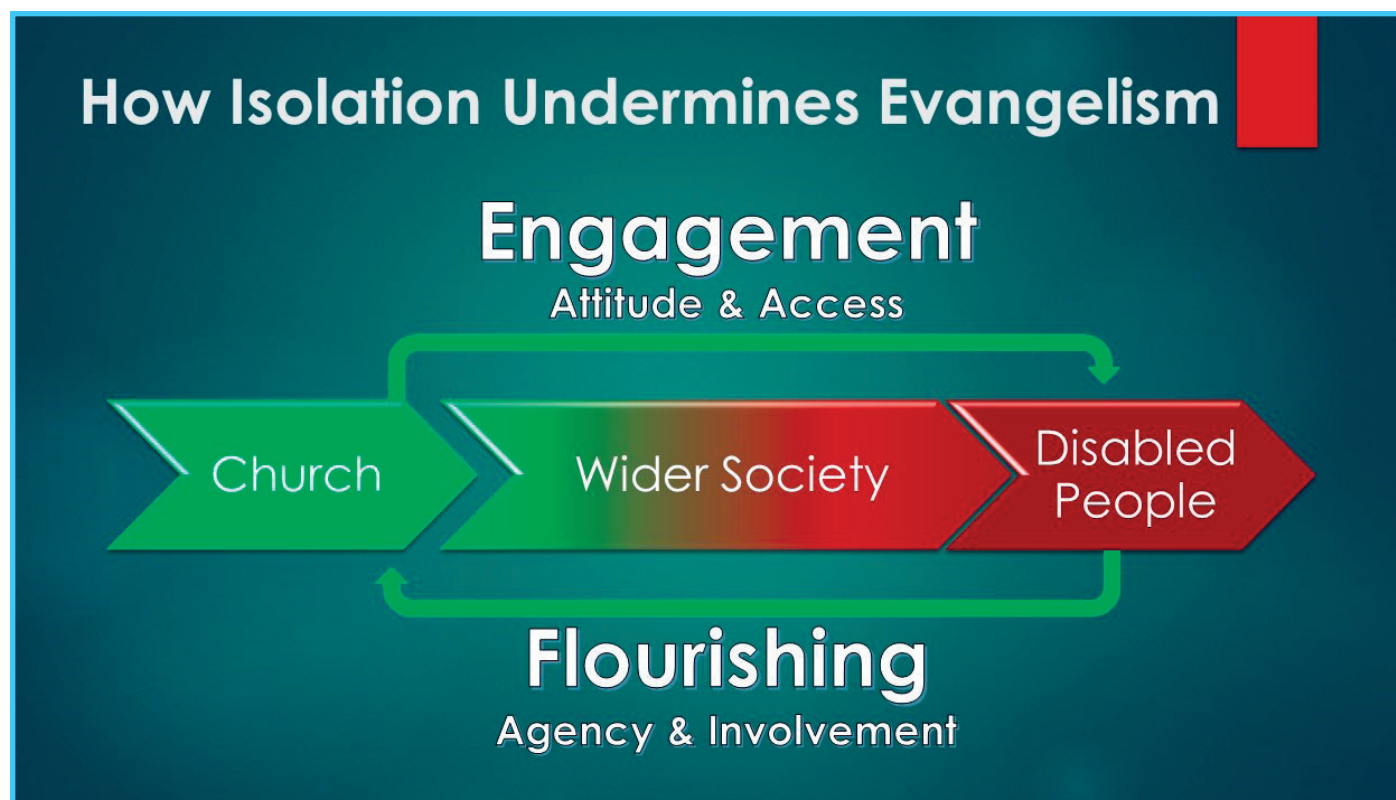
According to the research we carried out in the Derby diocese in 2020, an estimated 11 per cent of church members are disabled, using the definition of disability from the Equalities Act 2010.¹ This compared to a

national average of 15 to 20 per cent in the general public and over 40 per cent for 65-year-olds.

Interestingly the number of common adaptations made to a church building did not directly correlate with the number of disabled people in any given church. On reflection, the Disability Inclusion Working Group (Derby Diocese) felt that adaptability and willingness to listen to disabled people's stories increased the likelihood of them being a part of a church community. Disabled people in decision-making bodies and leadership were also fairly uncommon.

Disabled people are among the most isolated groups in UK society. 67 per cent of people feel uncomfortable when talking to a disabled person (according to a report by SCOPE in 2014).² Disabled people are more than four times as likely to feel lonely, "often or always", and more than twice as likely as to experience domestic abuse than non-disabled people.³

This potentially has huge implications for disabled people and the church's mission and evangelism across the UK.



¹ You're a disabled person under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a "substantial" and "long-term" negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities. "Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010," GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>.

² "Brits feel uncomfortable with disabled people," SCOPE, 8 May 2014, <https://www.scope.org.uk/media/press-releases/brits-feel-uncomfortable-with-disabled-people/>.

³ "Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2020," Office for National Statistics, 18 February 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2020>.

Often churches aim to grow through engagement with people we meet through social interactions outreach and connecting with our communities. As disabled people are often find themselves excluded by those communities and beyond the edges of society, these methods will struggle to engage.

Pioneering among groups who are not engaged with the church might prove more successful, one might think. However, because these communities congregate around pre-existing groups, there is a need to consciously reflect on how many disabled people live in these groups to begin with. In my experience meeting with pioneers, this is rarely done.

The diagram highlights some of these challenges. The church (in green) tries to influence and encourage people in the wider society to respond to Christ, but it is more likely to meet people who are from “easy-to-reach” groups. “Harder-to-reach” groups, in this case disabled people, need to be engaged with in specific and intentional ways.

At the same time, disabled people who are already within the church need to be seen as important, valued and flourishing. Christianity needs to be Good News to them, and listening to their experiences needs to inform and shape the engagement for the future.

Over the course of year, a team of disabled Christians from churches across the Diocese of Derby looked into ways that church structures and local churches can engage with disabled people and become more receptive to their needs. Together we wrote a report called “The Disabling Church... and what to do about it”. At Diocesan Synod in October 2021 the report was received and these three challenges for the diocese were accepted:

Aim 1

(Attitudes) to challenge and change all attitudes that limit the lives of disabled people in our churches and structures

Aim 2

(Access) to remove all barriers that stop disabled people engaging with church, both online and in our buildings

Aim 3

(Agency) to celebrate the lives of all disabled people and provide space for them to minister alongside others in response to God’s love

During the year of the project, we saw examples of how churches can build bridges and barriers to disabled people and how, with small changes, disabled people can be included better.

ATTITUDE

Challenging the assumptions and attitudes of a community is the most influential way for inclusion to take place. Churches, like all communities, have set ways of operating that are often not reflected upon or written down. These were probably not shaped by disabled people and therefore don’t often accommodate disabled people who need to do things in a variety of different ways.

Christians also have quite a history of making judgements of disabled people and using inappropriate methods of prayer. The experiences have damaged many in the disabled community. Most visibly disabled people have at least one story of being singled out for prayer, often without their consent. This makes the church a challenging place to engage with in the first place.

However, with a flexibility and a willingness to listen, simple changes can build bridges instead. In one example, a church had an unusual way of reading the psalms antiphonally between the reader and the congregation. It was joined by an older teenager with learning disabilities who asked to read in the service. The church changed its practice immediately to only have one response at the end of the reading, so that he could be included!

ACCESS

Often the barrier to thinking about access is that we have many old buildings and few funds to make them accessible, with ramps, toilets and hearing loops costing money that we don’t have.

However, there are things that can be done very cheaply. For example, including photos and a description of your building on your website so that people know what they will face when they enter enables people to plan their way in before they arrive. Also, make sure the signs in your buildings are clear, readable and correct.

If you can’t do everything (and you probably can’t), then do something! Get advice from organisations or advisors, or even better, invite a group of local disabled people into your church and ask them what would be most useful for them to know so that they can get around in your building. You have experts locally, so use them.

And please stop saying “everyone welcome” on your posters! While you are probably open to anyone who wants to come, that doesn’t help disabled people know **if** or **how** they can come. There is little more demoralising than turning up to discover that the event that everyone is welcome but that can’t include you!

In Derbyshire, a new church group was forming around the joy of nature and meeting God while spending time outside. The group knew that the planned walk was flat. In the first session, a scooter user came along to test it. Now all the publicity says “wheelchair accessible”. Knowing things in advance helps disabled people to know that they are “welcome” too!

AGENCY

Representation of disabled people in the leadership of the Church of England is hard to judge. As far as I am aware, no bishop has stated that they are disabled, although by the definition used in the Equality Act and the age profile of bishops, they probably are.

Disabled people often face extra challenges to other forms of ordained or lay leadership, and because they are disabled, they may never be given the opportunities to serve in the first place. This lack of involvement leads to sidelining and othering of disabled people. This is often seen when our intercessions pray for the ill and the sick as *them*, rather than *us*.

A pioneer Christian community were writing their prayers and liturgy, which included disabled people. Disabled people were involved in the creation of the prayers, which affirmed everyone as they were and encouraged everyone to respond to God’s call. The “us and them” prayers that churches often use didn’t need changing or adapting, because they were never written in the first place. Involvement of disabled people in all we do in our churches informs our inclusion more than anything else.

So, what is Jesus’ Good News for those people on the “long-term health conditions” course who joined and then left the church?

Maybe it is to be loved as they are. To be listened to as they are. To be included as they are!

Not because God will take away their symptoms and conditions (a cure) to make them acceptable to others, but because in the church, the disabled and resurrected body of Christ, together we can find hope, peace, love, healing and belonging.

Tim is a disabled Church Army evangelist developing a pioneering community with others in Chesterfield in Derbyshire. The community consists of three groups: disabled adults, disabled children and carers. For the last two years, Tim has been leading a disability inclusion project to produce a report to help disabled people to flourish and be accepted better across Derby diocese. He is studying for an MA in Theology and Transformative Practice at The Queens Foundation, focusing on the experiences of disabled people. Tim’s hobbies include playing board games, cooking and watching sport.



MISSION, DISABILITY AND CREATIVITY

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Emma Major

MISSION?

Jesus said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”

Mark 16:15 (ESV)

This is the crux of mission for me: it is to GO into the world and join in with what God is already doing in ALL of creation. “Go”; mission is going into the world, whether that’s the local community, a far-flung country or an online community. “All” of creation; mission is not just being with those who look like you or act like you, not just those in church or known to church, but every single person, especially those you don’t see in church.

What might God be doing that we are called to join in with? Jesus tells us to care for the poor, feed the hungry, stand up for the downtrodden, protect the weak and guide the lost. That seems like a good list to start with; or, to put it more succinctly, share the love of God with everyone.

I know that in the past I have put God in a box called “church” contained safely in church because that’s where it’s easy to find God, talk about God and share God. Even when I spoke about church being the people not the building, I was still limiting God to those who were part of that wider definition of church. I knew that God is everywhere in life, in every place, every activity, every silence, every question. God is at home, work, leisure, health, politics, justice, illness, recovery, life and death. I couldn’t contain God safely; God was waiting for me wherever I went to join in with God’s work of loving everyone.

Then I lost my sight overnight and my mobility within months. I became disabled. Going into the world was literally almost impossible, but before I get into that, let’s define disability.

DISABLED?

You’re disabled “if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities”.¹

I’m disabled; I’m a blind wheelchair user with long Covid. However, my impairments aren’t the greatest disabling

factor in my life, society is; and my disability doesn’t define me, my gifts and talents do.

We all have gifts and talents, experiences and knowledge to be valued; we must celebrate everyone for their gifts as well as knowing each person’s needs. However, if we can’t get into a room, no one will ever even know about our gifts, skills and talents. That’s the most disabling part of being disabled.

An example. A church meeting is arranged in London to start at 9 a.m. in an old building. Most people can jump on a train early in the morning, get the Underground a few stops and bounce up the stairs into the building. I know that’s true – I used to do it all the time.

As a wheelchair user, I have to pre-book my place on a train and the assistance (ramp) to get on and off it. Most of the Underground network involves steps, which makes it inaccessible. I need to catch a taxi but most of those aren’t truly accessible. The taxi drops me near the building but not quite close enough to avoid the blocked drop curb. Those steps into the building are interesting; how do I get someone to tell me where the accessible entrance is without going up them? (I’ve spent hours sorting this out and know who to ring.) Eventually in the building, I realise I can’t get around the room and no one knows where a disabled toilet is. I could go on.

What happens now I’m disabled? I stop going to meetings; there are no disabled voices in the room, because it’s too exhausting and depressing, especially with fatigue in the mix.

The Bible is full of Jesus healing people – much has been written around how those accounts are more about healing spiritually than healing physical or mental disabilities.

Instead, I want to briefly share two passages:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.”

Jer. 1:5 (ESV)

God knew us and knows us and knows what will be in our futures. Everything we are throughout our life is loved and blessed by God, no matter what disability we might have.

“We all have gifts and talents, experiences and knowledge to be valued; we must celebrate everyone for their gifts as well as knowing each person’s needs.”

¹ “Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010,” GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>.

“Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”

Luke 24:39 (NRSV)

Jesus was disabled when he was resurrected; he still had the physical damage from the crucifixion. As Nancy Eiesland writes:

... the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected saviour, calls for his frightened companions to recognise in the marks of impairment their own connection with God.²

The biggest barrier I had to overcome when I became disabled was the one in my mind that said I could no longer live fully, I could no longer do... just about everything. And it's true; life became extremely challenging, as you've read in the example above, because the inaccessibility of the world is placed on disabled people rather than on the barriers to full inclusivity.

But just because I couldn't "go" or "do" as I did before didn't mean that I could no longer "go" or "do" – it would just be different. In fact, it would be better, more out of the God box, more available, more creative.

CREATIVE?

Relating to or involving the use of the imagination or original ideas to create something.³

Everyone is creative; yes, even you. We overcome obstacles by being creative: we speak and that's creative, we draw and paint and garden and sew and photograph and tell jokes: we are all creative. Creativity is an integral part of human life and a central part of being a Christian.

Creativity is right there at the very beginning of the Bible:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Gen. 1:1 (ESV)

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Gen. 1:27 (NIV)

Then let's hear from Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Eph. 2:10 (NIV)

If God is creative, which we know to be true, then so are we. Creativity is literally a God-given gift.

CAN CREATIVITY BE MISSIONAL?

These two verses from Colossians speak to me about the mission of creativity:

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Col. 3:17 (ESV)

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.

Col. 3:23 (NIV)

Mission is about finding where God is working and helping out. God is the initiator and we respond. Jesus told us: "Without me [Jesus], you can do nothing."⁴

God created me. God created me with gifts of creativity that have come to the fore artistically through my disability. God has grieved with me and healed me through all the challenges I have faced, and God has guided me to new ways of living and new ways of being a minister.

Hardly anyone would think someone almost entirely blind could paint as I do, but thanks to technology and the whisper of God to keep going, I do. Then, when I share my creations, I am sharing my faith and the blessing of God in my life; that is mission.

I don't mean sharing just the church and faith-related creativity, but all of it – because my life is inspired and energised by God and therefore so is everything I create.

HERE ARE THREE EXAMPLES.

Pentecost painting⁵

I painted this for Pentecost and shared it online; it was picked up by church leaders and Christians who asked if they could use it for prayer or in services. This is clearly mission.

² Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 100.

³ "Meaning of creative in English," *Lexico*, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/creative>.

⁴ John 15:5 (RGT).

⁵ <https://www.llmcalling.com/post/pentecost-1?fbclid=IwAR3prmd5Msnpl4c7hPQKOHG8C3vP4cuor71lsprzcQLoUf7YgT9iX2lpy2o>

Caring for creation⁶

These abstract paintings and associated poems were created in prayer about the climate emergency. They talk to people, no matter what their faith, about the importance of caring for God's creation. They might point to God or they might not, but they are inspired by God – and this is mission.

Landscape paintings⁷

I miss going into the woods and the hills; I miss the wild places of the world. But I have learned to paint digitally and I have learned to travel to wild places through my painting, and that gives me freedom. These paintings aren't explicitly about faith, they are just paintings that I have enjoyed creating; when I share them they speak to people, they spark conversations, they form connections and they inspire other people to see what is possible in their lives. This is mission.

CAN SHARING THE DAY-TO-DAY REALITIES OF MY LIFE AND FAITH THROUGH MY CREATIVITY BE MISSIONAL?

Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually!

1 Chron. 16:11 (ESV)

I share my weakness and strength, my pain and joys, the reality of my life as a woman, as a disabled woman, as a disabled disciple, as a disabled minister seeking and following God every day.

I live differently, I am called differently. I bring a different view of humanity and this is an important reflection in the world. By sharing my life creatively online I have a ministry of presence, recognisable as a person of God bringing people together

I creatively share who I am, honestly, openly about how God is at work in my life. I write, paint and share knowing that God is in every moment of my life, in every word I write, in every colour I paint. But even more than that, I know that God will be with whoever engages with my poetry and art: a constant presence waiting to be found, a still small voice waiting to be heard. God inspires me and leads me and then leads others to receive what I give. If that isn't mission, then I don't know what is.

This is a poem I wrote in June 2016, which is just as relevant today as it was then; this is my ministry, my mission, to share creatively.

Such a week of awful news
TV full of doom and gloom
Fifty dead
Shot in a club
MP shot
Doing her job
Added to the wars non-stop
And inequality that drops
The weakest in the darkest place
Without water
Without a home
All across the world they roam
And no one wants to take them in
They are blamed for everything

Why?

What has our world become
I do not know what can be done
But surely
One thing we should see
Is that it's real for you and me
All this grief
All this loss
My heavy heart
Removes life's gloss
Today I want to shut it off
To close the door
Switch off the phone
Makes me want to be alone
And cry
And rant
And shout so loud
God of mine
Why do you allow?

And yet I know
That my dear God
Is crying too
Through all this loss
Seeing our world
Feeling our pain
Seeing the evil
Repeat again
God must despair
At our lack of care

⁶ <https://www.llmcalling.com/caringforcreation>

⁷ <https://www.llmcalling.com/contact>

It's overwhelming
What can I do?
I'm just one person
As are you
But together
Joined with many more
Surely we can do
What's been done before
To make a change
Improve our world
To heal the sick
And warm the cold
To feed the hungry
Save the damned
We can't give up
Let's make a stand
To shout out loud
Put down the hate
Love each other
Gay or straight
Enemy, neighbour
Near or far
Evil cannot win this war
Love must open every door
So together stand
Together say
We'll help each other
Come what may
Through prayer and action
Donation
Petition
THIS is our God-given mission
With hopeful heart
I impart this vision
Can you make the same decision?

Emma Major is a pioneer lay minister, blind wheelchair user, artist and poet. Her poems have been included in numerous books and she has written her own collections of poetry on miscarriage, mental health and climate change. In 2020 her first book combining both poetry and art, *Little Guy: Journey of Hope*, was published by Wild Goose Publications. In 2021 Emma's first exhibition of paintings and poems, "Caring for Creation", was exhibited around Berkshire; it was hosted at COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021. She currently has paintings in two other exhibitions and has five books of poetry and paintings in various stages of publication. You can find Emma online at LLMCalling.com or on social media @emmuk74, where she shares her artwork and poetry to encourage, bless and affirm people.





ANVIL

BOOK REVIEWS

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Jione Havea, *Losing Ground: Reading Ruth in the Pacific*, (London: SCM Press, 2021)

I loved reading this book. Jione Havea is Tongan and, as a Kiwi, I was looking forward to reading a work from my part of the world. It is a fascinating read and such an interesting and challenging way of approaching the book of Ruth. Havea presents the insights that he gleaned from Bible studies conducted with Pasifika peoples in 2019–20 in the Solomon Islands, Ma’ohi Nui (French Polynesia), Aotearoa New Zealand, Nauru, Tonga and Australia. He uses a Pasifika concept of *talanoa*, which refers to three events: story, telling of stories and conversation. My only disappointment here is that we rarely hear the words of the participants themselves – they are usually mediated and woven into the text through Havea. This is one frame through which the book of Ruth is read. The other frame is our climate crisis. Havea claims that the book of Ruth opens with a climate crisis – there was a famine to which a family responded by migrating to find a better life. Themes of climate change, climate trauma and grief, climate resilience and climate injustice are all present in the narrative.

He decapitalises I, by using i. This may be disconcerting for some readers. However, he is not the first scholar to do this. bell hooks famously did not use capital letters for her name although she did capitalise I in her writings. Havea writes:

I use the lowercase for the first person when “i” am the subject, because I also use the lowercase for “you”, “she”, “he”, “they”, “it”, “we” and “others”. The privileging (by capitalisation) of the first-person singular is foreign to Pasifika native worldviews. (xii)

Maori scholar Jay Matenga has a similar perspective, in that he claims these pronouns reflect a Western worldview dominated by ownership. In his opinion, the indigenous world is much more orientated to belonging and for Maori, such pronouns have an implicit communal meaning.¹ This communal worldview is certainly reflected in the reading of the book of Ruth we find here. Most of the book relates the findings of the 20 Bible studies Havea conducted, and the last two chapters offer some interpretive perspectives and imaginative exercises such as imagining Ruth going into other narratives and places, or beginning to question how we read, remember and understand the biblical narrative.

I found this a fascinating read as, despite coming from the South Pacific, there were so many new angles and different questions from the ones that I would pose the

text. I am a white woman, not an indigenous person, so I bring a very different lens to the text. For example, one of the first things the Pasifika readers noted was the question of time. For these islanders a story takes time to unfold. They found the narrative of the family’s departure and border crossing too quick. They wanted to know what kind of family this was, what preparations they made, what food did they carry for the journey. I suspect, as well-fed Westerners used to being able to purchase food whenever we like, this is not a question we would ask. Did they carry baggage? Did they have helpers? Or did they leave everything behind?

Names are important in Pacific cultures. The Bible study participants all knew at least one Ruth but no Orpah or Chilion. This made them sad, and they determined that they would consider these names next time there was a newborn baby in the community. Another interesting perspective is that of colonialism, which meant that some groups were suspicious of Boaz’s generosity. Was he selfless or was he looking for something in return? The participants of Nauru and Ma’ohi Nui wondered this, as these islanders are familiar with extractive mining on their land. These participants knew that Boaz was a plantation owner so he may well have had profit in mind.

I recommend this book because I think it will introduce you to other worlds: the worlds and perspectives of island nations in the South Pacific. Moreover, the overarching frame of climate change and climate grief is not only highly relevant but also highly contextual for these nations who face ever rising sea levels. Havea has cleverly woven this theme of losing ground into this study of Ruth. He does this by exhorting us to realise that it may well be the questions that we ask that are as important as the answers we discover. He reminds us to have the courage to let go of plans, to let go of control and ultimately not to be afraid of losing ground.

Cathy Ross, Head of Pioneer Mission Leadership, Oxford, CMS

Luke Timothy Johnson, *Constructing Paul: The Canonical Paul Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020)*, *Interpreting Paul: The Canonical Paul Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021)*

I have always enjoyed reading the work of biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson. When commencing postgraduate New Testament studies, I found it useful

¹ https://jaymatenga.com/pdfs/MatengaJ_IndigenousEcologies.pdf

– and comforting – to read his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles because he holds firm to his conviction that they actually were authored by the apostle Paul, a controversial opinion in some academic circles. More recently, reading about the history of Jewish–Christian relations, his article on first-century polemic is an often-cited – if not always agreed with – defence of what appear to modern ears to be the some of the more shocking words on the lips of Jesus (notably in Matthew 23 and John 8). I was therefore very interested to read his two-volume study *The Canonical Paul*. The first volume is a modest 385 pages, and the second a somewhat heftier 598. I will not be able to do these excellent works of scholarship full justice in a review, but my headline recommendation is simple: these are volumes any serious student of the New Testament would do well to read.

Constructing Paul

Volume one focuses on *Constructing Paul*. At the outset it is important to note that Johnson's focus is on the canonical Paul, not the historical or intellectual figure. *Constructing Paul* engages in the foundational work of establishing Johnson's views on the critical questions for the academic study of Paul. It is divided into three parts: preliminary scaffolding, the materials and the elements. In the first part, Johnson assesses the sources, both canonical and apocryphal, for details of Paul's life. He then examines Paul's life and apostolic ministry. There follows an overview of Paul's writings. For Johnson, Paul is the author, although not necessarily the writer, of all the letters that bear his name (some were, Johnson proposes, written by an amanuensis). Finally, Johnson defends his view of Paul as a "creative thinker within a broader movement" rather than the sole founder of Christianity (p.99).

There are three chapters in part two. Johnson considers the nature of Paul's Jewish faith and identity, arguing Paul is both a Hellenistic Jew of the Diaspora, but also someone clearly invested in, and shaped by, both Palestinian Pharisaic thought and the Essenes in Qumran. Johnson describes Paul as a prophetic Jew, who considered "the spirit of prophecy to be active and powerful in himself and in others because of the resurrection of Jesus" (p.143). Paul is also someone whose thoughts and worldview are rooted within the scriptural narrative, albeit one that is being redefined and reinterpreted in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Johnson plays down the influence of Greco-Roman culture on Paul, as well as rejecting the use of post-colonial theory in New Testament studies, arguing that it anachronistically imposes practices common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century European (especially British) empires onto the first-century Roman empire.

The third part of *Constructing Paul*, "the Elements",

has four chapters. Johnson argues that Paul writes at length about his experience, particularly his encounter with the resurrected Jesus and the Holy Spirit, in each of his letters. Chapter nine discusses four further elements: convictions, myths, symbols and metaphors. Chapter ten examines Paul's letter to Philemon, "a fine vantage point for viewing Paul," in detail (p.248). Johnson proposes there is a close connection between Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians, suggesting all three were delivered by Tychicus when he returned the slave Onesimus to the household of Philemon in Colossae. By reading these three texts together, Johnson argues we can appreciate both Paul's theological and pastoral ministry, while Philemon provides a more personal touch. Chapter eleven, the final chapter of volume one, is a spirited defence of Paul, whom Johnson argues should be seen as a liberator, sharing a message that is radical and challenging, but neither oppressive nor dominating. It is the nature of that message which part two examines in great detail.

Interpreting Paul

The second volume of Johnson's project consists of 23 essays, some of which are written specifically for this book, while others have been published previously. It is a deliberately eclectic collection, based on Johnson's view that any study of Paul should produce not a neat and tidy codified system, but a "deconstruction" that treats the letters as texts in their own right, while also exploring the connections between them and their relationship to contemporary concerns. Johnson has not set out to write a "theology of Paul" because he believes to do so is a flawed enterprise that seeks to control and reduce what should be left free and full. Therefore his "deconstruction" is not after the way of Derrida or the postmodernists. Rather it is a resistance of any single way of reading Paul, combining breadth of enquiry with attention to detail. Ultimately, Johnson's aim in writing is to free the Pauline corpus from the constraints of academia and encourage pastors and teachers of the faithful to engage with all the texts as spiritual food for the church.

The subjects of the essays follow the broad sweep of how Paul's letters are arranged in the New Testament, beginning with Romans and ending with Titus (Philemon is discussed in volume one). They range far and wide: for example, the first essay is a discussion of how *pistis* is used in Romans 3:21–26, understanding Paul's argument to be primarily about the faith of Jesus rather than faith in Jesus. For Johnson, the Christian's faith, by the gift of the Spirit, can become like (one with) the faith of Jesus. Two essays engage with specific scholars: NT Wright's argument that the NT writers understood salvation as the restoration of God's people here on earth and Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* (which Johnson finds a highly problematic piece of scholarship, shaped more by assertion than argument). The topic

of glossolalia is explored in chapter six, beginning with the Corinthian context and ending in the modern day. Elsewhere, in an essay focused on Ephesians, Johnson discusses issues of sex and gender. Johnson's two convictions are to take both ancient and modern voices seriously and second, that the primary issue should be not matters of sexuality and gender, but whether we are growing in maturity in Christ. Johnson argues that Paul was conservative on matters of sexuality, but for his day liberal in his attitude to women. He examines the case for a revised reading of Paul (and other biblical texts) on the issues, arguing that if homosexuality is innate, not chosen, then the prohibitions of Scripture have less cogency. Johnson's primary concern is for holiness and purity whatever one's sexuality or gender.

Limitations of space preclude a detailed discussion of each essay; I will instead make five general observations about *Interpreting Paul* as a whole. First, Johnson follows where he believes the evidence leads, not where scholarly consensus resides. A clear example is found in chapter 20, which discusses the divine ordering of creation as expressed in 1 Timothy. Johnson begins with some orientation regarding his views on authorship and provenance before turning to his main focus, the theology of the letter. This chapter began as a paper for an SBL seminar on Pauline theology in 1996. It was critiqued by Professor Margaret Mitchell, and in this revised version, Johnson provides a response to Mitchell, both in defending his view that Paul was the author of 1 Timothy and also his translation of 1 Timothy 1:4. His continued insistence in other essays that the whole corpus is genuinely Pauline further emphasises this point.

Second, Johnson's main concern is to read the letters as letters – his description of Romans as primarily a fundraising letter rather than a systematic theological treatise is an insight I will consider at length. Third, Johnson is writing primarily for the church, not the academy. He says as much in the introduction and the conclusion, and his conservative take on academic issues supports this approach as well. Fourth, there is an impressive range of topics and levels of focus; between them, the 23 essays move from detailed analysis of a single word to a grand sweeping overview of the Pauline corpus in its entirety. This is also deliberate – Johnson wants to encourage up-and-coming scholars to be similarly versatile. Fifth, this book is an easy read, at least by the standards of hefty tomes on Paul. Johnson is clearly a master of his material, and although his writing is technical at times, it is never obtuse.

In his conclusion Johnson states he feels his task has only just begun. He reaffirms his commitment to read Paul's letters as letters and to avoid constructing a systematic theology of Paul. His main concern is the gap that has appeared between the academy and the church since the rise of critical biblical scholarship. His argument is

that just as the Gospels, not the results of an academic quest for the historical Jesus, nurture the church, so the "canonical letters ascribed to Paul shape the character of Christian identity" (p.500). His hope is that other scholars might follow his lead and read the whole of Paul's corpus, not just a selection of it.

The two-volume series *The Canonical Paul* is essential reading for serious students of the New Testament. It will be particularly valued by those, such as myself, who have always been sceptical of the "scholarly consensus" that has rejected Pauline authorship for a significant portion of the Pauline corpus. But even if you disagree with either his foundational premises or the details of his arguments, Johnson's work is an outstanding piece of scholarship that deserves thorough reading and evaluation.

Tom Wilson, St Philip's Centre, Leicester

Drew Collins, *The Unique and Universal Christ*, (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2021)

When I received this book for review, I was not prepared for the kind of book it turned out to be! As I began to read, I quickly became aware of three things. First, this is an immensely important book; second, a fairly brief review can do little more than offer some idea of its content. Only a review article could do full justice to it. Third, this book is the fruit of the author's personal quest to find answers to some basic questions, because "these questions nearly cost me my faith". The preface is a moving account of the author's intellectual and spiritual journey towards what he describes as a "generous Christian orthodoxy".

As the subtitle indicates, a major area of enquiry is the modern theology of religions. In a lengthy chapter (60 pages), Collins engages with what has become known as the Threefold Typology of Religions. Here, Collins interacts principally with Alan Race's use of this typology. The three typologies are exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Race fairly quickly disposes of first two and adopts the third because the others are unable to deal with what he loosely describes as philosophical criticism. This then poses a stark choice: either establish the possibility for theologically affirmative relationships with non-Christians by denying the literal sense of Jesus' description in Scripture and his status as the incarnate Son of God or affirm this or forsake any possibility of theologically constructive relationships with non-Christians. Simply stated, for Race, philosophy is the final arbiter of theological discourse. Race bolsters his position by his reliance upon the historical method developed by Ernst Troeltsch. Race insists on the centrality of historical criticism. He adopts the principle of analogy in two ways.

Negatively, Race uses the principle to limit the possibility of metaphysical uniqueness by insisting that all events occur under universal conditions thereby subverting the notion of divine intervention operating within a Chalcedonian Christology. Positively, the principle allows Race to identify analogical correspondences between the world religions in their orientation toward an experience of the transcendent and ethical transformation. This account leaves Race open to the charge that Troeltsch's exposition of historical method leaves the validity of religious experience insecure. Collins thus continues his exploration of Race's theology by bringing in John Hick's epistemology of religious experience, which Race finds unsatisfactory, and this is followed by an examination of the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and his exposition of the phenomenology of faith, which Race finds appealing – but there is no space here to pursue either Hick or Smith, important though they are for Race.

We turn then to the work of Hans Frei, which Collins believes will show that concerns about God's universal presence can be honoured outside of pluralism in a manner that Race's typology inhibits our ability to grasp.

Pairing Frei with Race may appear odd, since Frei is only rarely mentioned in the theology of religions discourse, but it can be shown that Race and Frei do have in common some basic concerns. There is no space here to draw attention to the full extent of such concerns, but mention must be made most notably of their common belief in God's presence to those outside the Christian faith and church, even while Frei insisted that it was a question that could only be addressed after the basic question of the identity of the God who is present.

Frei's work is sometimes described as postliberal, but, as Collins points out, it may equally merit the description post-conservative. In his approach to the Gospels, Frei's view centres on what he regards as an error made by both conservatives and liberals, namely that both mistake the Bible in general and the Gospels in particular as texts whose meaning is a function of its external reference over, and often against, its syntactical sense. In a word, both decide first to what Scripture refers and then interpret it accordingly. Conservatives tend to locate this reference in the past, in a chain of factual events running through scripture. Liberals locate Scripture's ostensive reference in the present, in terms of its contemporary relevance. In response to the influence of historicism, empirical philosophy and Deism, Frei shows how conservatives alike sought meaning in something behind or beyond the text, such as historical facts or ethical ideals. Here we come close to Frei's own mode of interpretation, which Collins calls the narrative option and which is oriented around the plain or literal sense of Scripture. This, for Frei, is not a claim of historical inerrancy. Rather, Frei advocates a literal reading of the Bible in which the interpreter can affirm that an affirmation of the historical reference of the Gospels and

crucifixion/resurrection accounts, though an essential component of Christian faith, is nonetheless secondary or subsidiary to their interpretation as realistic narratives. Thus, for Christians who are inclined to believe the resurrection transpired in history, the Gospels can only be said to refer miraculously to such historical events, even while they are acknowledged as necessarily limited accounts. The Gospels are not histories, but they are history-like and give rise to a figural interpretation. By this term derived from Erich Auerbach, Frei means that guided by faith in God's providential plan for the world, he suggests that what he calls the strange amalgamation of the particular identity and universal presence of Jesus Christ leads Christians into an engagement with the world.

In his conclusion, Collins seems to have resolved, albeit tentatively, his initial question: "How is the uniqueness of Jesus' identity connected to his continuing presence to creation?" He does so by expressing his preference for Frei's figural interpretation in its narration of the particularity of Jesus Christ in the Gospels over Race's vaguer hope in what Collins calls an "existential" horizon of concern.

This is an important book because of its intellectual rigour and honest questioning of standard answers to complex questions. It does however require some acquaintance with the work of modern theologians, especially Hans Frei, but it certainly moves forward the debate concerning Christian engagement with other religions.

Howard C Bigg, Cambridge

Anita Maryam Mansingh, *Exploring Indigenous Spirituality: The Kutchi Kohli Christians of Pakistan*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021).

This is a fascinating first foray into a largely undocumented world. Anita Maryam Mansingh, herself a Kutchi Kohli Christian, introduces the faith of these people, their challenges and joys in following Jesus for themselves. The first centre for Kutchi Kohli Christians opened in Pakistan in 1986, so this is a very young spiritual community, and it is probably the first time their Christian faith has been explored in print in English.

Exploring Indigenous Spirituality reads as if it is the author's master's dissertation (at less than a hundred pages it is too short for a PhD). This means it has commendable academic rigour, with a clear explanation of the method of research, the mode of analysis and the main argument that is advanced. Academic writing can at times be dry, but Mansingh largely avoids this,

especially when sharing the fruit of her in-depth interviews with her fellow followers of Christ. This is her main aim in writing – to ensure that otherwise unheard voices are recorded and available.

The book contains just four chapters: an introduction to Kutchi Kohli Christianity, an explanation of her methodological and spiritual framework, analysis of her research and recommendations for the future. Chapter one, as well as orientating the reader to the Muslim context of Pakistan and the largely Hindu context of the Kutchi Kohli people, introduces the three tools Mansingh uses in her analysis: interspirituality, multiple or double religious belonging and hybridisation. By interspirituality she means the possibilities for spiritual growth that come through studying, encountering and living with the religious traditions of another. Perhaps this is Krister Stendahl's "holy envy" writ large and lived out in a family that has both Hindus and Christians under one roof? This is why multiple belonging is so important, as all the Kutchi Kohli Christians featured in *Exploring Indigenous Spirituality* have Hindu relatives; some are the only Christian in their extended family. This in turn results in hybridisation, which focuses on the dynamic interaction between different cultures and religions.

Chapter two, on methodology, is thorough and detailed, and like any methodology chapter is of interest to a specialist but perhaps less attractive to a generalist who wants to get to the meat of the analysis. This is provided in rich detail in chapter three, which is well worth reading carefully. This is the most thought-provoking chapter. Mansingh explores questions of identity and self-perception, of double cultural and religious belonging, of ritual and sacramental practices, of personal relationship with God and prayer, of community and family relations, and finally challenges and obstacles to spiritual growth. One particularly striking example is *Joti Parab*, a festival of light celebrated by Kutchi Kohli Christians at the same time as their Hindu compatriots celebrate Diwali. It made me think about how Christmas is, and is not, a Christian festival, not to mention the proliferation of "Light parties" as an alternative to Halloween.

Chapter four lists Mansingh's findings and conclusions, both those that surprised her as well as those which she expected. It is notable that the Islamic context of Pakistan was far less of an obstacle for Kutchi Kohli believers than the Hindu faith of their own families. If everyone around you goes to *Bhopas*, Hindu healers, when they are ill, can you ignore their belief that all illness has a spiritual element and just go to a (Western) doctor for medicine? Mansingh also calls for the empowerment of women and the need for the development of a "*Kutchikohlinized* Christianity" which clearly reflects the culture and practices of her people.

Although this specific world, of a particular sub-group of a particular Pakistani tribe, is likely to be of direct

relevance to only a few, the general questions it raises are far more widely applicable. Here the brevity of the book is a real advantage. It would be an excellent resource to help someone think through questions of contextualisation, the difference between faith and culture, and what it means to follow Jesus in a setting where he is largely unknown. As such, this book deserves to be widely read by those who want to consider questions of faith and culture.

Tom Wilson, St Philip's Centre, Leicester

Dan Pratt (ed.), *Slavery-Free Communities: Emerging Theologies and Faith Responses to Modern Slavery*, (London: SCM Press, 2021)

This is an impressive book that I would highly recommend. Modern slavery is still an issue (to coin a John Pilger phrase) and this book informs us of the complexities of the issue, and offers some excellent theological reflection and engagement with it, as well as some practical resources. Dan Pratt has gathered a wide range of contributors to inform and challenge us. Dan himself is well placed to do this. He is a Baptist minister and it is out of that experience in his local community in Southend-on-Sea that he was confronted with this issue. Actually, that is the wrong way to frame it – it was not the issue, but rather people he got to know and their stories he heard that confronted him with modern day slavery on his doorstep. As a result of this he founded the Together Free Foundation and is an anti-slavery coordinator for the Southend Against Modern Slavery Partnership. This already highlights an important approach to anti-slavery: that partnerships and cooperation are vital.

The book is divided into six sections. The first section has a chapter by the UK's first Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and this sets the scene for the rest of the book. He reviews the current state of modern slavery in the UK and emphasises the importance of churches and faith communities getting involved. The second section is vital for the rest of the book and frames the articles and responses. This section contains the stories of three survivors of modern slavery, each of whom experienced a different form of modern slavery. These stories are so important to read as they form the basis for the theologising and responses in the rest of the book. This is the lived experience of modern slavery, which we need to hear. The third section has six chapters by theologians and practitioners responding to and engaging with these stories. The fourth section explores wider church and faith community responses. The fifth section offers prayers of response, and the final section lists organisations and resources for further engagement and advice.

The contributors bring considerable experience and theological insight to their articles. These articles are written from a depth of experience and reflection on this painful and complex topic. I will mention just two here. One is a superb theological reflection by Dan Pratt using liberation theology as a framework and the pastoral cycle as a way for the community to see, learn and respond to modern slavery. The article demonstrates that with attentive listening to people's actual lives and stories, awareness is raised, and with a willingness to partner with others and with some training, ordinary church members can make a real difference to those enmeshed in modern slavery.

The article on a restorative justice response offers a superb explanation of restorative justice, its more relational approach and how it can work for both the offender and the victim. It also offers a challenging analysis of how we understand modern slavery and human trafficking by asking us to consider why the modern slavery agenda falls outside the mainstream modern economy, e.g. nail bars, car washes, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, and why these are a particular focus. The authors ask us to consider if there is less exploitation in the supply chains that manufacture the goods in our high street stores. No, but here the profits are rising to the top – to the powerful and wealthy who know how to hide and launder their wealth. Those who run car washes and nail bars tend to be of the same socio-economic class as their “workers”. Therein lies the rub for neoliberal economics, the writers argue, because big business is about the upward movement of money and power. That is acceptable – car washes etc. are not. They suggest that the entire governmental response is inaccurately and unhelpfully framed and so their measures are not just unhelpful but actually harmful. I found this to be an enlightening and disturbing article, which challenged my own naivete on so many levels.

So, take the plunge and read this book. You will never be unaware again. You will learn that modern slavery is the second most profitable criminal enterprise globally after the arms trade. It is estimated that around 40 million people are kept in modern slavery today, but it is a hidden crime. Perhaps by being more aware we can pray from the prayers at the end of the book, “Bring people across their path who see them and can help.”

Cathy Ross, Head of Pioneer Mission Leadership,
Oxford, CMS

Lisa Wilson Davison, *More than a Womb*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021)

Lisa Wilson Davison's book, *More than a Womb*, challenges the trope of women being fulfilled (and fulfilling their divine purpose) primarily through reproduction. The ideal of “woman as mother” is one, Davison argues, that denigrates women who are childless, whether that is through being unable to have children or by choice. Importantly, this obsession with motherhood ignores the crucial role women have played as secular and religious leaders, prophets, warriors, negotiators, diplomats and authorities, all of which may be found in the Hebrew texts.

Davison noticed that there is a dearth of knowledge among theology students about women in the Hebrew Bible, and so the greater part of the book is a thorough excavation of the stories of Old Testament women who demonstrate roles unrelated to motherhood, which, Davison argues, may have resulted partly as a conscious choice to remain childfree.

As well as Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Esther, Davison also gives colour and voice to unnamed “wise women” who play important parts in Hebrew history. Under Davison's forensic eye, these women are revealed as so much more than the monochrome characters who never properly mature into multi-faceted human beings that they are so often reduced to in Sunday School stories.

Like the author, I must declare myself to be a feminist theologian who approaches Scripture with a hermeneutic of suspicion. An imaginative reading of the text is not just desirable but critical for a fairer understanding of the roles women may have played in biblical times. Davison uses her imagination to great effect as she interrogates the possible motivations of not just the biblical authors, but those who have interpreted and relayed those stories through the ages with a particular bias.

I found her excavation of language particularly enlightening. She is upfront about words and phrases where it is impossible to say for certain what they might mean. But, instead of viewing this as a blockage, she takes the opportunity to suggest alternative understandings of texts that have, by habit (and, in all probability, to fulfil darker objectives), been interpreted through the lens of patriarchal power structures.

For example, Miriam has been described by scholars as leading the women only. However, a close reading of the language used in Exodus 15:21 suggests that Miriam was a worship leader for all the people – men included.

I imagine it would be fairly easy to criticize Davison's book for extending her research beyond the canon of

Hebrew and Christian texts into the cultic practices of civilisations and cultures contemporaneous with Old Testament contexts. However, given how the voices of women have been silenced, the names of women erased and their words even (possibly) attributed to others (Davison argues that some of Miriam's words may have been redacted and placed in the mouth of Moses), it seems only fair and expedient that Davison should use every tool and avenue at her disposal to interrogate a narrative that has predominantly benefited men at the expense of women.

Davison does give plenty of space to dissenting voices, particularly those who persist in "motherising" female biblical characters, but is unapologetic in her critique of what she clearly regards as views enculturated by patriarchy.

Davison states that, "The purpose of sharing these stories is to make clear that everyone is shaped by cultural ideals and stereotypes about women and men, despite their best intentions not to be." In my view, she has done a superb job in at least raising the possibility that women are not just wombs that will only find true fulfilment in marriage and motherhood, but are complex human beings capable of fulfilling their God-given identity in a huge variety of ways and in roles that have largely been colonised in the Western Christian narrative by men.

Sadly, this book is unlikely to change the hearts and minds of those who are fixed on the idea of "normative roles" for men and women (whatever that means). But, for women who long to find ways of reading and recognising themselves in the biblical canon outside of a mothering narrative, *More than a womb* will be a hugely welcome liberating gift.

Sue Hart, Warminster

Gerald A Arbuckle, *The Pandemic and the People of God*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2021)

Arbuckle's argument is that the destruction wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic confronts us with a choice: we can allow the world to drift further into global division and conflict, or we can renew our institutions and common life on the foundations of justice and compassion.

The Pandemic and the People of God has six main chapters. The first outlines the cultural complexities of COVID-19, advancing Arbuckle's argument that the pandemic has caused "cultural trauma", by which he means "the sudden collective breakdown of order" (p.3). Arbuckle explores the collective myths of American

and wider Western society, noting how they have been manipulated and damaged over recent years, arguing that the pandemic has exacerbated this trend. He briefly discusses the impact of conspiracy theories, before reflecting on the values enshrined in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He has six points: creation is a gift of God, we must commit to stewardship, strive for solidarity, maintain a bias toward the poor, commit to holistic healing and to the prophetic role.

Chapter two does foundational work, explaining the nature of rites of passage. Here Arbuckle is on home turf – his training as an anthropologist clear in his discussion of the role of rites and their three stages of separation, liminality and re-entry. Arbuckle discusses examples of cultural trauma as rites of passage and sets out his "grief overload" model. A particular strength of this chapter is the biblical reflection on the psalms of lament, contrasted helpfully, and distinguished clearly from, the Kübler-Ross model of grief.

Chapter three, which applies the theory of chapter two to his discussion of successes and failures of the pandemic rite of passage is weaker. The broad-brush outlines of the different government responses to the pandemic, taking in the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, China, Brazil and Russia, are all accurate enough. But the analysis is simplistic. For example, New Zealand's swiftly closed borders are good, the UK tardiness to close borders is bad. But what about the child who was unable to get to their parent's deathbed because of overly strict lockdown rules? What about the fact that New Zealand's "zero covid" strategy was largely abandoned in the face of the Delta variant? The main issue Arbuckle does not tackle properly is whether striving for low COVID-19 cases should be the only game in town. I found myself with more questions than answers here.

Chapter four returns to Arbuckle's strength, of macro analysis. The theme is the enduring impact of poverty, and the topic is examined in qualitative and quantitative terms, treating both absolute and relative poverty. Themes discussed include poverty as opportunity deprivation, as patriarchal domination, as violence, loneliness, old age, environmental degradation and paternalism. The scriptural reflections in this chapter range broadly across the New Testament, touching most of the expected places (the Sermon on the Mount, James, the parable of the rich farmer, etc.).

Chapter five shifts the focus to racism, including institutional racism. Arbuckle begins by explaining what he means by prejudice, discrimination, race and ethnicity. The main focus is on institutional racism in the US, UK, New Zealand and Australia, and on suggestions as to why racism persists in society. These include normalisation of evil, cultural learning, populist anti-immigrant movements, racist humour and the racism inherent within founding mythologies. The third main section

details the impact of racism on those who experience it. Arbuckle concludes by citing the example of Jesus as one who challenged the three evils of oppressive structures, the subjugation of women and presumed cultural inferiority, as well as demonstrating non-violent resistance. As with chapter three, a vast topic is covered quite quickly, and inevitably there are gaps and omissions and simplifications of the argument.

Chapter six is entitled “The Call to Refocus on Christ and His Mission”. Arbuckle argues that the church has been hit by two crises – the cover-up of child sexual abuse and the COVID-19 pandemic. He offers a three-fold response. First, a summary of the teachings of Pope Francis: to work through the liminal moment, in a pastorally creative manner, recovering the calling to be a listening and “refounding” church, which means one that returns “to the original founding of the church” (p.195). Arbuckle’s second point is to advocate four pastoral strategies. First, fostering faith-based intentional communities. Second, challenging institutional injustices such as patriarchy and racism in the church and wider society. Third, understanding and responding to Catholic fundamentalism with compassion for those who hold the views without compromising on the need for change and reform. Fourth, avoiding ministry becoming dominated by a business ethos. This is not to deny the need for financial prudence and wisdom, but rather to argue that a business mindset must be shaped by Catholic teaching. The third section is a reflection on the annunciation to Mary, how she responded with grace and wisdom to the sudden inversion of her life.

The Pandemic and the People of God is a book of a particular moment in history aimed especially at Roman Catholics; it is Arbuckle’s suggestion for how the Catholic Church should collectively and individually respond to the COVID-19 pandemic as we, in the West at least, transition towards a recovery phase. There are some good points here, perhaps for Catholics in particular. The questions at the end of each chapter would start some interesting conversations. Yet despite these strengths, I was left wondering whether the moment for which this book is written is already passing. The focus of the public discussion appears to have already moved on. But if the pandemic has taught me anything, it is that I should not second-guess the future, but leave that firmly in God’s hands.

Tom Wilson, St Philip’s Centre, Leicester

Anna Creedon, *Do Small Groups Work?*, (London: SCM Press, 2021)

Small groups seem to be key to many of the models of church planting, discipleship and evangelism that

are being suggested as means of church renewal. It is therefore great to see some focused qualitative work being done to ask the question of whether they work. Of course, the question of whether something “works” is an interesting one, and for Anna Creedon “working” means transformation from engaging with the Bible. Her research is based on participant observations and focus groups with three small groups from different Church of England churches.

This book is part of the SCM Research series and is based on Creedon’s doctoral research. This immediately indicates that the intended audience is those engaged in more formal academic work and theological training. As a result, it spends quite a bit of time reviewing the field, defining terms and introducing the methodology. For someone opening this book to explore practical questions of small groups, this will feel like a slow start and they may want to focus on transformation in chapter two before turning to the exploration of data from chapter five onwards.

The first chapter introduces small groups and chapter two examines accounts of transformation through Scripture, biblical hermeneutics and theology. Creedon compares terms such as formation, change and transformation and lands on a definition of transformation as “an ongoing process of change whereby individuals and communities come to more fully resemble Jesus Christ and glorify God by the power of the Holy Spirit, in anticipation of the future transformation of the whole creation” (p.34). Chapter three explores previous research into small groups and chapter four is quite a detailed methodology, which finishes by introducing the three small groups.

Having set the groundwork Creedon turns to her data, beginning with the focus group reflections on transformation identified in chapter two: transformation is a process, the importance of personal choice and openness, the importance of relationships and mutual support in the group, the importance of engaging together and hearing different views, and the way those views brought challenge. What felt lacking from the chapter was examples of change that her participants had experienced. This is clearly a challenge in qualitative work, but it meant that the change talked was often about their understanding rather than her category of change to resemble Jesus Christ.

Chapter six, seven and eight explore the three key themes identified by Creedon in three small groups: expert, challenge and the use of materials. Each chapter engages in careful reflection on where she saw these themes in each group. This is the real strength of the book, and presents issues, questions and experiences which will be familiar to those who have participated in a small group.

The final chapter explores the implications of the research for small groups. She suggests that, given the way relationships and support are often seen as the primary purpose, the groups should be more explicit about their purpose in relation to transformation through engagement with the Bible, and agree this ahead of time. She also notes the importance of expertise, suggesting that careful consideration needs to be given to both the way the groups are led and the material selected. She concludes, "It has become clear that the role of the small group leader is one of significant responsibility and importance." (p.166)

Overall, Creedon's careful and detailed attention develops key reflections on the practices and leadership of small groups, but the focus seems to move away from the nature of transformation. Too much attention is given to effective Bible study without demonstrating clear connections to her definition of transformation. In fact, if the key question is whether small groups work, it wasn't clear whether the answer was yes or no.

The strength of this work is the questions it raises about the small group and transformation, and its careful reflection on the nature of small groups. It is therefore an important text for those researching small groups, and for those teaching and training small group leaders.

James Butler, MA lecturer, CMS

Lynn McChlery, *How do you know it's God?* (London: SCM Press, 2021)

This has not been an easy book to review. I am a vocational assessor and discern people's call to mission in cross-cultural contexts. As such, I came to this book with certain biases and expectations. I was hoping for clear recommendations: how we discern calling, and an ability to evaluate my processes against the research. The book has not offered that. But maybe it never set out to do that.

McChlery clearly roots her research in personal experience as a vocational assessor. Her research is based on case studies, having chosen three denominations in which to watch assessment conferences and conduct interviews: Scottish Baptist, Church of England and Methodist Churches.

She guides the reader through her research carefully and in more detail than I felt necessary, but her format of example, analysis and conclusion was overall a helpful structure.

McChlery then layers her research by drawing on other discernment traditions, such as Ignatian spirituality, communal discernment, and practices both in Ignatian and in Quaker traditions. She also puts her research

in conversation with McGilchrist's brain lateralisation work. In chapters six and seven she takes the reader through a lengthy introduction of Newman and Barth's discernment theologies.

While I did not enjoy the book and cannot see many pick it up to read, I do want to give credit to McChlery for researching and writing about an area about which very little is known, unless one has experienced it either as an assessor or as a candidate. By doing so she has highlighted the importance of the role of the vocational assessor and actively calls for a recognition of that role by discerning the call to vocational work in the assessors. For that alone she deserves credit and recognition.

McChlery does note some helpful things. She gives language, or borrows language, to explain the notion of "just knowing", which I think will be beneficial to candidates and assessors alike. She also talks about the importance of creating space for the knowing and sensing in assessment processes and warns against the danger of simply making it a recruitment process, based on tangible facts. She rightfully notes that discerning with candidates is much more than that.

And so, maybe she achieved exactly what this book needed to achieve: a confidence to lean into the knowing and sensing aspects of discerning calling and suggesting a few practical tools to facilitate that better.

With that in mind, the last two chapters and conclusion might be helpful for experienced vocational assessors to dip into and hone their reflective practice. What I can see being useful to assessors, both voluntary and employed, new and experienced, is a user-friendly resource based on her research and recommendations. Let's hope that gets written soon.

Susann Haehnel, formerly Vocational Recruitment Manager, CMS

Michael Plekon, *Community as Church, Church as Community*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021)

"Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." With these familiar Eucharistic words Michael Plekon concludes his book on the death and resurrection of failing parish churches. It is an apt message of hope for those of us who are leaders of small rural (or urban) churches seeking to deepen the connection between church and community. In his introduction, Plekon captured my interest through his reflective analysis of Fr Köder's painting of the Supper of Sinners. The seven people – a diverse group of guests – are Jesus' friends, Jesus' community, Jesus' church. It is a reminder that church is a community that is part of the wider

community, and – like Rublev’s icon of the Trinity – offers a space at the table for all comers. The question that this poses for church leaders is, “How is this church serving its local community?”

For Plekon, the church is both the small body of Christ in this place (its members) and the places where they gather to worship (the buildings). The core part of the book looks at the shrinkage of church congregations, primarily in the US but also touching on Canada, the UK and Europe, and the way that the death of a parish church can lead to its resurrection. Plekon has clearly undertaken extensive research into the exciting God-breathed ways that parish churches are addressing the critical issue of declining numbers and resources. Many churches have closed or merged with neighbouring parishes. Others, though, have re-imagined their church life and church spaces to offer fullness of life for both members and their neighbourhoods (John 10:10).

While most of the case studies are not directly relevant to or replicable in a Church of England setting, where we have Grade II* buildings to manage and maintain for future generations, these stories of rebirth and new life are truly inspirational. Plekon suggests that small churches are here to stay and can create remarkable results (to which I would add, “in God’s hands”). Small parish churches can be deeply immersed in and be at the heart of local community life, and this can be a two-way blessing. This book speaks to the key missional opportunity and pastoral need for connectedness (*koinonia*). It evokes such questions as: What does fullness of life look like for this community? How are its needs changing? How might this community of faithful followers serve as Christ came to serve (Luke 4:18–19)? Plekon’s research shows that being few in number can enable rather than hinder community-based projects. Such projects can be a two-way blessing by building up the spiritual life of the congregation. And, whether or not the small congregation is struggling with the upkeep of its over-sized building, how can its sacred space be opened up as a community amenity? What is this village or parish lacking?

Plekon offers a powerful image of a small church’s mission as being “like the horizontal thrust of Christ’s arms on the cross, the movement is out to others, to share what the church and members have... to do the liturgy after the liturgy, not on the sanctuary altar of wood or stone but that of the hearts of the sister and brother in need.” He offers a vision of a small church that is alive to God and working with God within their community. What abundance of life!

Revd Katrina Hutchins, Vicar of Mears Ashby and Hardwick and Sywell with Overstone

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