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# ANVIL

Journal of Theology and Mission

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CHURCH  
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*Pioneering youth ministry*

**VOL 34, ISSUE 2**



**WELCOME TO  
THIS EDITION  
OF ANVIL**

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

**John Wheatley**

# THE EDITORIAL

Over the last few years, in partnership with Church Mission Society, Frontier Youth Trust has been experimenting with pioneer youth work – connecting the thinking of pioneer ministry with the professional practice of youth and community work. In this edition of Anvil, we have collated some of the insights from the ground for youth work and mission. Jane Barrett, Mark Scanlan, Dylan Barker, and Matt Davis and Ed Hodge each take on one of the core youth work values: informal education, equality of opportunity, participation and empowerment. We also explore a range of contexts for working with young people, including homelessness, sex and relationship education, work with the LGBT community and work in the north-east of England.

But first, what do we understand by the term pioneer youth ministry? Pioneers (according to the Fresh Expressions website) are people who respond to the Holy Spirit working outside the church and gather others in new contextual Christian community.<sup>1</sup> We might simply define pioneer youth ministry as going to young people beyond the existing Christian communities to create new communities with young people.

What's interesting about this definition, however, is that mainstream youth ministry is by its nature often more pioneering than traditional adult ministry. Church youth workers are expected to leave their buildings and enter the community in order to build relationships and grow community. There is often an expectation that these young people will join the existing church, but under the radar youth workers often also create small subset communities of young people.

In his article for Youthwork magazine, Jonny Baker says, "Youth ministry is the backdoor for renewing the Church. What you see in youth ministry you tend to see the Church picking up on ten years later. So it is highly influential, subversive and strategic to be in youth ministry. You can trace the Church's current resurgence of interest in mission, pioneering and a cross-cultural approach directly to the practice being developed in youth ministry back then."<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, all youth ministry is pioneering in that it leads innovation within the church. However, there is a particular way of doing youth ministry that is particularly pioneering, and in my opinion, it is

essentially youth and community work undertaken as pioneer mission. It is deeply rooted in the values and practices of youth and community work, holding in high regard the importance of voluntary participation, informal education, empowerment and equality of opportunity; and through these lenses it is able to navigate a path that grows new Christian community beyond the existing church. Pioneer youth ministry is wholly contextual, engaging in a theological endeavour to root the gospel in a community beyond the reach of the traditional church.

In this edition of Anvil on youth work and mission, our contributors explore in more depth the significance of the professional youth and community work values for pioneer mission. It is my belief that these disciplines – informal education, equality of opportunity, participation and empowerment – are as important to pioneer ministry as they are youth ministry. Our hope is that these conversations will resource pioneers in every setting and will join up the innovation in youth ministry with the practice of pioneer mission.

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<sup>1</sup> "Fresh Expressions," *Fresh Expressions*, accessed 3 July 2018, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-started/pioneer-ministry>.

<sup>2</sup> Jonny Baker, "Pioneer Youth Ministry – Part 1," *Youthwork* 2, no. 33 (September 2013) (Premier Christian Media).



# EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR MISSION AND MINISTRY

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

Dr Mark Scanlan

# INTERRUPTIONS AND CO-CONSTRUCTION: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR MISSION AND MINISTRY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

## INTRODUCTION

**Jesus was not averse to interruptions. On one occasion he was in a house teaching those around him.**<sup>1</sup> There were such a lot of people there that not everyone could get in and the crowd was overflowing out of the house. But the people kept coming. And why not – Jesus was in town. A group of five friends had heard about this Jesus and were excited that he was visiting. The four healthy friends decided this was an opportunity not to be missed so they each took a corner of the mat that the fifth, paralysed, friend spent his life lying on and they carried him to Jesus. Except they didn't, because they couldn't get to Jesus. The crowds were too big. But there was no one on the roof and they could get to the steps. Inside, Jesus felt a little dust fall from the ceiling, then a lot of dust, and then clouds of dust and debris, followed by a paralysed man on a mat being lowered through the hole that had been newly created by four friends who were determined that they wouldn't miss this opportunity. It turned out that Jesus also did not want to miss this opportunity. So he stopped teaching and turned his attention to the man on the mat; before long, he is demonstrating that he has the authority to forgive sins and the power to heal. This is not what he had planned, but it is what happened. This event in the ministry of Jesus was constructed out of a coming together of one man's condition, four friends' determination and Jesus' compassion. The interruption led to ministry. Jesus was not averse to interruptions.

This article seeks to develop a theology of equal opportunity for pioneer youth mission by discussing the

concept of ministry and mission with young people as a co-construction. By this I mean the way that the outcomes of work with young people do not solely depend on what we bring but are constructed out of what we bring, what the young people bring and how we respond to this. As we acknowledge this co-construction inherent in the event of ministry with young people, we begin to develop an approach that naturally honours the equality of opportunity that has been one of the core values of youth work since 1991. In addition, and learning from the life of Jesus, it is by becoming open to interruptions that we make the acknowledgement of co-construction explicit.

The *Youth Work National Occupational Standards* define equality as "treating all individuals equally despite individual differences".<sup>2</sup> Consequently equality of opportunity holds within it ideas around celebrating diversity and equipping young people to identify and challenge discrimination. While the amount of literature on youth ministry has grown immeasurably in the last 30 years, it is pertinent that there has been little direct reflection on developing a theological vision or critique of these central youth work values. The work of Danny Brierley stands as a notable exception.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, it has seemed at times as if the world of youth ministry has felt that it has little to learn from the statutory world of youth work. This is all the more strange given the Christian heritage from which statutory youth work can be traced.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, on their website, the National Youth Agency lists seven values underpinning their concept of youth work.<sup>5</sup> These develop the four core values in simpler language, with equality of opportunity hovering in the background of four in particular:

- Utilising young people's view of the world.
- Treating young people with respect.
- Respecting and valuing differences.
- Promoting the voice of young people.<sup>6</sup>

It is timely therefore to reflect theologically on these values in order to develop a vision for mission and ministry with young people that is authentic as Christian and as youth work. The theological framework that follows provides the lens through which we might grasp such a vision.

In order to develop this approach, the article moves through three sections. Section one discusses the importance of valuing the ultimate and proximate

<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:1–12.

<sup>2</sup> National Youth Agency, "Youth Work National Occupational Standards" (2014): 8, accessed 2 May 2018, <http://www.nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/National-Occupation-Standards-for-Youth-Work.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Danny Brierley, *Joined Up: An Introduction to Youth Work and Ministry (Youthwork: The Resources)* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003).2003

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–48.

<sup>5</sup> See "What is Youth Work?", accessed 2 May 2018, <https://nya.org.uk/careers-youth-work/what-is-youth-work/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

contexts of young people; section two then presents this in terms of a vision for mission and ministry in which all of creation actively participates in the relations of the triune God, meaning that we need to be open to that which others bring to our experience of God's active life in our midst. The final section turns to discuss the importance of taking an ethnographic posture in order to become aware of the contexts of the young people we are with and to welcome the interruptions that these contexts bring. This final section draws on my own ethnographic research of Christian youth groups to highlight the inherent ambiguity within such work and why this ambiguity is to be cultivated if we are to work towards grounding our mission and ministry in a theology of equal opportunity.

## THE ULTIMATE AND PROXIMATE CONTEXTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

In order to move towards this theology of equal opportunity in mission and ministry with young people, we need to take account of two distinct theological contexts. First is the ultimate context of youth; and, second is the proximate context.<sup>7</sup> The ultimate context claims that the period of life young people are in offers something distinctive to reflecting the image of God and the in-breaking of his kingdom on earth. In contrast, the proximate context refers to the specific circumstances of the young people that we are working with at a particular time and place. The ultimate context is key in remembering that youth is not a problem to be solved but a unique and precious part of the human experience; the proximate context alerts us to the way that the circumstances of young people have something specific to bring to conversation about God and the Christian faith. Consequently both move us towards a theology of equal opportunity for mission and ministry with young people.

We live in a culture that tends to frame youth as a problematic stage of life – something to be survived by both young people and others in their sphere of existence.<sup>8</sup> This narrative tends to stem from the understanding that adolescence is a period of identity experimentation and formation that will inevitably result in boundary pushing, mood swings and increasingly risky behaviour. This is

however a narrative that tends to be based on newspaper headlines rather than the reality of human experience. The ultimate context of youth understands the adolescent experience as one part of the lifelong human process of identity formation and development, though with a particular focus during the teenage years. Amy Jacober, for example, describes the significance of “individuation” as a key developmental task of this life stage. It is in large part this task of individuation that marks the teenage years as ones in which the key question of “who am I?” begins to be asked.<sup>9</sup> Asking this question is a distinguishing point between childhood and the development of adolescence. Young people, throughout adolescence, are seeking to identify the kind of people they are going to be and the way that this will set them apart from their family while still being understood within a community context. The journey of individuation “is a process of moving, in community, toward adulthood – realising that this movement itself is part of the larger, lifelong process of differentiation”.<sup>10</sup>

Intriguingly these insights about adolescence are increasingly being backed up by neurological research. In a book published earlier this year, neurologist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore suggests that there are common, biological changes to the brain that are a unique part of this process of moving from a child to an adult. It is in the formation of neural pathways through adolescence that young people can be seen to be literally inventing themselves:

The brain undergoes substantial development in adolescence, and this brain development probably contributes to the way adolescents typically behave.<sup>11</sup>

The remarkable thing that Blakemore is finding through her work is that many of the characteristics and claims about teenagers when research into adolescence was first being conducted by Stanley G. Hall over a hundred years ago can now be correlated to substantial and protracted changes that are taking place in the brain through these years.<sup>12</sup> Blakemore concludes:

Rather than being a period of purely social change, adolescence should be considered a unique stage of biological and psychological development.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to the work of Danish priest and youth ministry theologian Christian Noval for the concept of ultimate and proximate contexts of young people. He recently presented on these themes at the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM) European Conference in Malta. See [www.iasym.net](http://www.iasym.net).

<sup>8</sup> For an articulation and refutation of this, see Philip Graham, *The End of Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Amy E. Jacober, *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 63. *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, *Inventing Ourselves: The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain* (London: Doubleday, 2018), 202. *Inventing Ourselves: The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain* (London: Doubleday, 2018) Intriguingly she also claims that similar changes in brain function can be seen in animals transitioning from juvenile to adult (*ibid.*, 4).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

The specific experience of youth is therefore not problematic but instead vital to developing an understanding of what it is to be and become human. In the light of this, it is pertinent to ask what might be the particular theological contribution of this ultimate context of young people. In other words, if there is a specific time of human development and identity formation that occurs during the period we call adolescence, roughly the teenage years, then what particular ways of expressing faith and relating to God might be more apparent during this stage as opposed to others? This is the question that Kenda Creasy Dean tries to answer in *Practicing Passion*.<sup>14</sup> For Dean the theology of youth revolves around passion. She argues that unless the church embraces young people and what they naturally bring, our churches will be devoid of the passion that is inherent within this stage of life.<sup>15</sup> Now, all of us who work with young people will, at times, struggle to name passion as a key characteristic of those young people and yet, anecdotally, we recognise the experience of young people being given the opportunity to talk about something they are especially into or when a particular issue becomes vital to them.<sup>16</sup> They see things more clearly, are less prone to inaction due to pre-empting the challenges ahead and can be idealistic. The recent anti-gun “March for Our Lives” protests led by young people in the USA are an excellent example of this.<sup>17</sup>

Steve Emery-Wright helps to build on this by encouraging us to ask the question of what young people can bring to our ministry as theologians, liturgists and interpreters.<sup>18</sup> By working from the assumption that young people have something to offer our understanding of God, how we worship him and in discerning what he is saying, we are moved from a position of monopolising the agency in our youth ministry and mission to a place of openness to what the young people themselves bring with them. This is an inherently risky position but it is one in which the young people are valued and invited as equal partners in what we are doing and what God is doing in our midst. It moves us from being the ones constructing events and activities to being explicitly open to the co-construction of mission and ministry. The more we acknowledge that

there is something young people bring simply through the experience of being young, the more naturally we will operate from a theology of equal opportunity. The ultimate context of youth is not problematic; rather, it is an experience through which God is able to show us all something vital of his life and the human experience of being created to reflect the imago Dei.

Alongside this ultimate context of young people, it is important that we are attentive to the proximate context of the particular young people with whom we are working. Alister McGrath has written of the importance of cultivating attentiveness to the theology of the place where we work in mission and ministry.<sup>19</sup> He argues that a move from generalities to particularities is a move towards truth.<sup>20</sup> This is of course a vital aspect of the gospel message – in the particular actions of Jesus we see the truth of who this God is. In the words of St Paul, “we look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen”.<sup>21</sup> If we want to know what the love of God looks like, we do not try to explain it generally but we point to it in the particular. We look at Jesus with the dust of a broken roof in his hair; we look at him weeping at the tomb of a friend, feeding a hungry crowd, eating with those that no one else would eat with and ultimately carrying the wood of his own execution to the place of his death – this is what the love of God looks like.

McGrath develops this thought by pointing to the way that God is revealed in the narrative of Scripture: not generally in time and space but in place and history.<sup>22</sup> Drawing on the work of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, McGrath defines “place” as space in which important words have been spoken and events have taken place.<sup>23</sup> Consequently if we are to engage effectively in mission and ministry, we need to attend to the particular place in which we find ourselves. This means listening to the stories and hearing the words that shape the collective and individual experience of those who live their lives where we are operating. Drawing on an image from the wine industry, McGrath uses the concept of the “terroir” to illustrate how the gospel will take on a particular flavour based on the local conditions, in much



<sup>14</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–26.

<sup>16</sup> I recall, for example, with amusement a very in-depth conversation about mountain biking with a 14-year-old boy at an After School Club one time!

<sup>17</sup> Amanda Holpuch and Paul Owen, “March for Our Lives: hundreds of thousands demand end to gun violence – as it happened,” *The Guardian*, 24 Mar 2018, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2018/mar/24/march-for-our-lives-protest-gun-violence-washington>.

<sup>18</sup> Steve Emery-Wright, *Empowering Young People in Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Alister McGrath, “The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 107–23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Col. 1:15 (The Message).

<sup>22</sup> McGrath, “The Cultivation of Theological Vision,” 125.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2002), 5.

the same way as wine produced by vineyards will take on the particularities of the local climate and soil conditions – meaning that wine made from the same type of grapes will taste distinctive depending on where the grapes have been grown.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the same wine produced in that same place across different years will have a distinct flavour as the conditions will vary year by year. This image is helpful as it reminds us that the theology of place is not static; our attentiveness is not a one-time event but an ongoing listening to and learning from the stories and events that shape the lives of those with whom we live and seek to minister. Once again mission and ministry is consequently a co-construction, and this is an ongoing process of openness to the other, their experience and what they bring. If we are to be faithful to the work of God, the values of youth work and the lives of the young people with whom we work we need to be diligent in attending to the terroir of those young people. By doing so we will move again towards a theology of equal opportunity, humble and open-handed with what we bring, knowing that it is only part of the story; and we will be willing to allow the lives and places of young people, in their ultimate and proximate contexts, to interrupt our expectations and our plans.

## PARTICIPATION, EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND THE TRIUNE LIFE OF GOD

In addition to the way that the ultimate and proximate contexts of young people begin to move us towards a theology of equal opportunity in mission and ministry with young people, the way in which the Christian God is understood as triune is helpful. Indeed, reflecting on the Trinitarian nature of God is intrinsically connected to the idea of ultimate and proximate contexts as it holds in tension the general and particular in our pursuit of the truth of God.

All too often the concept of the Trinity is one in which explanation is attempted in the general. The way in which three can be one and one can be three is illustrated through the use of analogy.<sup>25</sup> This is more often than not problematic, however, since the analogies used tend to reduce God to a mathematical formula or fall in to one of

various theological traps; for example, referring to God as one who plays different roles, three individuals that contribute to one task or removing the personhood from God altogether.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than making these analogous moves in order to understand the triune nature of God in general, Paul Fiddes has developed a pastoral doctrine of God in which his Trinitarian life is grasped as it is participated in.<sup>27</sup> Without wanting to veer too much into the theme of participation, though the values of participation and equality of opportunity within youth work are closely interrelated, this idea opens up a helpful line of thinking for the kind of approach for which I am arguing.

The life of God is an interweaving movement of relationships between Father, Son and Spirit into which humans are called – they are movements of relationship that invite participation.<sup>28</sup> Rather like a dance, the relations that make up Godself are moving and opening up to invite the participation of others.<sup>29</sup> This opening up to the participation of others is seen in the moves in which the Father sends the Son and together the Father and the Son send the Spirit. God is known as God through this participation. In addition, says Fiddes, because there can be nothing outside of Godself, God must have made room within his life for the created order.<sup>30</sup> Consequently all of creation is already participating in the life of God, though the people of God have a particular form of participation.<sup>31</sup> Resultant of this, the practice of mission and ministry can be understood as calling individuals and communities with which we work to recognise the ways in which they already participate in God and strive to deepen that participation.

In addition, this participative understanding of the Trinity helps to hold in tension the ultimate and proximate contexts as they are integral to the life of God. Holding to the understanding that God is Trinity, expressed in interweaving movements of relationship, is to make an ultimate truth claim about the nature of God. It is, one could say, the ontological reality of God. In this way it is possible to hold onto truth claims as Christians, both for ourselves and in our lives and ministry. We do, however, know God insofar as we participate in these interweaving relational moves in the present. Consequently we only ever

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Of these attempts I find myself most drawn to concept of “polyphony” in the work of Cunningham. This refers to the way that distinct musical notes come together to form a single sound when part of a chord. See David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2000), 11–13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. Fiddes says, “It is into these interweaving currents of mission that the disciples are drawn.”

<sup>29</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 49–55.

<sup>30</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Discipline, Two Worlds,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Cambridge: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 26–27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

possess a limited knowledge of God.<sup>32</sup> We can therefore be ontological realists, while operating as epistemological relativists.<sup>33</sup>

This balance between ultimate reality and contingent participation in the current again draws us towards a theology of equal opportunity for youth mission and ministry. As we recognise that the young people we work with are already participating in the life of God, we are forced to open ourselves to their experience, their stories, their place and their proximate context. We are drawn to listen as well as speak and we become aware that the generality of the word “youth” hides a plethora of individual experiences and stories that might be unearthed in order to discover their lives in the context of God’s. Through the way these young people, together and individually, participate in the life of God and each other, they will contribute to the construction of the mission and ministry we seek to develop with them. And in turn contribute to developing and deepening our experience of participating in the life of God.

To draw on an image from Scripture we might think of ourselves as Eli with the young boy Samuel running to us to find out what we want.<sup>34</sup> We gradually realise that God is revealing himself to Samuel in a way that he hasn’t to us, but Samuel does not yet have the language or experience to name what it is that he is sensing. Eli, in wisdom and humility, with open-handedness to the things of God, equips Samuel to hear from God and to bring that to the conversation, honouring and acting on what he brings even though it does not look like what Eli would have expected. This is something of what equality of opportunity in mission and ministry looks like. It also alludes to the reason why Fiddes, like McGrath, points to the need to attend to the place where we find ourselves in order to be properly faithful to the call of God. For Fiddes, this is framed in terms of ethnography.

## CULTIVATING AN AMBIGUOUS APPROACH AND TAKING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC POSTURE

Ethnography is a mode of looking<sup>35</sup> that can bring the role of non-elites in the production of meaning to the

fore.<sup>36</sup> It is a form of research that seeks to understand the social interactions that construct the world around us from the perspective of participants in that world.<sup>37</sup> Specifically in a youth work context it can bring to light the contributions that the young people themselves make to the construction of our mission and ministry with them. This section then is the turn to the practical in this article but that does not make it any less theological – rather, it is a theological imperative of the approach that I have been developing through the previous two sections. It is about moving towards what Nick Shepherd has called a collaborative theology for youth ministry.<sup>38</sup> Specifically this section draws on insights from my own ethnographic work with young people while also arguing that taking an ethnographic posture is key to genuinely working towards equality of opportunity for young people, taking into account the ultimate and proximate contexts of young people and life of God.<sup>39</sup>

My research revolved specifically around extended case studies of two outreach-focused youth groups that were part of the Urban Saints network.<sup>40</sup> These were groups that sought to communicate the Christian faith to young people through simple Christian practices such as Bible teaching, prayer and pastoral care while also providing a place for young people to enjoy social activities and free time. I spent 18 months with each group and interviewed leaders and young people after being with the groups for six to 12 months. As I was drawing near to the end of my time in the groups, I realised that the word that most accurately defined these groups was “ambiguous”. By this I mean that there was no clear, singular way of defining the groups and the role they played in the lives of the participants.

Both groups defined their purpose as being broadly outreach – by which they meant they hoped to engage young people with the claims of the Christian faith. Central to this hope were simple Christian practices of prayer, Bible study and pastoral care that were key to both groups. While the groups did provide a context through which some young people, and intriguingly many of the leaders, talked of growing in their Christian faith, it became clear that there were a wide variety of ways to express the purpose of the groups and the role the groups played for those who attended.

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<sup>32</sup> As in 1 Cor. 13:12: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (NIV).

<sup>33</sup> Mark Scanlan, “Urban Saints: An Interweaving Ecclesiology as a Contribution to the Fresh Expressions Debate” (PhD diss., Durham University, 2017), 78.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Sam. 3:1–21.

<sup>35</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice, 3rd revised ed.* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 230.

<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 230.

<sup>37</sup> Michael H. Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography, 2nd revised ed.* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996), 1.1.

<sup>38</sup> See Nicholas Shepherd, “Trying to Be Christian: A Qualitative Study of Young People’s Participation in Two Youth Ministry Projects” (PhD diss., King’s College, London, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> For more detail on the research behind this section see my doctoral thesis, “Urban Saints”, available via Durham University’s e-thesis store.

<sup>40</sup> See <https://www.urbansaints.org/> (accessed 2 May 2018).

Both groups were built around key “modes of belonging” that expressed the rationale for young people attending the groups and expressed why participants maintained commitment to them. The modes of belonging saw the groups as social spaces and safe places for young people, while also providing opportunities for young people to contribute and operating as significant places for the leader’s expression of faith. These modes of belonging were in turn cultivated through what I called the “practices of interruption” that opened up the young people to the experiences available in the groups.<sup>41</sup> The practices were the ordinary practices of welcome and encouraging questions in the context of creating fun. In the words of Kathryn Tanner, these are everyday practice “born-again to unpredictable effect”.<sup>42</sup>

There were times when these practices formed literal interruptions in the groups. I noted on several occasions during my observations that the exuberant welcome of young people into the groups was encouraged even when young people arrived in the midst of an aspect of Bible teaching or prayer. For one leader, this practice of welcome interrupted even her opinion that the Bible teaching was the most important aspect of the group! One 17-year-old reinforced the value of welcome interrupting other core practices when I interviewed her:

If you are late to something people kind of ignore you as if you’re not there, but she is interested in you and she will often ask questions later if she feels she needs to follow it up. But it’s quite nice to know that you’re not just sliding in on the sidelines... No she’s like, hi how are you, how’s your week been, is there anything we need to know? No, good, this is what we’ve been doing and this is what we’re going to do. And she doesn’t really bat an eyelid that I’m late, or if anyone is late.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly the ambiguous space created by allowing interruptions is demonstrated by a description of a small group time by one of the leaders in which he details a conversation that he allowed to take place in the group:

One conversation, which is probably the best conversation I have ever seen there. One of the kids from the estate, real real tough case, I had him in my small group at the end of the session, and he’s absolute “God doesn’t exist, you know hate him”... and that’s kind of his view on it. And we had another guy who was <sup>14</sup> or so who comes from a church

background and we were talking about does Jesus exist. And this lad was straightaway “no he doesn’t exist, I can’t see him, I can’t touch him, so how does he exist.” And the other guy was “well I believe he does exist because it says in the Bible” and they ended up having this conversation and the rest of the group were looking at them and waiting for explosions because this lad has a real bad reputation for causing trouble... for five minutes they just had this conversation of yes he does, no he doesn’t and it wasn’t antagonizing or disrespectful or anything, it was just [an] amazing moment to watch and I thought this is why we do this.<sup>44</sup>

Central to this conversation is the way that the leader sat back and allowed it to continue without intervention, concluding that this is why they run the group. By allowing the conversation to run in the way that he did without imposing himself or what he might have considered the correct answer into it, the ambiguity of the group was cultivated.

While the leaders of these groups have an agenda in which they desired to see the young people make the decision to follow Jesus, the ethnographic research brought to light the way that they held this open-handedly in such a way that they were prepared for their agenda to be interrupted through creating space for welcome and encouraging questions. This cultivated the ambiguity that came to define my understanding of the groups. In addition the groups themselves firmly resisted defining themselves as seeking to develop church for the young people. This in itself is an interesting move given the trend of recent years towards developing new forms of church as a missional imperative. However, resisting this gravitational pull of the church is in fact integral to being open to the interruptions that make the co-construction of ministry and therefore the commitment to a theology of equal opportunity explicit.<sup>45</sup>

This does not make the life of the church irrelevant or impossible within such a theological move. On the contrary; resultant of the interplay of these practices and modes of belonging, alongside the outreach focus and non-church identity, an ambiguity around church is a vital part of the discourse of these groups. Within this ambiguity, however, the groups resemble communities of practice for the young people in which some of the core practices are inherently Christian.<sup>46</sup> Consequently I

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<sup>41</sup> Scanlan, “Urban Saints,” 195–99.

<sup>42</sup> Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” 230.

<sup>43</sup> Young person interview.

<sup>44</sup> Leader interview.

<sup>45</sup> See Pete Ward, “Blueprint Ecclesiology and the Lived: Normativity as Perilous Faithfulness,” *Ecclesial Practices*, 2, no. 1 (2015): 74–90.

<sup>46</sup> Nick Shepherd, “Community Builder,” in *Youth Ministry: A Multi-Faceted Approach*, ed. Sally Nash (London: SPCK, 2011): 34–45. Shepherd describes communities of practice as a helpful way of understanding the task and purpose of the church. In doing so he draws on Elaine

developed an understanding of the groups as potential ecclesial spaces that hold in tension church and not-church elements – they are not church and yet resemble some aspects of the church and allow for ecclesial life to extend into the groups as they operate on some level as communities of Christian practice. There is then a creative tension as the groups are able to respond to the particularities of the lives of the young people they are working with, expressed often in questions and conversations, while retaining a commitment to core simple ecclesial practices that hold within them echoes of the wider life of the church. However, whether the groups express the life of church depends ultimately on the co-construction between what we bring as leader and the contributions of the young people themselves.

My contention then is that to honour a commitment to the core youth work value of equality of opportunity when seeking to develop mission and ministry with young people, we need to be very careful about how we hold our ecclesiological commitments. This does not mean that we have no agenda or desire for young people to meet Jesus, but rather that we intentionally recognise the co-construction of ministry and the role of interruptions in allowing this to be shaped by unexpected voices. This will require us to adopt an ethnographic posture in our work with young people – one that seeks to listen and learn, to be open and humble, to understand and to stand back in order to value the contexts and the lives of the young people themselves.

From my own ethnographic work, I hold that ambiguity cultivated by the core practices of interruption of welcome and encouraging questions in the context of fun need to become our ultimate context of our mission and ministry with young people. By humbly holding to this approach, we will be able to attune to the proximate context of those we seek to work with, as well as their experience of participation in the triune life of God. This is inherently risky and open to misunderstanding, but risk is inherent in the terminology of pioneering. It also flows naturally out of the vision of young people and of God that I proposed

that we might allow ourselves to be interrupted.<sup>47</sup> It also aligns us with the life and ministry of Jesus – because Jesus was not averse to interruptions.

## CONCLUSION

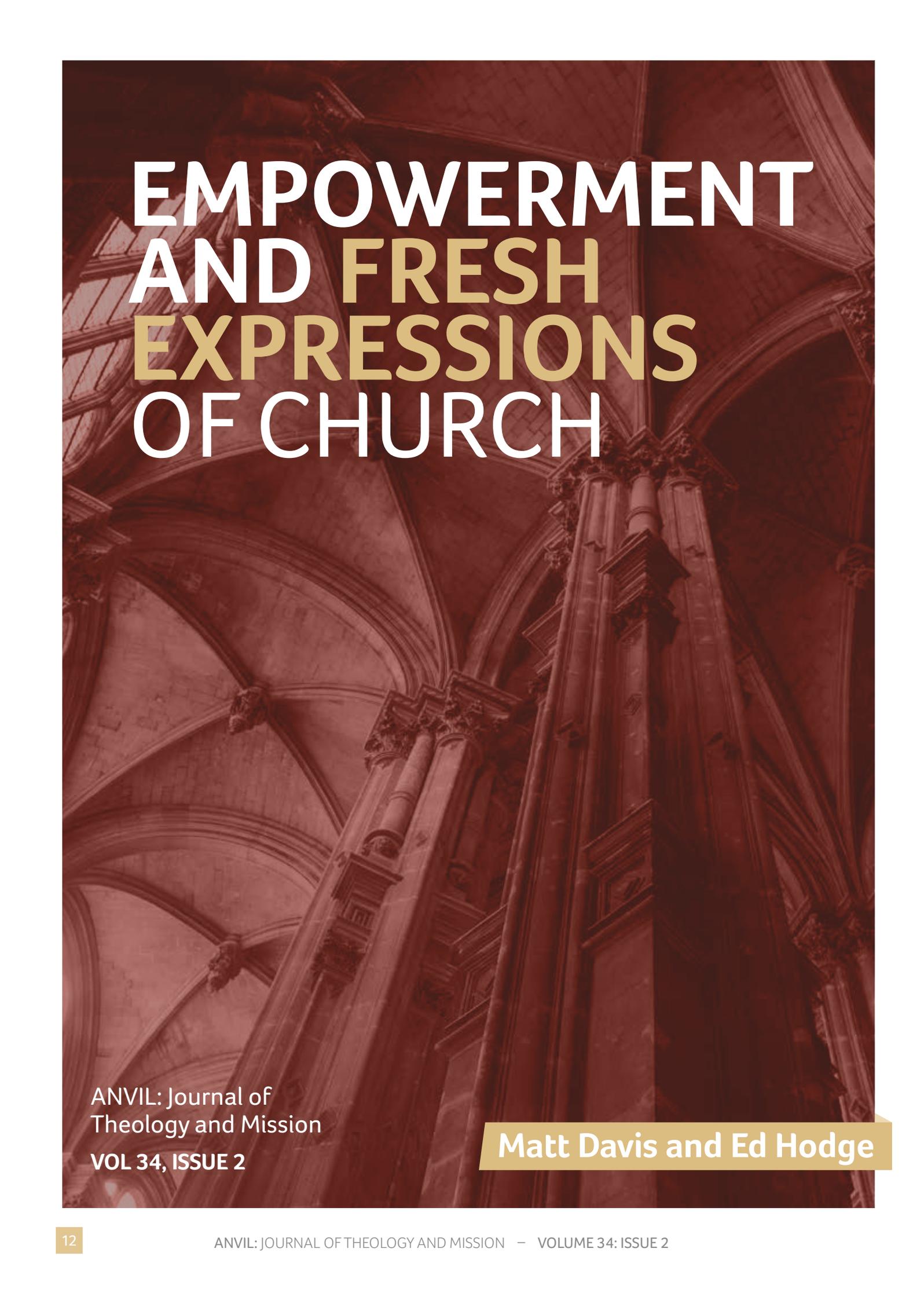
This article has argued that pioneer mission and ministry with young people can operate with a developing theology of equal opportunity. This theology is based on an approach that recognises young people are not a problem to be solved but that the ultimate context of adolescence offers something unique to the Christian community in general – and our mission and ministry specifically. In addition, the proximate context of young people with whom we work is shaped by history and place of that context, and as such requires us to be attentive to these particularities. This approach is founded on a vision of the Trinitarian life of God as one in which all of creation participates in his ongoing relational moves. Consequently we are moved to adopt an ethnographic posture that seeks to be open to the life of God in the place where we are with young people. This means we embrace ambiguity and the interruptions that welcoming young people and encouraging their questions will inevitably bring. We do this in recognition that the life of the church can extend in to this work with young people as they begin to recognise their participation in the life of God as such. This is the heart of my vision for a theology of equal opportunity in pioneer mission and ministry – that the work we do is open to co-construction through the contributions and particularities of the young people themselves and that it is open in this way for good theological reasons.

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Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> See Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, "From Proclamation to Conversation: Ethnographic Disruptions to Theological Normativity," *Palgrave Communications* 1 (2015).



# EMPOWERMENT AND FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH

ANVIL: Journal of  
Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

**Matt Davis and Ed Hodge**

# AT THE LAB WE HAVE BEEN ON A JOURNEY WITH EMPOWERMENT. WE ARE A FRESH EXPRESSION OF CHURCH IN NEWPORT.

**Fresh Expressions of church have been established in the UK for years, including things like Messy Churches or youth congregations that meet in the park. Some, like us at The Lab, have a focus on connecting with those who are disengaged with church and on the margins of society.** As a Christian community we wanted to, as Michael Moynagh puts it, “follow the ascended Lord not only to the edge of the church but to the people on the edge of society”.<sup>1</sup>

The youth work disciplines of empowerment, learning, equality and participation have been really important in helping us to pursue this desire among young people. For us, empowerment is a key part to what growing new forms of church looks like. The purpose of youth work, as agreed by the sector, is “to redress all forms of inequality and to ensure equal opportunity for all young people to fulfil their potential as empowered individuals and members of groups and communities”.<sup>2</sup> Our journey with empowerment and ecclesiology has been challenging – and in this piece we hope to tell the story of how these values and visions have worked together for us in Newport.

## GETTING STARTED

“Mission is finding out what God is doing and joining in,” says Rowan Williams.<sup>3</sup> This idea has been the basis of many missional and pioneering projects – especially for those who would in some ways consider themselves “new monastic”. And so it was for us. This radical idea laid the groundwork for a group of young people in Newport who set up an evening service in a pub.

As The Lab grew and we explored the scriptures together, some of our members decided to try a more

committed form of community loving. They looked at what other new monastic communities were doing (both here and abroad) – and convinced the Bishop of Monmouth (Dominic Walker) to lend them an empty vicarage. The group moved in to the house, incidentally located on the east side of Newport; and like many areas in South Wales, it is post-industrial, characterised by strong family ties, matriarchal structures and mixed levels of deprivation.<sup>4</sup>

Frontier Youth Trust and the work of people like Shane Claiborne inspired us. Our new tag line became “missional living” – with the aim to be a worshipping, praying and socially involved community living together in this house. We set up a youth work apprenticeship, giving more young adults opportunity to spend a year with us to learn about youth work and “give a year for God”. We recruited a group of university students and young professionals who brought a lot of energy, ideas and get-up-and-go that quickly got the project going. But the challenge of being incomers into this community meant that this first group was beset by a lack of understanding about the local culture and easily fell into the trap of needing to solve everyone’s problems.

## LEARNING TO DO EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment was an important value for the leaders of the early Lab – but a lack of understanding and a desire to help people out of immediate situations meant we still had a lot to learn. On the surface we talked a lot with young people about what to do and what they would like to see in the community, but there was little deeper development or ownership.

The work of Kristen Zimmerman gave us a guide to improving how we involved young people and the local community within our structures.<sup>5</sup> Zimmerman explains that young people start by being **clients** until they are invited to participate in **occasional decision-making** facilitated by adults. **Youth involvement** is next, where young people can have regular input into programme decision making. Eventually this births **youth-driven projects** where young people have substantive meaningful roles in leadership positions. The pinnacle of youth empowerment for Zimmerman is **youth-run organisations** where young people run a majority of the staff positions and manage day-to-day operations – even including major roles such as executive director.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Moynagh with Philip Harrold, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 193.

<sup>2</sup> Kerry Young, *The Art of Youth Work* (Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, 1999), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Community Well-being Profile,” last modified May 2017, <http://www.newport.gov.uk/documents/One-Newport/Alway-Profile-Final-2017.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Youth Speak Out Coalition and Kristen Zimmerman, “Making Space, Making Change: Models for Youth-Led Social Change Organizations,” *Children, Youth and Environments* 17, no. 2 (2007): 301.

So we set out to rethink our approach, attempting to realise the higher levels of what Zimmerman describes within a young people's Fresh Expression of church.

The first challenge for us was letting go of our own agendas. We had to hold in tension the fact that we are interested in forming new forms of church that are actively seeking to disciple young people in the ways of the gospel with our deep belief that the community in which we were located needed to have a much larger voice in what we were doing. We started by evaluating how we treated young people (both in and outside of the organisation) and set about listening to the community (which is the first step of the Fresh Expressions growth process).<sup>6</sup> It became apparent that we were struggling to include young people and the community in our decision-making structures. Those students living in our house and our city-centre church members had a bigger role in the running and processes, as well as our theology and ecclesiology, than people connecting with us from the local community. Most significantly this meant there was a separation of the worshipping life of The Lab with the on-the-ground activity.

Identifying this problem was our first big success on the way to better empowerment. We had already developed deep relationships with some of the young people, extending well beyond the casual contact we were having at youth club. So we took the risk of inviting those showing an interest in volunteering to join our gap-year programme – deliberately furthering what Zimmerman describes as youth driven, having young people starting to take those serious leadership roles.<sup>7</sup> This meant we had young people from the local estate living in the community house. This was the first time any had lived in close community away from the family home, and for many it was their first experience of having a job. These were young people for whom growing up had had its challenges; most had struggled in school, and the middle-class student paradigm of the shared house was completely alien. Overnight, it changed the dynamic of the work of The Lab.

Dave was our first local apprentice. We met him through our work in the school and youth club. Through this he had gained an idea of the direction we were heading and that we existed to “help people”. He knew we were Christians whose aim was to develop new forms of church for people in the community who were not engaging with the traditional church. Dave was open to faith and would say he was a Christian (though in my opinion this was not particularly well practised in day-to-day life). He enthusiastically attended our

Sunday gatherings, and took part in helping develop the spiritual practices we have in the community house.

There was trepidation in taking on Dave as an apprentice – partly because he was not academically gifted, partly because he came from a challenging home situation. We didn't know how he would fit in. But Dave was representative of the local demographic, and we were all ready to take the leap. Our trepidation was misplaced – he was fantastic! Dave brought a level of insight that we could never hope to achieve as incomers. He was immediately in conversations about direction, better seeing how we could help address issues that were affecting the people around him and himself. He had a role in encouraging others take action, and to provide spaces for gathering like-minded locals to talk about issues. From his role he enabled others to start courses to gain qualifications. And more generally, he was able also to input into the wider focus of what we were doing as an organisation.

Despite this positive shift, one of the main areas where we struggled was allowing empowerment in the forming of theology. We were quite good at allowing people to influence style, and we would work together to form accessible and engaging worship services or Bible studies. But there would be a level of gatekeeping when it came to belief – about what was right or wrong. This was almost certainly a hangover from our conservative evangelical heritage. As a result there was a glass ceiling on the level of empowerment available to the apprentices within our existing structure. Our offer to them was an invitation to join our faith practices and try out our new ideas for developing faith in the urban context. We were not expecting good middle-class Christians, although we did have an idea of where we wanted them to end up. I hesitate to be overly critical of these aims. They were rooted in good intentions and within the framework of being able to empower the apprentices to engage with a system in the church that they could not otherwise interact with in a meaningful way.

However, our commitment to empowerment led to a dawning realisation that we had no choice but to also equip these individuals with the tools to interpret the faith independently, and so to be empowered to make decisions on these matters themselves. One of the key principles of empowerment is to enable young people to address issues that affect them, especially those that can cause harm to them.<sup>8</sup> If the faith that we hold is to be taken seriously – that true life is to be found in Jesus – then the methods that are available to interact with the tradition and the church need to be able to meet

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<sup>6</sup> Moynagh with Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 208.

<sup>7</sup> Youth Speak Out Coalition and Zimmerman, “Making Space, Making Change,” 301.

<sup>8</sup> Young, *The Art of Youth Work*, 17.

people where they are. We believe that people should be empowered to discover ways to uncover where God is leading them theologically and ecclesialogically. In fact, Bevans describes a method of engaging new cultures with the Christian message. The outsiders (in this case the Lab team) must “let go” of their power and control of the message; while the insiders, the community and young people, must be empowered to “speak out” confidently about their culture and where the gospel and faith intersect with it. Only from this point then can true dialogue come about.<sup>9</sup>

## SPREADING OURSELVES TOO THIN

At the same time as we began to bring indigenous people into the team, we were also offered more opportunities in the community, in the diocese, and in the Methodist circuit. We took on local roles including school governors and community councillors, and were also offered houses in other areas of Newport to expand the work.

We have often felt that a big part of the community work process we have had in The Lab revolves around place holding: taking on roles and new opportunities with the understanding that we are creating a space for someone in the community (such as a local apprentice or parent) to step into. This method has sometimes enabled us to be a kind of “positive disruptor” in our communities. This has manifested itself in many different ways, but one that stands out is as a community councillor. We were told by our local council we weren’t big enough to warrant our own Christmas event, but leveraging this role within the community enabled us to facilitate a full-day festival complete with Santa’s grotto, attended by over 100 locals. From now on it’s the role of the community council to hold events for the community. Sadly, what often happened was that this “place-holding” process led to the Lab leaders accumulating roles that ultimately hindered our core vision of building relationships with those in the communities. This meant that we had access to more and more positions of influence and opportunity – but were struggling to spend time with enough people to fill those spaces. This came with an added temptation that the roles gave us inroads into communities and fortified our position as part of the community. As a result we fostered a strong sense of presence, one that was particularly visible to the church and other institutions to which we are accountable (and ultimately depend on

for funding). And having this presence created a sense of security and sustainability to a project, and a façade of success.

More than anything, however, this approach drifted into an accumulation of power, with the unintended consequence of working against our desire to foster empowerment. If we are to learn anything from Paulo Freire, it is that working with communities should always be deeply rooted in dialogue. He describes the essence of dialogue as “the word” and that “within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if sacrificed even in part the others immediately suffer”. By holding onto these roles, without the clear route for local takeover, we are at risk of essentially handing the church institution a monopoly over the word and fencing the community off from both reflection and action. We ended up pushing those we are supposed to be alongside out of the conversation.<sup>10</sup> In many ways our position of power over these opportunities mirrors our power over the theological gift. In both cases we started with good intentions but quickly discovered that our processes did not take us far enough – we had not been prepared to “let go” of control and dialogue more. Ultimately we believe this hindered our attempt to contextualise the faith with those in the communities of which we lived.

One approach that really spoke to us on this issue is Roger Schroeder on “entering someone else’s garden”.<sup>11</sup> He suggests that mission is like visiting another garden, not to compare its beauty and variety with one’s own, but to respect what is going on in other cultures; and although we “may want to give advice for growing... it is probably best that one waits until asked”.<sup>12</sup> We must remember we are a “guest or stranger” in the other garden, and therefore tread lightly on what is going on so we do not destroy unwittingly something that gives life. Schroeder reminds us to be respectful of “tastes and talents”, and only in time, after growing relationships, “perhaps... teach a bit”.

For us, we embrace what is in the context to be able to see what God sees, allowing God to speak through the culture. A great example of this was Ian, who joined us as a volunteer after leaving the sixth form where we worked. He joined us for one of our regular vision and planning days, and we asked him: what does hope and transformation look like in Alway? We were met with confusion and a blank stare. “There is no hope!” After some digging, it transpired that the language we used

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 388.

<sup>10</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 68.

<sup>11</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 387.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 33–34.

made it sound like we wanted to destroy what made Always, Always. In a sense, calling their flowers weeds. Schroeder says that where we recognise the “seeds of the word” the culture needs not just to be understood, but embraced. He warns that we must remember the gospel always has a counter-cultural edge, and that truth can be found in places beyond our church.

## INVESTING IN WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE

Let us return to the Rowan Williams quote, “Mission is finding out what God is doing and joining in.”<sup>13</sup> At The Lab we have done a pretty good job of joining in, getting involved in our communities, doing projects and generally looking busy. But for us, this misses out a big part of the idea: the part where we find out what God is doing. I believe we got so caught up in the fast pace of Christian ministry that we neglected to slow down and listen to what God is saying to us – not only through the church, Scripture and traditions, but also through the communities and people around us. It didn’t take much slowing down to realise that we had recruited people from the community to help us but continued to put our narrow view of church onto them. Mainly, we think, because challenging your employer is harder than we anticipated. You don’t bite the hand that feeds!

Empowerment, at its heart, is giving young people a voice that is heard.<sup>14</sup> We could not pretend that we are empowering people unless we give more over to the community – including who holds power. Jemima was the next person to join The Lab from the community as an apprentice. She already had strong ties with the church through a matriarchal grandmother who made sure that all her grandchildren were baptised and confirmed. There is a cultural expectation in our community to celebrate most of the major life events in the church. But there is also a deep mistrust of the church: a fear of the unknown together with perceived (and sometimes actual) judgement from attendees, as well as historic abuses. This cultural Christianity gives a helpful starting point for discussions of faith, and an opening to spirituality. We worked with Jemima throughout her youth and were enthusiastic about her participation and empowerment as she began helping organise and run activities. When she joined as an apprentice, she challenged us by asking how much time she would have to do new things. This took us by surprise – but we took a risk and it worked out. Jemima developed some amazing ideas, including a bike project and some challenges around the language we use in church. She translated out liturgies into words that

break down the mystery or irrelevancy as well as clearly explaining what’s going on. To truly have any impact we must be in dialogue. As Bevans points out, “without dialogue, without a willingness to ‘let go’ before one ‘speaks out’, mission is simply not possible”.<sup>15</sup>

Waffle On! was one of our shared answers to this: we wanted to do something together that explored life through a Christian spiritual lens, drawing on our own knowledge, the Bible and tradition. What it looked like was each time we met we would cook waffles and we would “waffle on”! The hosting and topics were chosen by the group (although the leaders offered some input), and it became a gathering of all sorts of people. Both Christians and non-Christians joined us, and everyone was able to give input and discussion starters. The nature of how we operated was very much down to the “insider” instead of the normal – up until then – “outsider”. This helped give a sense of belonging, and was an important step of giving up power and allowing space in the community.

Jemima, Ian and Dave all attended and were part of the set-up team for Waffle On! It was an incredibly important step for us, coming after the genesis of our “letting go and speaking out” vision. Then two things happened that we didn’t expect.

First we realised people were dipping in and out of each session but not staying for the whole thing. In the church we’re used to 90-minute Bible studies, so we found this jarring. But it transpired that just snippets of the session was enough to allow people to continue conversations with other community members outside of the event. We came to the view that maybe this was beneficial. It sparked conversation, which could lead to discussions of a deeper nature than took place at Waffle On! We may have been talking about mental health issues and God – and it would take the young people on to subjects like suicide, life’s purpose or life after death questions.

Second, the amount of ownership we saw from indigenous leaders was amazing. They were volunteering to set up, buying materials, contributing to subjects and gathering people to come. Eventually they took charge and developed ideas from what we had worked through together. It raised some important session topics that we hadn’t put on the table: like, Who is God? Is it worth believing? Why this Christian God? Does prayer work? This model of leading shifted our thinking from standard apologetics to listening to people of all backgrounds share their experience.

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<sup>13</sup> Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Young, *The Art of Youth Work*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 350.

## WHERE NOW?

We for a long time have held the ethos of discipleship through belonging and being part of, rather than having to sign up wholesale to our beliefs and practices. One example is Tyrone. He had been around The Lab for a considerable time and he had begun to volunteer for some of our events and youth activities. He is also Jemima's partner. He comes from non-religious background but has been willing to engage, help run and take part in our community discussions on faith. He has also taken part in some of our wider community activities such as Big House. Big House is one of the main Christian services we do. It is based around the main Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter as well as secular times, including summer activities. These services are structured a little like a fair where people come and go as they please, joining in with as little or as much as they want. Depending on the season each service is quite different, but we usually have songs, stories, crafts, games and refreshments. This Halloween, Tyrone volunteered to organise a reflection on light and darkness for Big House. She formulated an idea of what the reflection could look like, did some research based on her experience and got input from other Lab members. Her idea was to create a beautifully decorated gravestone where people young and old would be invited to write prayers and memories for those who have passed away and place or pin them on the grave and spend a moment praying or remembering the person.

Organising the central reflection of Big House is something that one of our senior leadership with a religious background usually does. So there was some worry about the suitability of Tyrone's idea and leadership. The worry was mainly pastoral about how the subject and activity was going to be handled, and exactly what it was going to look like. But on reflection, a lot of the concerns were around our own sensibilities and how our middle-class selves perceived it. It turned out that it was an incredibly effective and well-received part of the night enabling people to write some poignant and touching tributes and prayers to people they had lost. The majority commented that it was a thoughtful thing to do and meant a lot.

Bringing Dave, Jemima and Tyrone into the Lab team puts us in new territory. They are not signing up to the local church and not necessary engaging wholesale with some of the practices that we had developed for the people in their communities – rather, we are going to a new place together. The identity we find forming is not one that even speaks the church's language. The faith that is formed is empowering

because it gives these local individuals a voice. It allows the relationship between God and humanity to be built on what is helpful, not that which hinders. And it provides a flourishing of faith rooted in the local culture and context. That is not to say everything goes unchallenged: we work together.

The biggest challenge we face is, from our perspective, Tyrone could almost be a practicing Christian but with none of the language. She does not know or use any of the poetic church-culture language riddled with double meanings and confusion, drenched in images that have no meaning no matter how beautiful they may be. Or as it is put in Vincent Donovan's *Christianity Rediscovered*,

In working with young people... do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have even been before.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

When The Lab began, as a youth work project empowerment was a key element of practice. Our ideas and methods were formed by the youth and community work sector – inspired by writers such as Zimmerman and Hart. Hart's ladder of participation gave us the language and tools to move from manipulation to participation. As our story has developed, we have also taken inspiration from Asset Based Community Development (or ABCD): building on unrecognised strengths and hidden micro-assets rather than meeting needs with outside resource. For us, this journey has been an invitation for the church to become co-creators in a shared future with the community, seeing all as equal partners.

We have learned that empowerment is important and takes us in new directions but we still have a way to go in terms of co-creating theology. For us, the challenge is that there is still a huge divide between the language of the church and the language that is used in communities. We still see the need to translate the language of the church to community and the language of community for the church. We have not found a way together, to create a language that is accessible to both – if such a language is even possible. To be willing to explore such a place is risky, in the most fantastic way! It involves making sacrifices.

We can begin to form ideas around life and death, grief, community, love and sexuality and all that other stuff that shapes our daily lives that is informed not only by the church but the people it is there to serve.

<sup>16</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (London: SCM Press, 2001), xix.

The gravestone is just one example of how people that have come up through community and dialogued with us can understand grief and how to help those around them wrestle with it better than we ever could with our polished, middle-class, inaccessible symbolism. Now comes the excitement that comes from letting go of the place we have created as translators between church and community to enable a new language to come out of the two, coming together to create a language that cares about Jesus but also a language that cares about people as much as Jesus did.

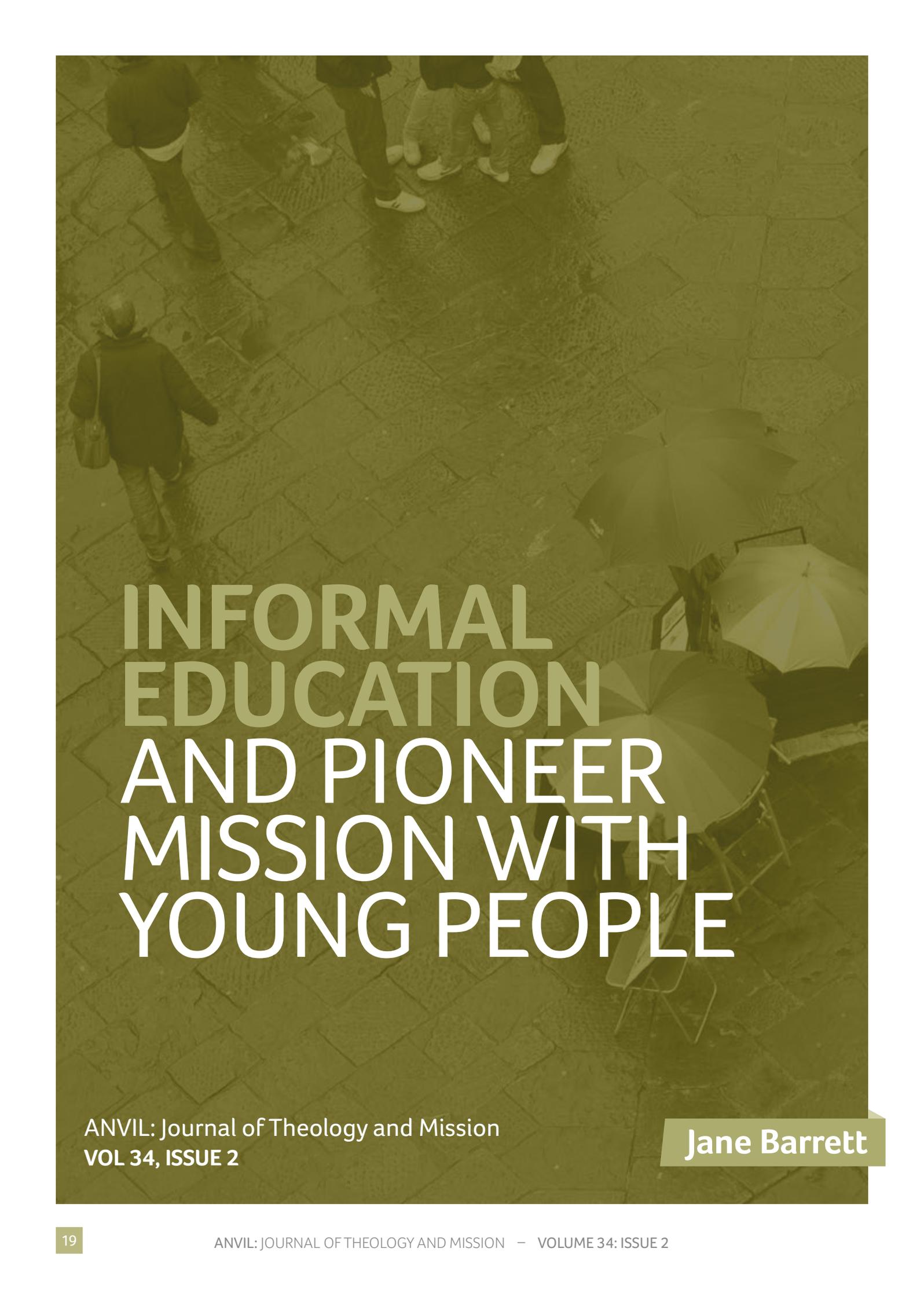
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**Edward Hodge** is a hub leader with the Lab, community worker and contemplative chap, qualified youth worker and graduate of CYM. Lover of Pie.

**Matthew Davis** is a former Lab hub leader and current ordinand for the Church in Wales. Passionate about seeing the church develop in new ways with people who are on the margins.

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# INFORMAL EDUCATION AND PIONEER MISSION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

Jane Barrett

# INTRODUCTION

**In this world there are some people who are dog lovers – who have grown up with dogs and who agree that “dogs are man’s best friend”.**

**I can definitely say I am totally not that person, and would never want to offend those who adore dogs, but until recently I was possibly the other end of the dog-loving spectrum.**

Fearful of dogs, I knocked on the door of a young person to be greeted by the largest and to me the scariest-looking dog I had ever seen. To add to my anxiety he was foaming at the mouth, but this was the moment I met Oli the Rottweiler!

The young woman I met was referred to me by a friend who thought she could really benefit from the project I was running, which was all about enabling young women to have an entrepreneurial experience.

## Pioneer mission

Youth work has and still is experiencing huge financial budget cuts, and one of the initial aims of this project was to think about how enterprise could both change the funding mix of the charity I work for and provide opportunities for young women to develop new skills, with a particular emphasis on enterprise and business. When this project started (over four years ago), I had dreams and expectations that just possibly one or two of the young women would set up their own businesses, become financially more secure, and would feel this opportunity really could change their life for the better. Oli’s “Mummy” (this is real dog-owner speak!), the young woman I worked with, is an incredible photographer and is amazing at photographing dogs; here was the opportunity for her to turn her skill and passion into a small business. I am unsure whether this one example of me the youth worker enabling a young person to set up photographic commissions can in itself be seen as “pioneering”, but it has certainly been a huge learning process for me as I have worked with her and the other young women on the project.

As a female youth worker working with young women, I struggle with the masculine connotations of “pioneering” – the lone hero, full of bravado. I also think there are still a lot of questions about what pioneer mission is and does but I am encouraged by Jonny Baker’s suggestion that we view pioneering as a *gift*, within the wider gifting of God’s mission in the world: “Mission begins with and in God. Mission is the overflow of God’s self-diffusive love creating, redeeming, reaching out to, challenging and healing the world... It is given through love and not earned.

God’s gifts of Godself through Jesus Christ and through the Spirit are overwhelmingly generous. Mission is joining with this overflow of gift, receiving... and giving away again to others.”<sup>1</sup>

In some cultures, Baker continues, there are “strings attached” to gift-giving and receiving: we must do something in return. In other cultures, the total opposite happens: the gift “moves onwards”; it may even go “round a corner, blind or out of sight as it is given to another party. It is no longer controlled. You have to trust the process and trust that the recipient will keep the gift moving.” The Church should embody this “spirit of gift”, “always keeping gifts moving, being generous, being prepared to let the gifts go blind and trust the Spirit”. Within this bigger picture, Baker suggests, pioneering is a particularly “difficult gift to carry and to fathom, but its mystery and ambiguity are part of its appeal”. It is also the gift that “will not be boxed” and “refuses to stand still”: “it is a surprise that keeps surprising”.<sup>2</sup>

If my three-year funded youth enterprise project was a “gift”, then at times it has certainly, in Baker’s terms, been “difficult to carry”, and the temptation has been strong to hold onto it too tightly rather than allow it to “keep moving”. There were times when the project’s targets felt like an overwhelming burden: I was so focused on getting young women through the accredited part of the programme that I was unprepared to be “surprised”. My dreams and expectations at the start of the project were a long way from where we’ve found ourselves three years on. The “gift” has moved in a direction that I had not expected – and certainly a long way out of my hands! In what follows, I want to highlight three aspects of the journey of the “gift” over the last three years, aspects central to the core principles of youth work: meaningful relationships, informal education and the ability to work with surprise.

## MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

### Power balance

I was keen to create opportunities for young women to gain new experiences and new skills but had taken for granted the value of meaningful relationships. Some of the young women I worked with on this particular project I knew already, and it was actually really difficult to shift what had been a session where we “hung out” and ate together to a more focused session on enterprise. Looking back I definitely wasn’t clear enough about my expectations of this particular project, and what happened was a detrimental change in the power balance of our relationships. When we were cooking together, eating together and didn’t have an especially structured agenda there was a sense of mutual sharing, and both

<sup>1</sup> Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross, eds., *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in Mission* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

an openness and vulnerability that we were all part of together. The whole enterprise idea had come from me, and I had repositioned myself as someone with something to offer (something my funding *needed* me to offer!) that in this case was not being accepted.

With this particular group, their disinterest didn't hinder what I still see as my call and vocation to work with them – a privilege and a gift to *me*. Andrew Root talks about incarnational mission with young people as not getting them to “accept a message from long ago”, but rather “participating in the living presence of God together with them, right now... we don't have to *do* or *be* anything other than our authentic human selves”.<sup>3</sup> My work definitely feels much more like the latter, and while I appreciate critiques that argue that it minimises any sense of Jesus' “proclamation” and “holiness”, and might even result in “theological laziness”,<sup>4</sup> I nevertheless believe that something vitally important happens when meaningful relationships deepen, and that this in turn can only happen when we – the “professionals” – are aware of our own identity and our role within the relationship. I am often told I “speak posh” – my accent is much more obviously Berkshire than Brummie. I am conscious of my university education – something none of the young women I work with have been able to access. I am aware of the privilege that comes with my whiteness, even while I might have some common ground with these young women in our shared experience of gender inequality. Acknowledging the power imbalances, as well as what we have in common, the *mutual* work, over long periods of time, of helping each other become our “authentic human selves” is what enables our relationships to genuinely deepen.

### Asset-based relationship building

The charity I work for adopts an “asset-based” approach to its work with both young people and the communities they are rooted in. Such an approach “is founded upon the belief that everybody has something to give to those around them. Every single individual, regardless of where they live, how much they earn, or their academic achievements, has something to offer. This may be a particular passion, such as looking after children or playing music, an area of expertise, such as local history or business accounting, or a specific skill, such as plumbing, cooking or event organising. All of these passions, abilities and skills, broadly known as ‘assets’, are placed alongside other kinds of physical, financial, cultural or social resources that may be present within a community.”<sup>5</sup>

To illustrate this approach, I want to revisit Oli the Rottweiler. My relationship with Oli's owner developed very quickly, from the moment I dared to step out of my comfort zone and voluntarily go dog walking. My inexperience was highlighted by the fact I wore flip-flops to a muddy damp field and all the other dog owners were wearing wellies! But the expedition wasn't about me – it was about discovering more about this young woman's passion and one of the most significant things that gave her purpose. She is a hugely gifted photographer and takes hundreds of pictures of her dogs and her friends' dogs. During the enterprise project she made several calendars and mugs and did a photography commission. Experience has taught me that it will often take huge amounts of time and patience for a young person, especially one with low confidence and self-esteem, to believe they have skills, gifts and talents to offer their communities. But again it is the depth of relationship and levels of trust that means this can become possible.

### Barrier removal

As a youth worker, I do not see my job as trying to “fix” the young people. What I have learned to be crucially important, however, is that in helping them address some of the challenges they experience, I am often called on to help them navigate some of the systems and processes that frequently put up “barriers” and “road-blocks” to their development and flourishing. During the enterprise project, I spent a lot of time attending doctor's appointments, filling in job centre forms, getting ID with the young women, helping them open bank accounts and often advocating on their behalf at important meetings with other professionals. Although this appears, at first glance, to be more “needs-led” youth work, I am convinced that because the young women have had support to remove some of the “barriers”, they are now better connected to other people and have more confidence to take part in and attend other activities in their local neighbourhood. They have got involved in organising a Christmas “do” for the staff and volunteers of our local youth work branch, they've cooked pancakes for a church event on Shrove Tuesday, and they've started attending a Stay and Play group and a community café as well as continuing with their entrepreneurial experience.

## INFORMAL EDUCATION

### Conversation

Critical to informal education is the art of conversation – and my approach to working with young women has

<sup>3</sup> Karen Jones, “Holistic Pastoral Care,” in *Christian Youth Work in Theory and Practice: A Handbook*, Sally Nash and Jo Whitehead, eds. (London: SCM Press, 2014), 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>5</sup> “Tackling Poverty in England: An Asset-based Approach” (Church Urban Fund): 3, accessed 19 March 2017, [http://www2.cuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/PDFs/Research/Asset-based\\_community\\_development\\_CUF\\_2013.pdf](http://www2.cuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/PDFs/Research/Asset-based_community_development_CUF_2013.pdf).

sought to help them learn through conversation, from engaging at depth with issues of sexuality and gender to Googling together the best outfits to wear on a night out. As Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith, the “gurus” of informal education in youth work, describe it, conversation involves six elements: concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope<sup>6</sup> – and I want to highlight those elements in just one worked example here.

During the last general election, I took three young women to their polling station to vote. Before voting day, we had had numerous politics-focused conversations, and the young women discussed their varying opinions at length. We were all anxious to know how our country might change depending on who the next prime minister would be. Through these dialogues we were showing our **concern** and commitment to each other. We also had to **trust** each other: I had to trust myself, that I was enabling these young women who had never voted before to make an informed choice and not abuse their trust by pushing them to vote a certain way. It was clear that we all had to **respect** each other, as our opinions were so diverse. In the process we learned to **appreciate** each other and the unique opinions we all had. **Affection** in conversation “involves a feeling with, and for, those taking part”.<sup>7</sup> This in some ways was the easiest part for us as we were already an established group who knew each other well. It also created the context in which I could, at times, challenge prejudices that the young people held – around “immigrants”, for example.

Jeffs and Smith’s final element is **hope**: “We engage in conversation in the belief that it holds possibility. Often it is not clear what we will gain or learn, but faith in the process carries us forward.” Little did any of us imagine that the outcome of the general election would be a hung parliament. On the day of the result, my WhatsApp went crazy with messages, questions and a general sense of confusion. I certainly hadn’t prepared them for that, and we all learned that Britain was a deeply divided country. I remain hopeful, however, that this experience has given these young women a sense that their vote matters and is one way to make their opinions heard – and that they will vote again, next time round.

For some young people, engaging in conversation is not easy. One of the young women I work with genuinely finds talking difficult as she often pronounces things wrongly. “I’m not a conversationalist,” she says. More often than not, she has very important things to contribute, but it is only when she feels really comfortable that she talks. Another has a very shy personality and she opens up best when she has no eye contact. I often walk with her around

our local shopping area as we are side by side and not staring at each other. In our wanderings, among other discoveries she learned that she could fit into child-size trainers as her feet (like mine) are small – this to her was a real revelation! As youth workers we need to carefully work out the right environments to enable young people to talk, so we can educate informally – and we need to have a number of different ways of promoting conversation “up our sleeve”, so we can build relationships with the young people we are with.

## SURPRISE

### Ritual and tradition

Over the last three years, I have been continuously surprised, in different ways.

We have welcomed two babies into our group, who are utterly cute (most of the time!), and we have included them in most of what we now do.

For the three years of the enterprise project, we met every week at a house owned by the local Anglican church, called the Old Rectory. We had always celebrated Christmas together there, giving each other gifts and playing card games. In December 2017, I was with some of the young women at a Stay and Play group and to my surprise they asked, “Are we doing Old Rectory Christmas this year?” As we had not been meeting in the Old Rectory for some time, I had not even considered it. I had not realised the significance of this to the young women, but we did it again and we gathered there together, babies and all. Though we still all see each other every week, this particular time was one of reconnection and we acknowledged how much we missed each other. The ritual and pattern of this experience had created memories, good ones, and we all agreed that this was and will be our Christmas tradition.

### Enterprise – in a new direction!

“Youth workers are potentially well placed to support young people who may not have had access to enterprise education at school, or whose opportunities to join a mainstream enterprise programme are limited. Good youth workers demonstrate skills that are often valuable in enterprise: building partnerships and social capital; encouraging self-belief; acting as a critical friend and offering challenge; being around when things go wrong – these are the professional attributes that provide structure and support for young people.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith, *Informal Education: Conversation, Democracy and Learning* (Derbyshire: Education Now Publishing, 1999), 42.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Jeffs and Smith, *Informal Education*.

<sup>8</sup> National Youth Agency, “Final Report: Commission into Young People and Enterprise” (2015): 20, accessed 20 March 2017, <http://www.nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Commission-into-enterprise-and-young-people-report.pdf>.

I managed to secure additional funding beyond the three years of the enterprise project, and I continue to meet with the young women. After the last project had not gone remotely to plan, I was much more intentional about asking the young women what *they* wanted to do next. They decided they wanted to set up a clothing line. There was a unanimous decision to actually do something enterprising. I was totally shocked, and literally could not believe it! Currently, it is very much in its infancy, but we are actually in the process of setting up a real business, called Listen Threads: a brand that not only “listens to young women”, but where all profits are going back into supporting our young women’s work. The young women have designed a logo and have picked a clothing range, and we have organised a photo shoot for our website.

This next phase in “doing life together” feels exciting and scary in equal measure but the dream is big, and I hope I can be the kind of “good youth worker” described in the National Youth Agency report above. The importance here is that the whole business is about making the young women’s ideas come to life. We have had some sample flip-flop slider sandals produced, and when they saw them in real life, the smiles on their faces were full of disbelief because the product they chose and designed looked so good. One young woman writes:

I have been a part of Listen Threads before it was a project. To be a part of something that allows your ideas and views to be listened to is really important to me. As a young single parent it is easy to be judged and not listened to. Having a youth worker has also helped a lot and I can’t wait to see the brand go far.

### Change that comes as a surprise

Josephine Macalister Brew suggested (in 1946) that an informal educator should be “capable of entertaining himself [*sic*], capable of entertaining a stranger and capable of entertaining a new idea”.<sup>9</sup> This link between self-reflection, hospitality and a change of mindset appeals to me. Our conversations and relationships can, and will, surprise us and change us. I have been

surprised by how much I have changed over the period of working with these young women – not least in my attitude to dogs. When I went dog walking, the Rottweiler never strayed far from the young woman and was her protector. He would always look out for her to see that she was close by. I will always have an ingrained element of caution around dogs, but my observation is that this young woman has brought her dog up to be a bodyguard, a companion to her, and an animal that she loves and treasures. This has hugely helped me understand the bond between pets and their owners in a way that I had never thought possible. As my confidence around dogs has grown, in turn I have been able to help my daughter be less scared near dogs too. I have not only “entertained a new idea”, as Brew puts it, but have even embraced it to the point where I find myself voluntarily looking at dog pictures on Instagram!

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

I love the quote by Lilla Watson: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”<sup>10</sup> There are different levels, or dimensions, of liberation of course, and the one I talk about here does not go all the way to undoing some of the structural injustices of our society. However, through my deepening relationship with this dog-loving young woman, not only have I overcome

some of my own fears about dogs, but I have been able to help her overcome some of her fears and social anxieties, as we look forward to working together later this year on a wedding, with her as the official photographer and me as her assistant.

### CONCLUSION

Our three-year funded enterprise project did not, in the end, involve a huge amount of enterprise. Taken in isolation, it might look like a failed piece of work. It did not meet the outcomes I had initially hoped for, but even without the surprising development of “Listen Threads”, I am proud of what we had achieved by the end of those three years. It has underlined the wisdom that really good relational youth work is often about a quiet patience, a deep-rooted commitment to listening, and “being with”

<sup>9</sup> Jeffs and Smith, *Informal Education*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> “Lilla: International Women’s Network,” Lilla, accessed 20 March 2017, <https://lillanetwork.wordpress.com/about/>.

and “doing life” with young people over long periods of time. This is a gift, a gift to be shared – and one I would love you, the reader, to share in with me. It may not be an easy gift, but it may be a life-changing gift: one for you to take, to unwrap, but most of all I would urge you to help keep it moving!

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# PARTICIPATION – SHARING FOOD WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

**Dylan Barker**

# WESTERN SOCIETY IS PREOCCUPIED WITH FOOD – AS EVIDENCED BY THE NUMBER OF TELEVISION COOKING SHOWS, CELEBRITY CHEFS, FOOD MAGAZINES, RESTAURANTS AND 24-HOUR SUPERMARKETS.

**The act of eating together is one of life’s most basic bonding activities. Sharing food is universal of all human societies. Since the earliest times, the shared meal has been a central component of community life. For youth workers, sharing food is a common activity. The sharing of food provides a space in which other activities happen.**

Sharing food has a way of bringing people together that meeting without doesn’t. As youth workers, we are always looking for opportunities for young people to increase their participation, and the use of food consciously or unconsciously often plays a part in that. Through meeting with other youth workers, I often noticed how sessions that were looking to build relationships and increase participation in a project would often use food as a backdrop. It was more than just the use of food to attract young people to the session; there was something about it that enabled an equity among the participants and a receptiveness to new ideas. Within youth work, sharing food with young people is such a common way to encourage participation that it almost goes unexamined.

## THE FAMILY MEAL

Within the field of social sciences, the family meal has come to represent a model meal that has warranted

much study. In the West, the family meal is experienced in its most ceremonial form on Sundays and at Christmas. Year upon year, traditional meals are cooked to family recipes and unique family traditions arise that represent the chain of family meals going back through the generations. The customs and rituals are continued but the participants are just as important as the meal itself.

The family meal is not only nutritionally beneficial – it is crucial for the maintaining and building of social relationships within the family. Staying together requires eating together.<sup>1</sup> Meals eaten together mark and shape both day-to-day life and festive occasions. The family mealtime is both space and time for socialisation.

In a similar way, Christian youth workers play and experiment with how they are sharing food with young people. Food is almost always shared in communities, and Christian youth work is no exception. Christianity has a wide heritage of sharing food that extends beyond the communion table. Christian youth workers have naturally adopted the practice of sharing food as an act of hospitality and relationship-building with the young people they serve.

Outside the Eucharistic meal, other forms of sharing food have a long tradition in faith communities. People are drawn to churches because of the community, and food provides a focus.<sup>2</sup> Sophia Park interprets the act of sharing food among the faith community as a cultural space that gathers people together, restoring relationships with self, other and God.<sup>3</sup>

The shared meal is also used by faith communities in interactions with those outside the faith community. Cathy Ross equates both hospitality and mission as space-making activities where the stranger can enter and become friend.<sup>4</sup> John Clifford Henson heralds a church’s regular Christmas meal for the homeless as the High Mass of the year, where Christ is incarnate and the Word made flesh.<sup>5</sup> The shared meal is a thread that is woven throughout the church and the activities of faith communities.

## MY RESEARCH INTO YOUTH WORK AND FOOD

In my own practice I use food in a variety of ways, so in 2015 I took an opportunity to explore the use and impact of sharing food with young people in Christian youth work more widely. The purpose of my study was

<sup>1</sup> Marjorie L. DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Sophia Park, “Come and Eat: Sharing Food as a New Cultural Space that Heals,” *Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors* 3 (2011): 62–87.

<sup>4</sup> Cathy Ross, “Creating Space: Hospitality as a Metaphor for Mission,” *ANVIL* 25, no. 3 (2008): 167–76.

<sup>5</sup> John Clifford Henson, *Other Communion of Jesus* (Cardiff: John Henson, 1994).

to discover the implications of sharing food and to examine the role of commensality as a tool in Christian youth work.

Commensality, the practice of sharing food, on a basic level is about eating and drinking together, “but it is far more than just a physical act: it also comprises the myriad social and political elements entailed in those occasions. Underpinning commensality is co-presence, the relevance of which is central to an understanding of the sharing that is at the heart of the commensal act.”<sup>6</sup>

My research was formed of an initial survey and follow-up focus groups to discuss the findings. The responses to the survey were grouped and two major themes emerged. I was keen to discover how youth workers would reflect on the instinctual practice of sharing food with young people and if the youth work core value of participation would be a driving factor.

## FOOD AS A SERVICE

Firstly, in many cases the sharing of food was seen as a service. In these cases, the sharing of food was a tool that met a need of the young people or youth worker.

## HUNGER

A third of my respondents engaged in food sharing because there was a perceived need that some of the young people who came to the projects were hungry. There were concerns that young people were not eating well, and without access to food at the sessions, young people would go without. Some youth workers were also worried that young people weren't eating things that were good for them, so times of shared food were designed to promote healthy eating. It was noted that when young people attended sessions hungry, their behaviour and concentration was negatively affected. Feeding hungry young people had a positive impact.

## ATTRACTION

Some of my respondents acknowledged that having food available at the sessions they ran made those sessions more attractive to young people. Food was used as a reward for turning up and more formal meals were used as rewards and celebrations for completing specific projects. When food was not provided when young people were expecting it, they were, unsurprisingly, disappointed.

## NEW SKILLS

A key value of youth work is the development of young people's skills and abilities. Sharing food gives ample opportunity for young people to do this through cooking.

Getting young people involved in the preparation of food taught them skills of food hygiene, healthy eating, budgeting and washing-up. The cooking process also enables young people to develop another set of skills. Furthermore, the activity of sharing a meal also developed soft skills. It was felt that some young people rarely sat around a table with others to eat. By preparing a meal and sitting around a table to eat, young people developed their social skills by interacting with others.

## FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

Secondly, I found that sharing food positively impacted the formation and development of relationships. Young people who engaged with sharing food had better relationships with each other and with staff.

But for me it's the community and relationships that are important. As a youth worker and part of a youth work team, eating with the young people is special. It's like being invited into a more intimate part of their lives, and getting to know them better. Eating together is a practice we have as a team, and it's natural to share that practice with the young people we meet. The young people really enjoy coming, and they have built deep relationships with our team and with each other. Recently one of the young people invited our team out for a meal for her eighteenth birthday with her close friends and family. I think this demonstrates how well this has done in breaking down barriers.

The relationship-building aspect of sharing food was such a large category that it was further subdivided into areas of atmosphere, togetherness and conversation.

## ATMOSPHERE

It was observed that sessions that involved sharing food had a difference in atmosphere to them. Sharing food not only gave the opportunity to change the pace of the session but also changed the way interactions happened.

We also have food as part of a social once a month; this is a more of a buffet/snack-based meal but we use the time to sit and chat together. Mixed age and sex group, mostly church-based. Food means we slow down and spend time together rather than doing “something” all the time (game discussion, etc). It helps create a relaxed atmosphere; this group is made up of a mix of other groups so is a bridging group. It works! Passing round the food, saying what we like, how the week has been, it is a leveller.

Through the sharing of food there seemed to be a shift of focus from doing things together to being with

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Pollock, “Towards an Archaeology of Commensal Spaces. An Introduction,” *Journal for Ancient Studies* special vol. 2 (2012): 2.

one another. The sharing food appears to give a low participatory barrier that allows most young people to engage, while discussion and conversation happens around it. Food seems also to provide an alternative focus for young people, enabling them to dip in and out of the conversation. This change in rhythm to the session, and indeed to day-to-day life, appears to set the stage for young people to come together and experience a moment in time that is somehow different.

## TOGETHERNESS

Again, many youth workers remarked that by participating in the sharing of food young people were brought together, and it engendered a sense of belonging. Most of the people I spoke to seemed to agree that bonding happens in the space of a shared meal. In fact, some purposefully shared food to bring about a family-like environment, and the relationships built in the youth work setting are sometimes referred to as extended family. This is a careful balancing act of being a “professional” and yet at the same time being community-focused.

I think even on changing culture where families sit and eat together, well there’s something about sharing food that is really symbolic of what family is or should be about. I think young people “buy into” that imagery (not sure about my choice of words there) and it speaks deeply to them.

The togetherness of the extended family that is brought about by sharing food doesn’t seem to necessarily need a positive family experience. Young people seem to engage with an idealised sense of family even if their own experience is to the contrary. Furthermore, sharing food was often a way of levelling the participants. Eating is activity undertaken by all and a shared meal ensures that everyone is cared for. This levelling, brought about through common need, provides opportunity for a sense of belonging.

## CONVERSATION

Building on the sense of togetherness and belonging, the environment of the shared meal changes the atmosphere of the space. For example, youth workers told me that during times of shared food, the level and nature of conversations changed. The sharing-food environment is a natural home for conversation. The bonding or togetherness that happens over shared food means the conversation sits more comfortably in the created space.

For workers, it’s an opportunity to welcome the young people into our homes and share our everyday lives with them. Conversation flows more easily over food and is more inclusive (everyone tends to be included in one conversation rather than several smaller groups talking).

With food being “a” focus of the time in the shared meal, conversation can be dipped in and out of without the need of too much attention and focus on the individual. With the focus of individuals continually switching between the food and the conversation, it seems that the conversations can be less intense for the young people.

The positive impacts of sharing food in the youth work context are wide. Most importantly and most mentioned is how relationships can be built and developed within this space. The change of atmosphere, sense of togetherness and the nature of conversations in this space all contribute to how this happens.

## CONSIDERATIONS

However, these positive impacts aren’t the whole story. In a few cases, sharing food can have a negative impact. Respondents were asked to identify any negative impacts that had been encountered as a consequence of engaging in food sharing; a few noted that some young people, who already found it hard being part of a group, didn’t like conforming to the social convention of a shared meal. Furthermore, some felt that by providing food to share they were part of a consumerization of youth work, creating a culture of expectation. Young people were coming to expect food as part of the youth work session and being annoyed when it wasn’t provided. And finally, for some young people, there are issues around food itself. This could range from feeling uncomfortable about eating in front of others to complex psychological issues. Sharing food around a table can be a pressurised and socially anxious environment for some. As such, the use of food to increase participation in a session, without the right forethought, can lead to separation of the group and young people being made to feel uncomfortable.

## FAITH

Interestingly, in my research the impact of sharing food on faith was notable in its absence. Although the questionnaires were distributed through networks of Christian youth workers, it was a surprise to discover that while a few respondents mentioned the Christian context of their food sharing, only one respondent mentioned their faith as a reason for sharing food with young people. Even though the food-sharing sacrament of communion is a central part of almost all Christian denominations, no one mentioned it in the initial surveys. This absence of faith and spirituality within the initial survey to Christian youth workers piqued my interest so I went back to ask more questions.

Those I asked agreed that there was a spiritual nature to sharing food but found it hard to pin down. The nature of sharing food was a relational activity that levelled everyone. In this understanding, the connection to each other during a shared meal was viewed as spiritual.

In my experience sharing food around a table (as opposed to everyone just diving in and eating it standing or on laps, etc) is a spiritual experience and opens [the] door to conversations, etc that doesn't seem to be able to be replicated in the same way in other contexts. It's easier to talk/share/build relationship over food than just sitting in a room, I find. Though this may be just because I love food! But I think it's more than that... And a biblical model.

Having listened to what youth workers were doing with food, and thinking about my own experiences, I began to think about how using a shared meal could be used as a tool within Christian youth work and mission. I began to see that sharing food had a foundational role in creating close personal bonds and strong social ties, and therefore a stronger sense of community.

## BONDING THROUGH SHARING FOOD

On reflection, participation in shared meals and rituals helps young people form relational bonds both between individuals and towards the community as a whole. The sharing of food speaks to the overall community commitment that results from the relational bonds that are formed through participation in shared meals. Sharing food provides a means of participation in the group and enables interactions within the group or community. The act of sharing food with others not only nourishes the body but also nourishes, maintains and develops relational bonds.

I began to explore the idea of a "third space" as a lens for the shared meal: a framework for understanding how sharing food can build participation in the community and Christian story.

## SHARING FOOD AS A THIRD SPACE

The youth work space has always been space for young people to gather – a place to socialise, to learn and to relax; this is often termed as a third place. Ray Oldenburg describes the third place as an environment that is neither home (first place), nor work or school (second place), that allows people to come together socially, where novelty, conversation and interaction occur.<sup>7</sup> He describes third spaces as places such as coffee houses and pubs, which are accessible to their "inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own".<sup>8</sup> These spaces evolve and are

transformed by those who inhabit them in order to make them homely for all.

In an examination of Oldenburg's view of third spaces, Barbara Crump and Keri Logan summarised them by these indicators:

- A neutral place away from home and work where people feel comfortable and can come and go at will.
- Little interference from a host.
- Social inclusion in terms of membership/participation.
- A place that stimulates connection with others.
- Frequency of regulars.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to this list, S. Ganguly and P. K. Bhattacharya add that "food and drink, while not essential, are important".<sup>10</sup> The characteristics above align easily with the values of youth work, which are voluntary participation, informal education, empowerment and equality of opportunity.<sup>11</sup> I have come to believe that these characteristics are crystallised in the participation in shared food found in the youth work setting.

## NEUTRAL GROUND

Third places are characterised as neutral grounds where individuals can enter and leave as they see fit. Within the youth work context, the shared meal, as with most activities, is an open invitation to participate. Eating is a requirement to sustain life, thus sharing food is a neutral ground as everyone will need to eat at some point. As I saw in my research, youth workers think of food as a "leveller" or "equaliser". The open space that is provided in the activity of sharing food is a natural level playing field that welcomes all. The sensitive worker can accommodate even those who are socially anxious around the meal table.

Moreover, third places must be easy to access. Youth workers will often choose foods that will cater to young people's taste, yet also reserve the space for challenging young people with food. Conversations that happen over shared food are more inclusive and often have more depth to them. Frank Elgar (et al.) notes that the links between family dinners and positive mental health are partially

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<sup>7</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett, "The Third Place," *Qualitative Sociology* 5, no. 4 (1982): 274.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Crump and Keri Logan, "The Interplay of Third Place, Self-efficacy, Social and Human Capital in a New Zealand Community ICT Youth Project," *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems Evaluation* 14, no. 1 (2001): 1–11.

<sup>10</sup> S. Ganguly and P. K. Bhattacharya (eds.), *International Conference on Digital Libraries 2013: Vision 2020* (India: The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), 2013): 217.

<sup>11</sup> Danny Brierley, *Joined Up: An Introduction to Youth Work and Ministry (Youthwork: The Resources)* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003).

attributed to the ease of communication that happens around the family meal.<sup>12</sup> As discussed, the shared meal is a space that engenders social bonding and is therefore a socially inclusive space.

## THE REGULARS

“What attracts a regular visitor to a third place is supplied not by management but by the fellow customer,” notes Oldenburg. “It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there.”<sup>13</sup> This is the case in the youth work space and so is also indicative of the shared-food space within the youth work context. The meal space provides a moment within the life of the youth work community in which regulars, many of whom often spend their time engaging in fast-paced activity, slow down and engage with each other.

The youth work space is a third place for young people to be in. The shared meal crystallises the concept of a third space within an existing third place, or with a nod to a Christopher Nolan film, what could be culturally termed as “third space inception”.

The sharing of food both expands and intensifies the idea of “third place” beyond the designation of a physical place. Within this shared space is an opportunity to build social capital through the gathering together of young people. Through conversations and the communicative act of sharing food, bonding is accomplished and there is an opportunity for social capital to increase.

## CONCLUSION

Sharing food together remains a key ingredient of daily life. Although the landscape of food consumption is changing, eating with others still remains important. In the practice of youth work, Christian youth workers continue to share food with the young people they work alongside. By participating in sharing food with young people there were changes in conversations, sense of belonging and atmosphere, which resulted in a change of relationship between participants.

When looking to increase participation, the practice of sharing food, when implemented carefully and with

consideration, can create an environment where young people are at ease with each other. This common act of eating together opens the door to a shared space where young people can participate in the responsibility of the group activity.

The youth work space as a third place provides a neutral location for young people to meet, have conversations and build relationships with one another in a relaxed environment. The participation in food sharing practices within that act as a central point for that third space. As young people continue to participate in the youth work community, the sharing of food can become both a treasured memory and a future moment of celebration that initiates and develops relationships through conversation. The continued attendance of this third space could indicate not only the desire to feed the stomach but also the desire to feed the bonds of relationship and nourish community.

While it must be noted that the majority respondents, who all had a Christian connection to their work, initially failed to theologically reflect on their motivations and understanding of the implications of their food-sharing practices, it is my conclusion that the sacramental tradition of communion has become so removed from the original physical shared meal that it was a part of that they are only held together by a thread. The spiritualisation of the holy meal fences it off from other forms of food and drink. I believe that barriers between the holy and the everyday, symbolic food and real food, must be broken down if theologies of shared food among Christian youth workers are to arise. Through praxis, the Christian youth work world could reclaim the spiritual impact of shared meals; in this place, with both meals of celebration and remembrance a community theological praxis may be re-found. Youth workers and youth work communities should be encouraged to explore the spiritual impact of sharing food in their own context and not see it as merely nourishment of the body. While the meal at the altar holds the focus of Christian communities, it is meals around the table that will provide an opportunity to enact Christ’s generosity and inclusivity. Shared is the food of love.

**Dylan Barker** has been working with young people the majority of his life. He currently works for Frontier Youth Trust, supporting pioneer youth workers. He recently moved with his family to a housing estate in Weston-super-Mare and is working with the young people there.



<sup>12</sup> Frank J. Elgar, Wendy Craig and Stephen J. Trites, “Family Dinners, Communication, and Mental Health in Canadian Adolescents,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 52, no. 4 (2013): 433–38, doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.07.012.

<sup>13</sup> Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 33–34.



# EMPOWERMENT IN PRACTICE

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

James Ballantyne

# EMPOWERMENT IS ONE OF THE MOST CONTESTED CONCEPTS IN YOUTH WORK PRACTICE.

**Yet the empowering of humanity is a critical aspect of the Gospels' dramatic story. As Danny Brierley describes, all those who met Jesus came away "feeling more beautiful and valued than before".<sup>1</sup> A critical aspect of the fourth act of the Gospels' dramatic narrative is the empowerment of the church to participate in the acts of God, as the space became vacant after Jesus' ascension: a participative task for the church that continues then and now.**

Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith articulate that empowerment may seem laudable, but may actually be patronising and anti-liberating, creating dependency, and regard young people as those to be acted upon.<sup>2</sup> Empowerment has been used to emphasise programmes of change that are undemocratic and used for political ends,<sup>3</sup> merely empowering young people to conform. However, Kieffer's definition of empowerment is a process, which generates "participatory competence",<sup>4</sup> which links it to developing self-confidence. Consequently empowerment is about cultivating a greater collection of resources within the social and political environment, in order that a young person might make decisions and take action.<sup>5</sup> Empowerment can be characterised by the opening up of a space to enable ongoing participatory education with young people. Our hope is to tip the balance of power towards young people in aspects of decision-making, developing ideas,<sup>6</sup> and enabling young people towards actions that enable them to take control,<sup>7</sup> all of which enable them to develop confidence through being participative contributors and critical reflectors of the environment around them. This includes being empowered to make positive decisions about experiences of faith.

Three case studies are described below; each are practices from within the Frontier Youth Trust community

and they illustrate the challenges and benefits of realising an empowering and participative approach. The first reveals how a culture within practice was empowering from the start; the second describes the changing to a culture of empowerment; and the third describes a practice that overtly explores faith while retaining an empowering environment.

## EMPOWERMENT FROM SCRATCH

*In a village in north-east England, the workers began a piece of detached youth work after receiving training by FYT to prepare them for engaging with young people on the streets. As they met with young people and used participatory and empowering questions, these culminated in the negotiating of an open after-school club. The young people, having negotiated the club at the beginning, continue to make decisions on aspects of the programme, craft activities, food and trips. The young people decided and developed their own ideas about raising money for the church building, and continue to make positive contributions to the style, content and activities of the group.*

This example shows how young people have been empowered to take some control and ownership of provision aimed at them and where it affects their local environment. They have become competent in ongoing participation as they are viewed as contributors, having their opinions validated through negotiated collaborative action. Through creating a culture of empowerment from the outset, a risk was taken by the leaders to improvise the direction of how the young people may develop the activity, causing a need to be flexible and responsive, a challenge at times that shifted the balance of power to young people. Other challenges occurred when new young people arrived into this group as they had to be inducted into an empowering culture that expected ongoing participation. Nevertheless, creating an empowering culture from the outset and developing from this starting point might be easier than trying to shift a culture within a youth club environment to this.

## EMPOWERING FOR INNOVATION

*"Starting out as an Art Therapy group, our Tuesday Club was well attended by young people who took part in the activities that were provided for them. On the face of it, it was successful and we were able to justify the arts-orientated*

<sup>1</sup> Danny Brierley, *Joined Up: An Introduction to Youth Work and Ministry (Youthwork: The Resources)* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith, *Informal Education: Conversation, Democracy and Learning* (Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Bunyan and Jon Ord, "The Neo Liberal Context of Youth Work Management," in *Critical Issues in Youth Work Management*, ed. Jon Ord (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> C. H. Kieffer, "Citizen Empowerment; A Developmental Perspective," *Prevention in Human Services* 3, no. 2-3 (1984): 9-36.

<sup>5</sup> Dod Forrest, "The Cultivation of Gifts in All Kinds of Directions: Thinking About Purpose," in *Youth Work Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 54-69.

<sup>6</sup> Annette Coburn and David Wallace, *Youth Work in Communities and Schools* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Kerry Young, *The Art of Youth Work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, 2006).

*funding. But as coordinator, I was uneasy about the limited opportunities for developing young people's participation and empowerment, as well as thinking that they had skills, creativity and innovation that we or others might be missing out on when young people are just recipients of our provision. However, I was also aware of the challenge that this change in culture would mean for the group, for the current volunteers and the young people to adjust to. Over a period a year we gradually increased the non-activity space to include conversations about choices, options and listening to the young people. We found that young people were initially frustrated as they said 'there's nothing going on', and at times they would request the arts materials, but this was okay as it was their choice, and we persevered and communicated with them. They now realise that they can make contributions to affect the session, and we can respond through the open spaces to develop what might be appropriate and requested. Since we made this change we have seen how young people have taken up the challenge to show creativity and innovation, some of which was evident from the nature of the art group previously, but is now incorporated into other activities such as a cooking, drama and vocational studies that they have completed at college. The shift also paved the way for young people to organise a variety of fundraising activities and local community projects, many of which were of their own direction and insistence. As a youth project we have been surprised but also pleased about the unpredicted off-shoots of changing the culture within this evening youth club."*

Steve, Sidewalk Youth Project, Scarborough

This example expresses the challenges of changing to an increased empowering and participative culture within an already established group that already has regular patterns and actions. It also reveals how, if the young people have developed social capital and trust the workers, this change made gradually and with consultation can bring about opportunities for conversation, creativity and community contributions in the young people.

## MAKING FAITH EMPOWERING

The faith communication aspect can present a youth group practice with a challenge, especially if its other activities are undertaken with high levels of participation

from the young people. In another north-east-based practice, a group worker realised that its epilogue-style "God talk" was at odds in the context with the changed participative approach, yet an aspect of faith experience needed to remain. One solution the worker trialled was to give young people opportunities to opt in to faith activities. Each evening the young people would opt in to crafts, games or activities, and they would also have the opportunity to opt into a faith-orientated activity. These have included a prayer station, thought-provoking picture cards and themes on a table, all of which invoke curiosity and create a space where young people can make a positive participative choice. The workers realised that having three young people in the group participating in faith activities out of choice was significantly preferable to 12 hearing a talk they are forced to (and often opting out through destructive distracting behaviour). From this basis, a number of significant meaningful conversations have been had around faith, leading to confirmations and baptisms in the church. Again, these were not planned or strategic outcomes of making this change, but giving space for young people to participate in faith rather than merely be recipient has been hugely beneficial in a number of ways.

There is much to learn from each of these examples, and what the implications are for developing increased empowering and participative approaches. Understandably, even in youth groups, culture shifts take time, requiring the education of volunteers and young people alike. They involve taking risks to value young people, to open up the empty space and trust that young people might rise to the possibility of responsibility. Each example shows how, through providing a healthy space through positive relationships, young people can rise to the challenge presented to them, take risks and made contributions, and take control of themselves and the environment around them. In creating empowering youth practices, these case studies model something about what church is all about in the overall drama of God's redemption, the agency that humanity is afforded and how that empowering participatory competence can be an ongoing task of faith.

**James Ballantyne** is Youth Work Development Adviser for Frontier Youth Trust. He lives in Hartlepool with his family, and has been involved in youth work, principally detached youth work, for 15 years. He writes on youth work and mission at [jamesballantyneyouthworker.wordpress.com](http://jamesballantyneyouthworker.wordpress.com) and can be contacted there.



# A PLACE TO CALL HOME: EMPOWERMENT AND HOMELESSNESS



ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

Pat Clarke

# MOST OF US ARE LIKE THE REST OF US

**This is a saying I heard in a small church on the Isle of Wight many years ago and it is so true.**

All people are of equal significance to God. Scripture affirms this and yet we have a tendency to see the “us” and “them”; “vulnerable” and “non-vulnerable”; “needy” and “not needy”. The truth is we are all “us” to God irrespective of any factor that is challenging us at the moment – all of us are needy or vulnerable in different ways.

Our classification of people according to how we see them needs to be constantly challenged, both within ourselves and in the wider community. This is particularly true of people who are displaced, who do not have a place to call home. The very label “homeless” conjures up in most people’s minds the rough sleeper who needs to be helped off the streets – someone who is very vulnerable and needy with a multitude of problems that we personally cannot help with, and indeed this is the image portrayed in the media. The response to this overt need is usually almsgiving as people are touched by compassion – food, money, clothing, bedding and some shelter. A short-term response to immediate need, the giver and receiver relationship in action and a practical way people feel they can help.

In reality, most homeless people do have a roof over their heads, but it is not the roots put down that most of us think of as home. For example, in Coventry at the moment there are 220 families living in hotel rooms waiting for housing, the whole family living in one room with no cooking facilities. There are over 250 young people under 25 living in hostels.

## COMPUTER SAYS NO

It is beneath human dignity to lose one’s individuality and become a mere cog in the machine.

Mahatma Gandhi

As housing services find their resources increasingly stretched, many homeless people are turned away from help. A homeless person is often left feeling that they are just a number – a task that needs to be solved before moving on to the next. This is because in the process of getting help they will have sat across the desk from a series of people asking questions and typing information into a computer as their homelessness status is assessed and the help they can be given, if any, is determined. At the end of all that they may get just this response – “The computer says no.”

This can be a very isolating experience as hope is gradually stripped away, as each organisation – whether due to its limitations, duties or lack of resources – cannot

provide help.

## OUR COMMUNITY SAYS YES.

So, how do we move beyond the compassionate, immediate response and include those who feel hopeless and excluded?

When we meet displaced people the cause of homelessness may not be obvious, and it is only by building a relationship with an individual that the main problem may come to light. After many years of belonging to our community, messing up regularly leading to a pattern of serial homelessness, Sam (not his real name) eventually admitted that he had a heavy cannabis habit. Whenever his benefits came through, he would immediately spend the bulk of it on drugs. But when seen at our project, Sam was never under the influence so we had no idea. His trust in the project and church and the way he was accepted as an individual meant he eventually felt safe to admit his problem and get support to tackle it. Sam knew we were with him for the long haul.

One thing as Christians that we are clearly called to do is to live as community, as family together with all its messiness and give and take. This is very empowering for everyone as they feel valued just as they are and feel that they can contribute as well as receive. Trust is built up as we are all included through thick and thin, accepted despite the mistakes we make, loved and affirmed.

Our community believes that showing the love of God is more important than telling the love of God. Belonging to our community should not be a means to make “them” become “us”. The agenda should not be evangelism but love.

Loving with an agenda, apart from a desire for each person to be the best they can be, can be very destructive. I came across someone recently who had been to a series of churches to be rejected by each one until she was empowered to change by finding a loving accepting Christian community that journeyed with her through thick and thin no matter what. Rejection was because of an agenda – repentance was expected, or she was loved in order to convert her then was rejected when this did not happen, or she was ignored through fear as she was judged to be too dangerous to be with. Unconditional love is what Christ commands us to do. We need to obey and not worry about the results of our love, just see all people as part of “us” – the us that God loves without exception.

## A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Inclusion is important. Homeless people need to feel they are just like everyone else in the community and not just someone who needs help. For example, we first met Paul (not his real name) when he was 16 and was “sofa

surfing”, staying at a variety of friends’ homes. He found it very hard to accept offers of help. He had first been kicked out of home at the age of 14.

Paul had no identity papers. This also meant he could not register as homeless with the council despite being a child. We helped him to sort this out and benefits started to come through, but he continued to struggle with homelessness. The big breakthrough came when he was 18. We asked him to help another young person move into his first flat, and this gave him “permission” to ask for help in return. We discovered that he had significant benefit problems and was living on food given to him by friends and the meals we provided.

Paul now has a room in a shared house. *“I can lie down flat to sleep for the first time in two years.”* He did his best to continue his education, despite the fact he was often sent away from school for not having the correct uniform or footwear. He was not diagnosed as dyslexic until his final year and left school with no qualifications. With our help, he got into college. He is now, at age 20, in the second year of an apprenticeship, is still one of our regular attendees and volunteers to help others every week.

At Bardsley [Youth Club] there is always a friendly face to talk to and get help. It picks you up as it is a happy and safe place. They are always there.

## A PLACE TO BELONG

Another example is Abia (not her real name), a Muslim girl we met when she had been thrown out of home on her twenty-first birthday with only a small bag of belongings. She was turned away by the council as they had no duty to help her. Having nowhere else to go she spent several nights in the rough sleepers’ room at the Salvation Army, a frightening place for anyone, let alone a young woman. We arranged for her to go to Cyrenians, a national charity that helps all homeless people, who gave her a room and helped her claim housing benefit so by night four of being homeless she was in her own room in a shared house. We gave her bed linen, clothing, towels, household goods and food to get her started.

Our relationship with Abia continued as she lost her job, being owed two months’ pay by her employer, who

went into liquidation. Her housing benefit stopped and she was evicted from her Cyrenians room due to rent arrears (in hostels the rent is between £150 and £200 per week). To avoid the rough sleepers’ room, one of our trustees put her up and she now has employment and is currently awaiting a place at the YMCA. I asked Abia what she thought about our project and the response was wonderful:

What would I have done without you, I would have been sleeping on the streets. I have no family now, you are the closest thing I have to home. You actually provide genuine care and help. You moved fast, didn’t hesitate and helped with everything you could. You have respected my background totally and have not been judgemental.

Abia felt that she could not ask at the mosque for help, but our caring acceptance spoke volumes to her about the Christian faith and opened up dialogue and sharing of views. We have learned much from her as we have helped her. We have no idea how God will continue to act in her life but she knows we will always be there for her.

Helping homeless people is rewarding and sometimes hard but it awakens you to your own vulnerability and need and the realisation that everyone is just a few steps away from being in the situations we deal with on a daily basis.

It’s not us and them; it’s “we”.

**Pat Clarke** is the manager of the Homeless Hub at Bardsley Youth Project in Coventry ([www.bardsleyyouth.org](http://www.bardsleyyouth.org)), walking with and supporting homeless young people as they navigate the complexities of finding a home, equipping it and keeping it.



# SEX ED AND MISSION... NO, REALLY!

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

Debs North

# FOR ME, MISSION TO YOUNG PEOPLE IS ABOUT WHOLENESS. AND OVER 20 YEARS WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN SCHOOL HAS TAUGHT ME THAT A CLEAR ROUTE TO WHOLENESS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IS SEX EDUCATION AND COUNSELLING.

**Youth work in schools has always ended up being challenging, pushed to the edges of the “real work” of education and discipline.** Because of this it has often been underappreciated and minimally funded, but it has also provided opportunities to work with young people in their times of greatest need. Counselling was an obvious salve and help, but it became clear that sex education could be life-changing and empowering to a larger audience. Removed from the usual period talks and don't-get-chlamydia lectures, it has enabled wholeness and freedom in the young people I work with.

The material we developed over a period of time has always been responsive, well researched and collaborative with young people. We know the difference we have made through the feedback we receive from young people, parents and teachers. And we now deliver a wide range of sex education and resources from the age of 10 through to college, and even to parents via our quiz nights.

To have wholeness as a goal of mission has sometimes seemed OTT, amorphous, floating unattached to any particular doctrine or even faith. But it has grown out of a personal as well as a professional need to make sense of God and humans in the face of endless conflicting

evidence, experiences and gut feeling. Young people are the most excellent callers of bulls\*\*t there are... as well as being the most susceptible to it! Youth work invites us to listen to their insight as well as protect them from their naivety. Wholeness and congruence seemed to be the place where God might reside in the middle of all that.

Sex education is an essential conversation, a place to grow and wonder and develop a self. Much has been written about our terrible attitudes to sex and relationships, young people's dependence on porn for information, and the effects this is having. Lemon Jelly stepped into this gap with real words and real challenges; and real information. Our hope is that young people will begin to encounter themselves, begin to step outside the prescribed roles and activities, to ask difficult brave questions and find their own likes and desires. This is not about abstinence... unless it is. This is not about licence to swing from chandeliers... unless it is. This is about self-actualisation and the tools to reach this lofty ideal... and the thought that maybe this path of wholeness is a path to God.

Recently a group of young people met with me to collaborate on an article about taking nudes (naked pictures that are sent to others). It was a secret celebration for me as I experienced youth worker nirvana – when your previously damaged and needy 13-year-olds reach 17 to 20 and sit you down and teach you about their world. The group carried a range of needs when they were younger. They carry a different range of needs now. Fabulously, a lot of healing and growth has happened in the interim, hardly any of it down to youth work – most of it down to resilience and the innately human desire to live. But I know youth work helped!

I listened as they talked confidently about a subject they used to ask questions about. They told me things I had

no idea of, even though this is my area of expertise and I like to think I'm very up to date! Their insight changed a resource I was in the process of writing. I watched their joy and sense of fun as they realised they were teaching the

old lady. I buzzed as they told me “what to tell the young people”.

None of what they told me was anything adults would want to hear about young people sending naked pictures to other young people. It definitely wasn't anything a school would say in the midst of a panic about Brenda sending Bob a picture of her boobs and it going viral.

## “Sex education is an essential conversation, a place to grow and wonder and develop a self.”

But. For me, it was incredible. And God was everywhere.

Not because they said anything godly. Not because they came to faith. But because I was witnessing growth and wholeness wending its merry way in front of me like cartoon ivy.

Now. Many friends of no faith would say this was just the natural process of maturity. I have known these young people through the process and can observe the changes. Well, maybe. Probably.

But I believe God resides in these processes, that God lives in biology and cells and the space between our atoms. And my mission is to enable and support brilliant growth and change. To be alongside the biology and the maturing. To learn from it as much as teach it.

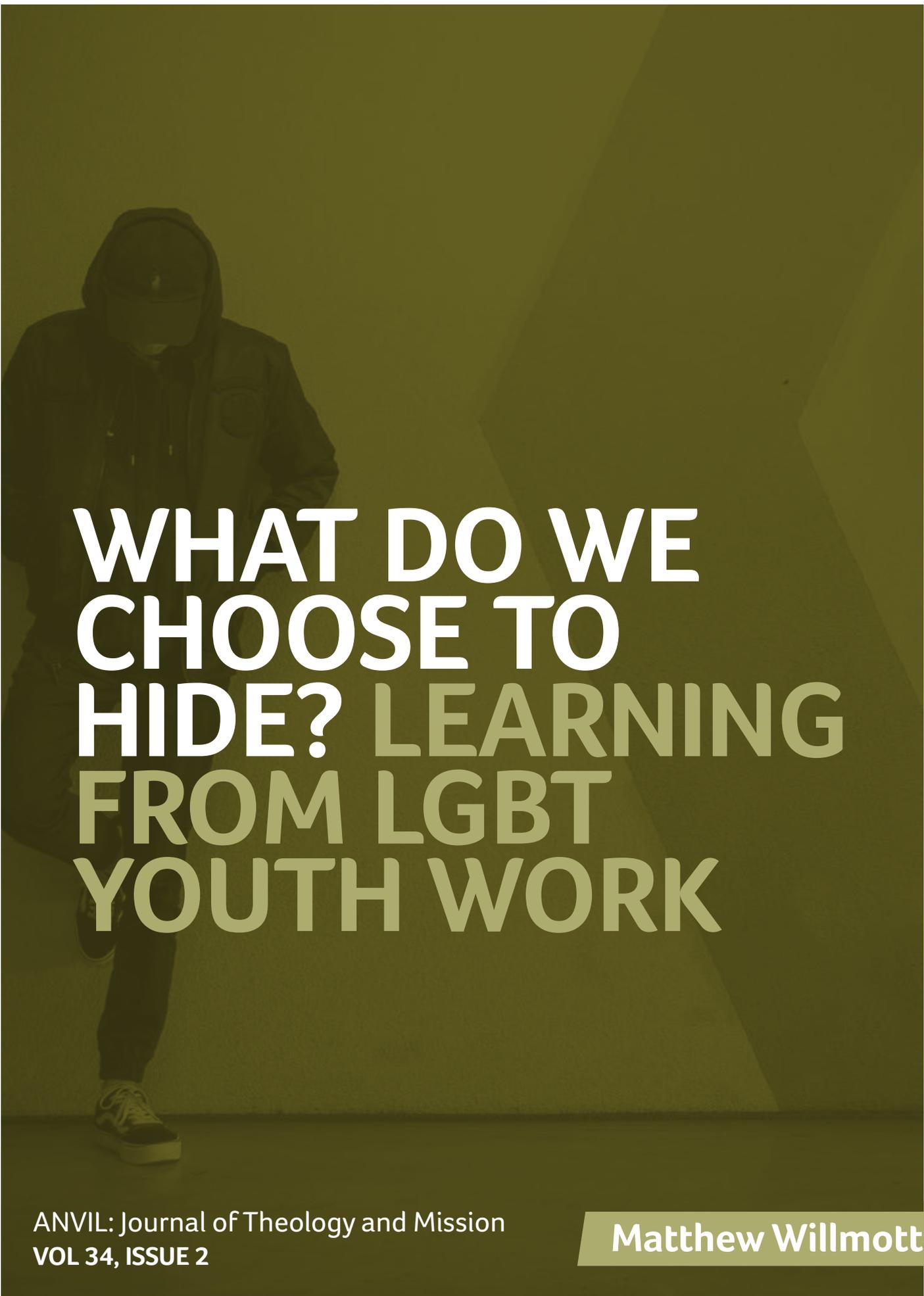
So. I have no neat parcels of healed and perfected young people tied up with bows to offer. I have only young people and myself on a path. Realistically, my mission for wholeness doesn't entail a destination of bows and perfection. Many Makers and Keepers have questioned whether that destination is where God is – maybe wholeness, and therefore God, is just about showing up on the path and walking together.

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**Debs North** runs Lemon Jelly Youth Work, a Devon-based charity delivering brilliant youth work locally, and PSHE/SRE resources and programmes nationally. PODS – the sex and relationships edition – is a collection of resources and articles for youth workers, teachers and parents available from [www.lemonjellyyouthwork.org](http://www.lemonjellyyouthwork.org).

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# WHAT DO WE CHOOSE TO HIDE? LEARNING FROM LGBT YOUTH WORK

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

Matthew Willmott

# I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN YOUTH WORK AND MISSION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER (LGBT) FOR OVER SIX YEARS.

I currently run Q Space, a group for LGBT young people in Northampton. While the church gets itself in a mess about anything LGBT, you might ask why dedicated youth groups are needed, or what difference they can make. You might even ask if such groups should even exist. Whatever your stance on people that are LGBT, the first fact is: we exist, we know we are different, and the world we live in favours straight people.

We call that heteronormative. In fact, being anything other than cisgender (gender matching that assigned at birth) and straight puts you in a place where people may not accept you for who you are. For a young person this means that at the time when you are starting to find your place in the world, the adult community often starts to reject you. The UK has laws that should protect the lives of LGBT people, especially the lives of young people. But misinformation, fear of getting things wrong, and disagreeing for religious reasons mean things that should be protected are often not.

As young LGBT people start to accept themselves and “come out” to others, they often face multiple problems. Some of the most common are schools that won’t accept a name change, churches that remove responsibilities and make attending uncomfortable (even impossible), and parents who struggle with the shame of having a child who does not live up to normal expectations.

LGBT youth clubs give young people a place to explore who they are in safety. Our club is a lot of fun. We go on trips, have themed nights and do most of the things you would expect most youth groups to do. But here young people can have a different name or different pronoun (he, she or they) from what they use everywhere else. They can talk about being attracted to people of the same gender, both genders or regardless of gender. These may sound like small things, but during a day how many times is your name used? Or your pronoun used

to refer to you? How many conversations involve saying how good-looking a person is? These simple things can end up outing people as LGBT.

All my LGBT youth work has been in secular settings outside the church. But I am open about being a person of faith, who is also gay. This means that young people share about their church experiences and how bad experiences paint a bad picture of who God is. I try to share what I know of God, a God I know and experience daily, a God of love who made us all unique in their image. LGBT people are a gift to the church; we have much to offer and have walked a path that means we build skills that can be used to help the church.

## COMING OUT

Coming out is a significant moment in the life of every LGBT person, and it’s an experience unique to the LGBT community. I think there is lots the church could learn from this culture. In her book *Queer Virtue*, Elizabeth Edman writes,

Decades ago people who identified as gay began to realize that the single factor that most affected how someone felt about “homosexuality” was whether that person knew someone who was openly gay.<sup>1</sup>

Are you someone who has had their opinion of sexuality changed by knowing someone who is “out”? Do you think Edman is right? My personal experience is that being out as a gay man changes others’ opinions on what sexuality is. The changing of other people’s attitudes hasn’t always been immediate, and at times has taken months or years, but the impact of knowing someone LGBT, and making the topic a personal one, has a lasting effect.

What can pioneer youth ministry learn from this? Coming out as gay was a massive step in my life; it became the point when I needed to tell people that I felt fake and that I was hiding something important about who I was. How can I expect a meaningful interaction with anyone if I won’t share what is an important and integrated part of who I am? It’s got easier; sometimes I surprise myself how quickly I come out to people. In a heteronormative world it requires little or no bravery to speak of your husband/wife/partner. Many typical conversations involve sharing where you have been with a loved one: a trip to the shop, simply watching television. Coming out as straight is something most people do multiple times every day. As a person from the LGBT community, these conversations lead me to a moment of choice: to share who I am, use carefully chosen words to test the waters or stay hidden in the closet.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 123.

How often do we come out as Christian? Is this something we choose to share or hide? This is an important question because of the world we live in today and the way we view our faith. Pope Francis says,

People feel an overbearing need to guard their personal freedom, as though the task of evangelization was a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God's love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive.<sup>2</sup>

Is sharing our faith something we consider a task, a separated state of mind we enter when we are doing God's work? Or is it simply sharing that at the core of who we are is a person of faith? Is it a natural pouring out of what makes us whole?

I hope for the latter – but I fear the former. When we first meet young people from beyond the church, we tell them things that justify us as people, often in an unspoken hierarchy of importance. We tell them our job, location, partner, children, something unique, hobbies, projects. Talk of

church or faith is often missing, unless it's very tied up in to one of the other things. When we "come out" as Christian, sharing something core to us no matter the cost, we are saying we are people of faith. We want to express that our faith is an amazing journey of love, hope and purpose. Depending on the other person's experience and worldview, they will make assumptions about us in the same way that LGBT people can be judged when they come out.

For many young people, this becomes a barrier to communication. One of the first assumptions people make, having only encountered Christians portrayed in the media, is that we are from the Christian right (conservative) or left (liberal). Others assume that coming out as Christian is a sign that we are preparing to negatively judge their lives and friends. Shane Claiborne, talking about homosexuality, says, "It should

break our hearts that often we are known more for what we are against than what we are for, for who we have excluded than for who we have embraced."<sup>3</sup>

How do we communicate that there is a God of love who cries at the injustice in the world and loves all their children? What does it mean to be Christian? Church has become a place of safety; we meet with our friends for tea and cake, to chat about the weather, from the comfort of our church halls. We are called to be part of and do God's work. How did we miss this? How do we come out as Christian in our work with young people, but also come out as people who care about the world in the time that God has placed us in?

## AUTHENTIC YOUTH MISSION

LGBT people come out knowing that the world might not accept them and that they may be seen as unacceptable, unlovable, wrong and sick. But we make a choice to come out anyway, as this brings light to who we are. Edman reminds us that "coming out

builds up the community, and the existence of that community provides support, encouragement, and balm to those who come out".<sup>4</sup> If the West sees Christians as prejudicial and intolerant, Christians need to come out and live authentic lives of justice and peace, showing (over time) that Christianity is a faith of God's love to the world.

In the Christian youth work world we come out as part of our evangelism: to proclaim the good news.

The LGBT community shows us a different way. Edman, again, puts it beautifully: "You aren't coming out to people in order to change *them*. Hopefully you are coming out because your life matters to you, and this other person matters to you."<sup>5</sup>

To be honest about who we are is about love. As Christian youth workers, we can learn from the LGBT world that living open lives, publically stating that we are Christians, allowing time to change people's minds about what being Christian means, reclaims credibility

“If the West sees Christians as prejudicial and intolerant, Christians need to come out and live authentic lives of justice and peace.”

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), paragraph 81.

<sup>3</sup> Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo, *Red Letter Christianity: Living the Words of Jesus No Matter the Cost* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), 133.

<sup>4</sup> Edman, *Queer Virtue*, 124.

<sup>5</sup> Edman, *Queer Virtue*, 130.

for being people of faith. There has to be a natural balance of including God in our conversations in the same way we talk about the friends and family that we love, care about and spend our time with. Talking about God should be within our normal conversations. As LGBT people normalise talking about their lives in a way that would out them, as Christians we need to talk about God in a way that outs us as Followers.

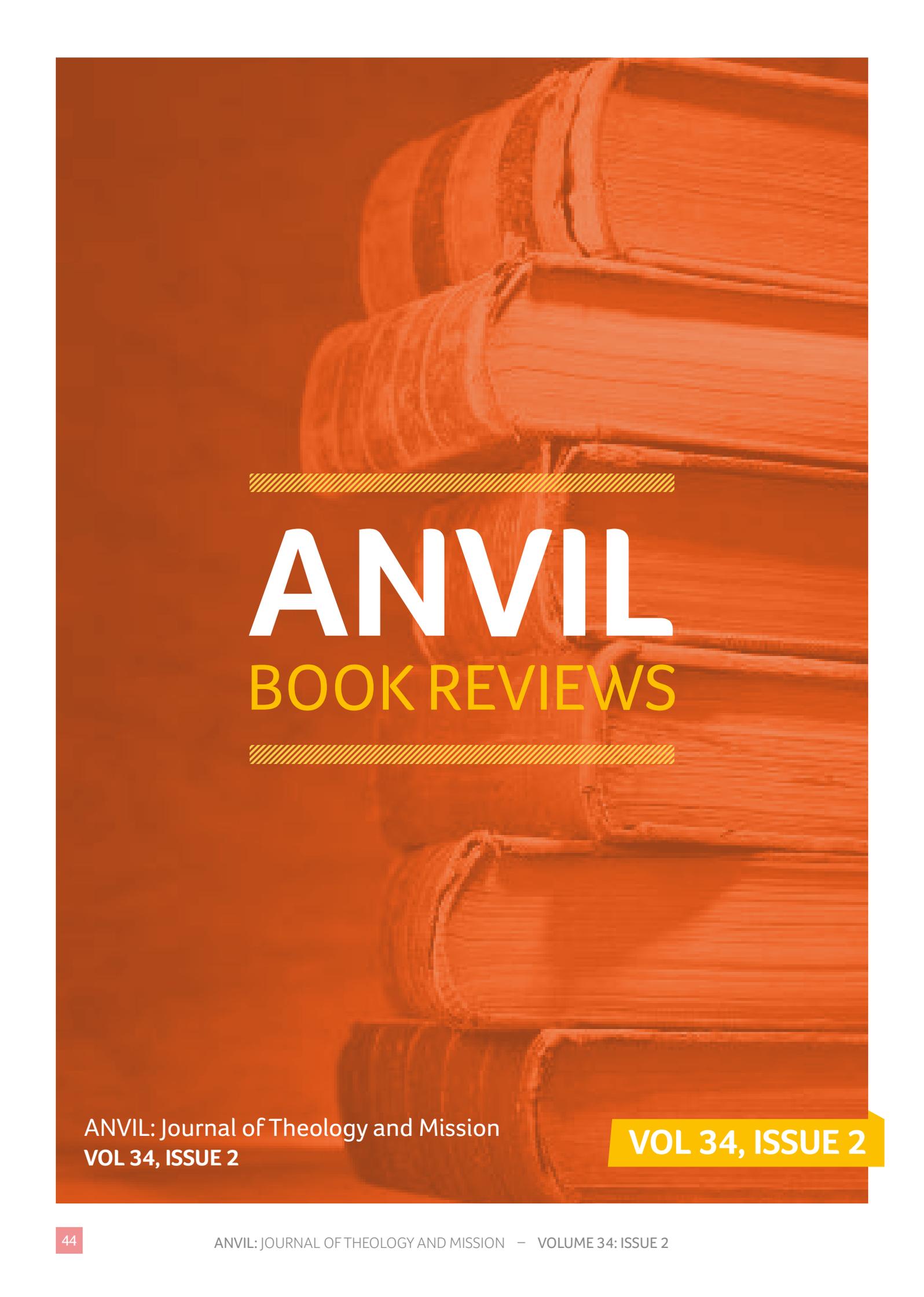
As a Gay Christian Youth Worker I find myself in places where coming out is often difficult but needed. From the time I spend within faith communities, I am aware that being LGBT means that my presence can be a challenge to people. Similarly, when I spend time in the LGBT community, it is my faith that causes people to feel threatened. To both communities I offer openness and honesty as a proclamation of the good news.

I have been involved in youth work in different forms for over 20 years. In every setting being authentic is something that has helped me build strong relationships with young people. For me this means choosing to be open about who I am. It would be easy to keep parts of myself closed off: to not let me be vulnerable to the young people I work with. My Boys' Brigade group know that I am gay. This has led to some interesting conversations in contrast to their conservative backgrounds. My LGBT group know that I am a person of faith. The point isn't what I tell a young person, but whether I allow them to see me. What can pioneer youth ministry learn from the LGBT experience of coming out? That choosing to reveal ourselves creates space for dialogue, openness and genuine mutuality.

Are there things you have chosen to hide from young people that limit your relationship?

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**ANVIL**  
**BOOK REVIEWS**

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission  
VOL 34, ISSUE 2

**VOL 34, ISSUE 2**

## 1. RECOMMENDED READING

### Larry Culliford, *Much Ado About Something: A Vision of Christian Maturity* (London: SPCK, 2015)

Do not be deceived by the cover of Larry Culliford's book. While it may look like something for the coffee table, it is in fact much more. Culliford writes for two main purposes: to paint a picture of spiritual (Christian) maturity and to reflect on the process of coming into such maturity. In pursuing these aims, he takes an integrative approach: his book desires the "insights of neuroscience and psychology to broaden the deepest intuitions and beliefs of Christian faith" (p.3). As the title suggests, Culliford also requisitions England's cultural heritage, drawing sundry phrases and illustrations from the Shakespearean corpus. This volume is accessible to a wider audience, yet it does at times demand focused attention. It would be a well suited to a discussion group and stands as a beneficial addition to the tool-box of both the pastor and the Christian counsellor.

Despite the short-shrift that spirituality (and spiritual development) is often given in our secular context, Culliford maintains its profound importance. He thus begins chapter one by arguing for the contemporary relevance of spirituality, which he defines as the encounter between the "deeply personal" and the "universal" (p.1). Spirituality is "a *something* which should elicit *much ado*". Christianly, Culliford grounds spirituality in an "intuitive awareness of the majesty and mystery of the Holy Spirit" (p.5). However, the reality of the Spirit can also be corroborated outside the bounds of Christianity, as Culliford highlights using the legacy of Alister Hardy, sometime director of Oxford's Religious Experience Centre.

Chapter two takes a turn into anthropology (i.e., what is a person?). After briefly citing Paul's flesh-spirit binary, Culliford proposes an expansion based on modern accounts which centre the physical, biological, psychological, and social aspects of the person. To these four, he adds a fifth – the spiritual. And just as humans must develop biologically and socially, Culliford asserts that we need to develop spiritually. We possess a "spiritual self" which needs to develop in contrast to the "everyday ego" (p.30). On this point, Culliford cites the pioneering work of Iain McGilchrist, likening spiritual immaturity to left brain dominance.

Pondering the process of spiritual development, chapter three focuses on how humans grow through adversity. Here, the (potential) benefits that accrue from the giving up of certain types of attachments through loss, grief, pain, and adversity are delineated. Especially intriguing is Culliford's contention that human emotions, while ever

complex and unpredictable, do in fact "follow natural laws" (p.46). This point is unpacked with several riveting case studies. The chapter concludes with a psychological construal of sin and forgiveness, wherein Culliford argues that sin is better defined as "dissonance" than transgression (pp.60–62).

Chapters four, five and six further address the process of spiritual development. Chapter four uses the legacy of William James, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Carl Young to introduce the different trajectories a human life can take ("arc of life" theory). This discussion is well served by a survey of James Fowler's six-stage schematic on the development of faith. Building on this, chapter five explores childhood spirituality and concludes with several practical admonitions for parents. Chapter six takes up adolescent religion and, among other gifts, identifies certain "big mistakes" made by the church in this domain. Culliford cautions the church against being too rigid, too exclusive, and too superior in its attitude towards others (or outsiders). Instead, churches should do more to "promote spiritual enquiry" (p.123).

Chapter seven hones in on the imperative to conquer the "everyday ego," as a prerequisite for spiritual maturity. Thomas Merton features prominently in this discussion, which also includes a critique of secularism. Secularism's "big mistake" is allowing "selfish, materialistic, and commercial values to dominate" without any serious mitigation (p.140). For spiritual maturity, such values must be dislodged, a process which is aided by contemplation. Chapter eight concentrates on the nature of mature faith, consummated by one's entry into the "universal stage," which is Fowler's sixth stage (p.159). In depicting this state, Culliford draws from psychologist Reza Arasteh's delineation of ten significant factors in a person's entry into stage six (pp.160–61). In the final sections of the chapter, Culliford engages with the ideas of heaven and hell, joy and pilgrimage.

The last two chapters are more practical in orientation. Chapter nine outlines avenues by which one may mature spiritually. Culliford's list includes corporate worship, prayer, the reading of Scripture, charity, and Sabbath. Chapter ten offers a few summational remarks, returning to the theme of universality, which is explained as an overcoming of the "dissonance" that Culliford identifies with sin. Such overcoming entails the integration of the right and left brain. As an added bonus, an autobiographical *Afterword* is included, wherein Culliford traces his own spiritual journey. This is well worth the read.

As is evident from the foregoing survey, Culliford's volume engages with an array of perspectives and thinkers. This enables him to envision spiritual maturity in a manner which is fresh and contemporary, moving past the sometimes stale and cliché conceptions which can linger in the church. This achievement is

complimented by Culliford's adept use of illustrations, stories, and quotations to explain sometimes unfamiliar and dense ideas. Another virtue is the book's relevance not merely to Christians but also to people of other (or no) faith. Though Culliford is himself an Anglican, the perspective he commends can be appreciated and applied far beyond the bounds of his confession. Finally, I was impressed by the project's continual consultation with Scripture in advancing its sundry points. Nearly every chapter contains several biblical references, cited to reinforce major themes and lessons.

At the same time, some of Culliford's biblical references gave me pause; on a few occasions his handling of a scriptural passage seem ill-suited. One example is the appeal to Rom. 12:6 in a paragraph which celebrates the freedom to experiment with new ideas and "to search out new experiences" (p.86). There is also the citation of 1 Cor. 2:16 ("having the mind of Christ") in the context of a discussion of discovering (or rediscovering) "the divine Spirit that is kindling within us" (p.154). Or one could consider the comparison of Jesus' rejection in Nazareth (Matt. 13:54–58) to misguided human attempts to return and re-educate members of one's "parent community" (p.127). Beyond this, my only other critique pertains to the volume's tiny page margins. In a book brimming with interesting ideas there was not much space for notation!

Culliford's volume is to be commended. It is well theorised, well expounded and emotionally intelligent. It is written in faith to help people with their faith. It is a book which yields many satisfying epiphanies – moments where something new is learned. At least this was my experience, and it was a pleasurable one.

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**Fiona J. Gregson, *Everything in Common?: The Theology and Practice of the Sharing of Possessions in Community in the New Testament* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2017)**

This fascinating study forces Christians to think carefully about their own attitudes and practices in relation to possessions and wealth. A revision of Gregson's PhD, *Everything in Common?* examines six New Testament paradigms in relation to the sharing of possessions in community. The first is the common purse in John's Gospel, which Gregson argues is one of a variety of ways that Jesus and his disciples were supported. Having surveyed the evidence for the practice of the common purse in John and the Synoptic Gospels, Gregson then compares other sources for evidence of similarities and

differences, finding evidence primarily of the latter, notably the porous boundaries by which the common purse was shared with those outside the circle of discipleship.

The second area of discussion is that of holding possessions in common, as recounted in Acts 2–6. Issues of historicity precede exegesis of the relevant texts before Gregson examines the practice of the early church and other parallels. The distinctive features of the early church community in Acts are argued to be the variety of backgrounds of the members, sharing by eating together, greater emphasis on God's grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the example of sharing/giving being primarily that of an ongoing process of sale of personal possessions in response to need.

The third focus is on the response to famine recorded in Acts 11, which includes discussion of Acts 12:25 and historical questions, especially the relationship to Acts 15, Galatians 2 and Paul's gift. Gregson also examines other responses to famine in the Greco-Roman world, noting the distinctive feature of the practice recorded in Acts being that each contributed according to ability, rather than generosity being limited to a few wealthy benefactors.

Fourth, Gregson examines the practice of eating together, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 11. There are preliminary discussions of the different situations and forms of meals in the Greco-Roman world, the common aspects of meal sharing and how patronage interacted with sharing meals. Then the context of Corinth and the Corinthian Church are outlined before a detailed discussion of 1 Cor. 11:17–34, the issues it raises and how it compares with other shared meals in the Greco-Roman world. Gregson argues that Paul uses the opportunity of confusion over practice in sharing food as one of catechesis, emphasising the social diversity of attendees, the need to ensure good order, equal relationships and formation of sound community.

Fifth the topic of giving and generosity is examined via 2 Corinthians 8–9, taking in other passages that refer to the collection (1 Cor. 16:14; Acts 11:27–30, 21:17–26; Gal. 2:10 and Rom. 15:25–32). As with other chapters, Gregson brings in relevant comparisons with contemporaneous practices, in this case the temple tax and patronage. The distinctive features of 2 Cor. 8–9 are argued that the giving is rooted in grace, in Jesus and his example; it provides for need; is voluntary, generous and practical; involves all; is in relation to what one has; is relational and has potential reciprocity. God is viewed as the ultimate benefactor. Paul subverts the practice of patronage, suggesting a different way of giving.

Sixth, Gregson tackles the limits on sharing, as set out in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The background of Thessalonica is discussed and passages in the two letters explained in more detail. The limits Paul places on sharing are to

ensure individuals do not become lazy or complacent; individuals who are able to work must do so, not only for their own benefit, but for the good of all.

The concluding chapter draws together the threads of the discussion. Gregson identifies seven common features: the examples she has discussed are practical and responsive; they are based on a sense of communal identity, unity or relationships; the groups have mixed backgrounds; there are multiple ways of contributing; there is a tension between individual and community in terms of responsibility for sharing; the examples are often in response to need; and four examples involve eating together. Gregson argues that the seven distinctive features of Christian practice in comparison with other contemporaneous groups are: subversion of patronage expectations; the greater diversity of Christian groups; a more flexible, fluid approach to sharing; an emphasis on the free choice of individuals to participate in sharing; an emphasis on individuals participating as a key part of the life of faith; a greater focus on eating together; and stronger relational bonds than other groups. She suggests there are three motivations for these actions: God's grace, action and provision; the relationship and unity between believers; and the example and actions of Jesus, especially his death.

*Everything in Common?* is an absorbing and rewarding read. It assumes a working knowledge of the Greek New Testament and a basic familiarity with the issues under discussion. At times the discussion is repetitive; the issue of patronage, for example, occurs in multiple chapters. This is an inevitable consequence of the approach taken and does not weaken the overall argument of the text. I would recommend this book for theological libraries and for any Christian who wants to think over their own attitude and actions in relation to what they possess.

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## **Andrew Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (London: SCM Press, 2017)**

This book is a must read for all Anglicans thinking about mission, the significance of place, and the "parish system". Andrew Rumsey has done something truly astonishing. In 189 scholarly and stylish pages, informed by much pastoral wisdom and vision, he has clarified what is at stake in discussions of the parish and mission, including debates about its future and its relation to Fresh Expressions. The parish re-emerges as a specific kind of *locality*, created by complex webs of social practice both present and historical, by interaction with landscape and the built environment, and by Spirit-empowered

mission, in the service of the Christ who acts to reconcile every locale to God.

Throughout the volume, Rumsey's chapters skilfully draw together many rich seams of thought. Each chapter is prefaced by a theologically rich narrative, displaying well Rumsey's attention to various fields, and at no point does this blend of genres and disciplines feel forced. The pace is deliberate, but the prose's flowing character keeps things moving along. The volume bears multiple readings, but will reward quick readers as well.

Rumsey's introduction succinctly surveys the existing literature on parishes, primarily the Church of England's, outlining also his purpose: to explain *what sort of place* the parish is. His investigation proceeds through attention to theology, social and spatial theory, and the history of English attention to place and landscape, as well as parochial practice down the ages. His first chapter discusses the "place-formation cycle", an interplay between being, revelation, vocation, and tradition. He reveals how place both forms and is formed by encounter with God, providing key context and lending shape to individuals and communities in time. The chapter presents a unique fusion of biblical theologies of "land," modern philosophy, and T.F. Torrance and Karl Barth's accounts of epistemology, among much else. It is an impressive opener.

His second chapter once again draws strongly on Torrance and Barth, along with Colin Gunton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to articulate a vision of Christ's reconciling work, which always plays out in the particular. Christ is "the one *locus*" of total creaturely reconciliation to God. Chapter three, "Sheer Geography: Spatial Theory and Parochial Practice," breaks new ground in discussions of the parish, by linking them to contemporary developments in geographical thinking. His section on "the practice of everyday space" is especially insightful. Influenced by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel De Certeau, Rumsey discloses the social space of parishes, as the full range of behaviours and attitudes expressed in and shaped by public and private arenas of action within certain geographic boundaries. The chapter contains perhaps one of the most important statements of the entire book, well worth quoting in full, since it describes the "spatial ethic" that the parish is:

To conclude, if common prayer is the congregational heart of social ethics, its parochial counterpart must surely be described as "common ground" – the field of proximate social relations in which the Christian ethic of love for neighbour is realized. As such, the social space – in Bourdieu's terms, the *habitus* – produced by the parish system has a vocational character, being conceived in response to the call of God in Christ. The very territoriality of the parish – its grounded, bounded nature – gives concretion (specific gravity, one might say) to this call and prevents neighbourly relations being subject to mere

arbitrary selection. *Parochial space is thus the production of neighbourhood*: a virtuous practice especially required of, but not limited to, the priesthood of believers (p. 86, emphasis added).

Chapter four opens the book's section on history, and best displays how the parochial (in the best sense) might undergird a more national vision, amid the parish's mixed historical record in gathering and preserving the properly social. The fifth chapter considers parish boundaries more properly, from 1215 to the present day. Here, Rumsey sees in medieval guilds something of an analogue for contemporary Fresh Expressions, given their more dynamic function within and across parish boundaries. The sixth chapter returns again to geography, now considering the shaping or "Christianisation of the landscape" in English history, as well as ongoing nostalgic appeals to the pastoral. The volume's conclusion admirably sums up the volume's argument, while addressing lingering concerns about the parish's continuing significance in English society as a unique form of belonging. It also addresses the question of future mission and the Church of England most directly, in terms of the Church's built heritage, new forms of local ministry, and the Church's ongoing establishment.

There are only a few missed opportunities in this admirably lucid and enjoyable read. As a medieval historian, I thought Rumsey might have enriched chapter five's discussion of parish boundaries by consideration of pastoral practice in England before 1215, on which there has been much research since the 1980s. Similarly, though Rumsey mentions medieval guilds and their relation to the parish, no consideration of the Church's late medieval territoriality and its other more dynamic networks is complete without the mendicant orders and monasticism, whose practices of "territoriality" mirrored, overlapped, and sometimes challenged parochial and diocesan boundaries. Medieval ecclesial society was even more complex than Rumsey describes. As a theologian, I found Rumsey's robust approach to Christology especially refreshing. His decision to focus solely on specific Protestant contributions to Christology seemed a pivotal choice and welcome. At the same time, the Western parish system was not developed with the insights of Torrance, Gunton, Barth, or Bonhoeffer in mind. A little more attention to, at least, key Western Church Fathers would have done much to further develop the discussion.

But this is to quibble over details in the face of Rumsey's truly panoramic vision. Each page is packed with worthwhile insights, and more elegant writing than this review could readily quote. He has written the book one wishes one could write, and discussions of the parish and its future must use this wonderful work as their starting place.

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## 2. MISSIOLOGY

### **Michael Amaladoss, *Interreligious Encounters: Opportunities and Challenges*, edited by Jonathan Y. Tan (New York: Orbis, 2017)**

This collection of fifteen essays brings together hitherto largely inaccessible writings by the Indian Catholic Christian theologian Michael Amaladoss. The first half of the book contains eight essays themed around "rethinking religious pluralism". Amaladoss speaks from his own culture and experience. He is steeped in Hindu thought; the whole of the first essay is primarily a discussion of Hindu sacred texts. In the second he suggests that in principle at least there could be more than one incarnation. Strictly speaking, Amaladoss is not a pluralist, but he is against comparative religion, arguing that a "truly religious person can only talk in terms of his or her own faith," while at the same time being open to the possibility that God has spoken to others in other ways (p.28). His concern is to get to the heart, the essence of faith, leaving the human taints and failures to one side. Similarly, he argues in the fourth essay that if we believe the Spirit of God to be active and present in other religions, then the same must be true of their scriptures. Essay five discusses violence in the name of religion and an alternative vision of peace, arguing that it is imperative all religions find resources within their own teachings that advocate peace and coexistence. Chapter six tackles responses to fundamentalism, discussing Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalism, and their links to violence and terrorism. The final two essays deal with the utopia of the human family and ethics in a multireligious context.

The second half of the book contains seven essays on responses to religious pluralism, written from and for Amaladoss' Asian context. Chapter nine sets out his vision of how he sees God using the religions of the world drawing all people to himself, perceiving the different religions of the world as different manifestations of the Word through the Spirit (p.121). Chapter ten argues that we cannot just engage in interreligious dialogue; we must also ensure different ideologies are in dialogue with each other. By ideologies he means worldviews such as *Hindutva* or Islamic fundamentalism. Chapter eleven asks whether we need borders between religions, or whether the reality is more porous than we might first presume. Chapter twelve builds on the discussion by reflecting on the nature of double religious identity, distinguished from double religious belonging, since Amaladoss is more interested in an individual's beliefs than in how groups respond to those beliefs. Chapter thirteen focuses specifically on relationships between Hindus

and Christians through the paradigm of those on the borders between the two faiths, people whom he terms “liminal persons” (p.176). Chapter fourteen argues for a move away from syncretism towards harmony between faiths. By this he means we can draw from the strengths and gifts of distinctive faiths without blurring them into one. The final main chapter reflects on fifty years of interreligious dialogue since Vatican II, noting that while some progress has been made, the situation is perhaps more bleak because of the rise in tensions between communities.

Although I am challenged by Amaladoss’s pluralist/inclusivist vision of interreligious relations, I remain unconvinced by it. He has clearly thought deeply about his beliefs and is open about the different influences he has experienced. But he appears more influenced by those outside the church than the Christian scriptures; he quotes more Hindu texts than he does Christian ones as he develops his arguments. For those who hold more exclusivist positions, Amaladoss’s writings are a warning of the danger of falling into fundamentalism and condemnation of others. The question it left me asking is how to present Jesus in a way that is both invitational and compelling.

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## Paul Keeble, *Mission With: Something Out of the Ordinary* (Herts: Instant Apostle, 2017)

*Mission With* joins the burgeoning list of publications addressing the shape and form of mission in our increasingly post-Christian western society and I believe it offers a helpful and persuasive contribution to this conversation. Paul Keeble describes his writing as “theological back-fill”, as he expresses in theological language his years of experience immersed within the local community on an estate in inner-city Manchester. From the outset, it is clear that this is no dry-eyed abstract approach to missional engagement, but one birthed in years of building relationships with those who would not normally be found in church on a Sunday morning. His book is thoroughly theological but manages to weave anecdotes and lived-experience skilfully through its pages.

In part one, Keeble offers an engaging and helpful summary of some key definitions of mission, exploring some possible critiques of the tendency to constantly refer to *Missio Dei* as our default setting in thinking about mission. Keeble describes his approach as “mission-with” which he presents as a complementary approach to mission-for (social action) and mission-to (evangelism).

“Mission-with” focuses on the importance of being a presence-among the local community: “Presence-among is with a missional intent, balanced by a recognition that the missionary is there as a learner and as one who finds God there already ahead of them” (p.113). While varying approaches to mission cannot perhaps so easily be categorised into either “to” or “for”, nevertheless, his emphasis upon the value of presence is a crucial contribution to any definition of incarnational mission. Keeble lays out clearly his conviction that the goal of God’s mission is the building of *shalom* and that when Christians grasp this vision they can see the importance of working alongside others within the local community for the common good.

Parts two and three offer theological reflection upon Keeble’s experience of moving into a housing estate in Ardwick with a young family and the challenges and opportunities that this way of living presented for living as disciples of Christ in a context that was unfamiliar and at times costly and challenging. Keeble’s stories are colourful, helping the reader imagine the intensity and richness of this way of life. He reflects both upon his own upbringing in Northern Ireland and what expectations were laid upon him as to what a “calling” might look like. He also reflects insightfully upon some shared projects within the local community during the last three decades, including Peace Week, a week long community response to gang violence. Part four considers some wider challenges for the church in mission today.

At times this book reads like a thesis which has been adapted as a book. However, it is in the blending of theology and practice that this book makes its unique and valuable contribution. It is uncomfortable and challenging in all the right ways and I would highly recommend it to anyone exploring mission in an urban context. I read Keeble’s book at the time of Pentecost whilst reflecting upon Jesus’ call to his disciples to take the good news to the “ends of the earth”. Historically the church in the West has considered this challenge to be that of taking the gospel abroad to unreached nations and people groups. However, Keeble’s book causes us to reflect upon whether the inner-city estates of Britain today might be our “ends of the earth”? If they indeed are, then *Mission With* offers an inspiring and practical guide for how we might respond to that call in the years to come.

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### 3. INTERFAITH STUDIES

#### **Muthuraj Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue: Plurality, Conflict and Elitism in Hindu-Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)**

The core argument of the book is that dialogue is a limited activity. Three main reasons are offered. First, that religious identity is not as fixed and rigid as dialogue activities presuppose; that is, for a dialogue to take place between, say, a Hindu and a Muslim, the two individuals concerned must have clear boundaries to their own religious identity. Second, so-called religious conflicts are often not actually religious in nature and hence dialogue between religious groups will not actually address the root cause of the conflict. Third, the nature of dialogue as an elite activity that often ignores grassroots issues.

The book is developed from the author's PhD thesis, which included fieldwork in South India for four months in 2007 and eight months in 2008. It begins by surveying the concept and practice of dialogue in India since the 1950s, with a particular emphasis on Christian approaches. Second, the practical outworking of this theory is discussed through a case study of dialogue activities in the Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu, South India. Chapters three and four examine contemporary approaches to the concept of "religion" and "world religions" and religious plurality and dialogue respectively. The next three chapters critique the concept of dialogue from the perspective of religious identity, the fact that religions are not in conflict and the idea that dialogue is an elitist activity. Swamy's argument is that dialogue focused on religious action ignores wider socio-economic and political contexts and the power relations involved in any conflict situation. He contends that religious identity is not as fixed or determinative a category as proponents of dialogue presume. He further argues that at the grassroots, people do not follow the presumptions or principles of elite dialogue but rather work out their own strategies for how to relate to and negotiate with their religious neighbours in their everyday lives. Chapter eight presents his alternative vision, based on his fieldwork in Gramam village in Kanyakumari district. He argues that people in the village construct their identity less on belief and more on praxis and group identity. While they did experience conflicts, these were normally not primarily religious but in fact personal in nature. Swamy found that all tended to participate in all religious festivals, sharing in the celebrations even if not participating in the acts of worship. In his concluding chapter, Swamy questions whether interreligious dialogue is either necessary or possible. He argues that rather than develop dialogical models, we need a better framework for understanding

and interpreting how people relate and negotiate.

My impression of *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue* is that it was demolishing a straw man, an unfortunate tendency of some PhD theses. He is correct in his observation that remote Indian villages, whose population are semi-literate and received limited formal education do not need complex models for interreligious dialogue. But that does not mean that high level discussions, as for example take place between senior staff at Lambeth Palace and Al-Azhar University are pointless. Moreover most proponents of dialogue recognise that religious identity is complex, that conflicts are multi-faceted and that dialogue must be appropriate to the context. A specialist scholar or a library wanting to expand its interfaith section may find this book a useful addition, but I would not recommend it beyond this very limited audience.

Tom Wilson  
St Philip's Centre, Leicester

#### **David Thomas, ed., *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018)**

The 45 chapters of this handbook are divided into three parts. The first part discusses Christian-Muslim relations in history, and is further subdivided into "beginnings", "the middle ages" and "the early and modern periods". Part two tackles theological attitudes in Christian-Muslim encounters and part three Christians and Muslims in society. The chapters are largely short essays by acknowledged experts in the field they address; for example Sidney Griffith discusses the Bible in the Qur'an and Chris Allen contributes on Islamophobia.

Designed as a reference work, the essays are both comprehensive but also severely limited; comprehensive in making the main points about the topic under discussion, but limited because they are invariably less than ten pages and so often only skim through topics on which the author has written at least one, if not several, books. I also struggled to understand the organisational logic of the handbook as a whole. The chapter on "Mutual influences and borrowings," for example, is part of the historical section on the Middle Ages, yet that is a topic that arguably lends itself to part two or part three of the handbook. Equally, I was unclear as to why the handbook jumps from Mughal India to the end of Empire without any discussion of the intervening period. The handbook is somewhat scattergun, covering most of the main topics well, but with some omissions that leave me dissatisfied, and various essays overlapping in topic (at least three authors comment on the *A Common Word* initiative, for example).

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect is that there are few, if any, explicitly and overtly Muslim authors, but a number of Christian authors. The handbook laments the largely negative nature of relations between Christians and Muslims, but does not take the obvious step of modelling good relationships between Christians and Muslims by having scholars of both faiths work together on a joint project. This handbook is a volume for the library of theological and missionary training colleges, not a book for the individual student or researcher.

Tom Wilson  
St Philip's Centre, Leicester

## 4. BIBLICAL STUDIES

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### **Katie Edwards, ed, *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* (London: Bloomsbury T& T Clark, 2015)**

I was looking forward to reading this book to discover what people mean by biblical literacy and if it is really in decline in the UK. I was not disappointed. The title itself helps to position this issue in a wider framework than just people reading and appreciating, and sometimes appropriating, biblical stories. The book is divided into three parts: Located Literacies, Visual Literacies and Popular Literacies and shows the interplay between the Bible and a variety of cultural media. I identified strongly with chapter one, which discusses biblical literacy in an Irish situation, which reflected my experience in the North West as a young Roman Catholic where the Bible and culture were not linked enough, if at all. Iona Hine in chapter three focuses on two stakeholders in the quest for biblical literacy, namely: those that are keen on scriptural literacy and its resultant impact on morality and conversation, and those who see the Bible in its wider academic literacy. Crossley's chapter on "What the Bible Really Means in English Political Discourse" highlights how the Bible has been utilised in politics. He provides a good framework to examine how politicians treat the text to affirm a liberal or cultural or radical political perspective.

Matthew A. Collins explores the use of the Bible in mainstream television, focusing on its use in 91 hours of series 1–6 of *Lost*, while Amanda Dillon describes, perceptively, street art as prophetic medium with biblical allusion and calls for a wider understanding of biblical literacy in the digital age. The nature of literacy itself is brought into question. Alan W. Hooker writes in chapter six, "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary: Eve as Redemptrix in Madonna's 'Girl Gone Wild'" and looks at Madonna's self-evident pronouncement and work particularly in the "Girl Gone Wild" music video. He explores the video's

messaging with Genesis 2–3 and in the context of the Roman Catholic Church and gender debates. At the end of the chapter he writes "We move away from panoptic classroom, to peer to peer learning. I become literate because my peer is."

Robert J. Myles's "Biblical Literacy and The Simpsons" in chapter seven begins with a quote from Homer Simpson: "God is my favourite fictional character". He examines the satirising of the Bible in the "Simpson's Bible Stories" within a wider cultural US milieu where many different stakeholders use the Bible to justify their own agendas. Caroline Blyth's "Lisbeth and Leviticus: Biblical Literacy and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" demonstrates how a novel can open up conversation with biblical texts and keep the Bible in public consciousness. The final chapter by Christopher Meredith "A Big Room for Poo: Eddie Izzard's Bible and the Literacy of Laughter" looks at Izzard's Glorious tour in 1997 about which he writes: "Structurally, the show is a Bible transposed into comedy format: Old Testament is the first act, New Testament after intermission and apocalypse as an encore." Izzard is quoted as saying, "I also take large subjects and talk crap about them." The book's final concluding comments include, "many existing discussions on biblical literacy are not about biblical literacy, they are about preserving a serious paternal metaphor in the midst of a decentralising of biblical dissemination."

The book always remains stimulating and entertaining while rigorously engaging with the subject matter. It offers possibilities to re-imagine engagement with people and the Bible through those who almost certainly have a different approach to it. Furthermore, it challenged me think of how Christians can be more proactive, playful and imaginative in our proclamation of the Bible's message through diverse media.

Paul Thaxter  
CMS

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### **Paul Foster, *Colossians: Blacks New Testament Commentaries* (London: Bloomsbury and T&T Clark, 2016)**

Paul Foster's commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians is an extensive (with just over 500 pages including bibliography and indices on the 95 verses of the letter) detailed and accessible addition to the large volume of writings on this Pauline letter. Foster's very readable style aims not only at a scholarly readership but makes it a valuable resource for pastors and preachers.

In the introduction Foster presents to the reader the key issues in the academic debate around this "Pauline" letter. As expected he discusses in detail the provenance,

authorship, date and theology of Colossians as well as its relationship to the rest of the Pauline corpus. He discusses in detail the key issues raised in the interpretation of the letter such as the paucity of references to and quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the “absent” Holy Spirit. One feature which I found interesting and helpful was the section on the “prosopography of Colossians” in which Foster examines what is known (or can be reasonably assumed) about the individuals named in the text of the letter.

Some readers will disagree with Foster’s conclusion about the authorship of Colossians. He argues that it is a pseudepigraphical letter written shortly after the apostle’s death somewhere between AD 65 and 80 from Phrygia or somewhere near there. He clearly shows why he has reached this conclusion and he presents the other positions in a fair light. He also acknowledges that the question of the authorship of Colossians does not greatly affect the letter’s interpretation.

Perhaps the key issue in Colossians in its highly developed Christology. Foster links this to the scarcity of references to the Holy Spirit and to the “heresy” which the letter was written to counter. Foster argues that the problem in Colossae was not so much Judaizers in the community as a more general tendency towards syncretism, assimilating the Christian faith to the local religions.

Like the introduction that precedes it, the commentary section is meticulously detailed and very engaging. I have used it in preparing a couple of sermons on Colossians and will refer to it when writing next year’s Lent course on the prison letters.

This will become an essential reference work for scholars and prove a very useful commentary for preachers to have to hand. It has already displaced my other commentaries on what is one of my favourite Pauline letters. Highly recommended.

Tim Gill  
Sheffield

## 5. NEW TESTAMENT

### **Trevor J. Burke, Andrew S. Malone and Brian Rosner, eds., *Paul as Pastor* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018)**

In all the massive literature on the apostle Paul, surprisingly little attention has been paid to Paul as a pastor, although this might be explained by the fact that Paul never calls himself a pastor. The noun only appears in Ephesians 4, and the verb is used only in a literal sense (1 Cor. 9:7). This volume, the fruit of an academic conference in 2014 involving theologians from various Australian

colleges, admirably fills that gap and shows the value of reading Paul through this lens. Its opening article by Rosner demonstrates how family metaphors of father, mother and brother in Paul shed light on various aspects of his pastoral vision and practice, a theme which recurs in later studies. The next ten chapters are each devoted to what we can learn from specific books, beginning with a study of Acts which contains an insightful analysis of Acts 20 and challenges the popular view of Paul as a hit-and-run missionary rather than pastor. Each of the letters attributed to Paul are then studied, usually a chapter on each book although concluding with 1 and 2 Thessalonians (focused again on familial terms including “orphan” and “infant”) and then the Pastorals grouped together (where Robert Yarborough powerfully explores many of what he identifies as 68 references in the three letters showing Paul’s strong work ethic).

The emphasis throughout the book is not on particular pastoral problems and how they are handled, but rather on Paul’s pastoral vision and method more generally. Cumulatively they show how theological this vision is: God, not Paul, is the ultimate pastor of the churches and (as shown especially by Paul Barnett on 2 Corinthians) Christ is the model for Paul as pastor. His central pastoral goal is conformity of his churches to Christ. In Paul’s practice we see the importance of teaching (most fully in Orr’s detailed technical study of Eph. 4:11–12) and theological truth (for example, Bird and Dunne’s study of Galatians). In one of the most creative studies, Matthew Malcolm shows how in 1 Corinthians Paul pastors by reflecting on Scripture to interpret the Corinthians’ situation and respond to it in terms of them being like “the rulers of this age”.

In that and almost every study, we are vividly introduced to Paul as a real person facing challenges remarkably similar to those facing pastors today as he knows and cares for people and ruminates on their situation in the light of the gospel. There is painful conflict (most fully explored in 2 Corinthians) and the challenges of working as part of a team of pastors (part of Sarah Harris’ fascinating study of Philippians which looks at Euodia and Syntyche), both areas with clear parallels today. Concrete applications to contemporary pastoral practice are not drawn out but they do not need to be – the exposition of the letters and accounts of Paul’s practice, although quite academic in style, provide clear guidance for the reader. There are some areas which could be explored more, notably the pastoral character of many of Paul’s prayers and the question as to how his epistolary pastoral practice which is focused on here might relate to his approach when actually present.

The final three chapters offer a different perspective from that of New Testament exegesis, exploring how Paul as pastor has been influential in church history through studies of the Pastoral Epistles’ offices and the first Church of England ordinal, Augustine of Hippo and

George Whitefield.

The book, in short, has much to offer the working pastor and preacher but sadly at £85 few will be able to benefit from its insights.

Andrew Goddard

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### **Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)**

Michael Gorman's *Becoming the Gospel* builds upon his two previous studies of Paul: *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (2001), and *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (2009), but readers do not have to be familiar with these earlier works to appreciate and learn from *Becoming the Gospel*.

According to Gorman, Paul's aim is that the churches that he founded and continued to influence should not simply believe the gospel; rather they should embody the good news that they have come to believe. When Christians embody the gospel they become partners with God in mission. Paul's letters to the churches are intended to help believers develop a missional consciousness in every aspect of their lives so that, individually and corporately, they express the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1–11 is a key text both for Paul and for Gorman). Once they are formed by the mind of Christ, Christian communities become the gospel. Church is intended not simply be a sign of God's kingdom but an anticipatory participation in that kingdom.

To participate in and embody the gospel is to live lives that are visibly and publicly distinctive and different; as a consequence Christians will begin to attract the notice of family and neighbours. Faithful Christian living entails the rejection of the gods of family, city and empire. Those who choose to turn from these rival gods and cultic practices will not only come to the attention of others, they will inevitably begin to face criticism and come into conflict. To follow Christ exclusively means participating in the public life of the community in a visibly very different way and at times not sharing in that communal life at all.

Gorman argues that proclamation of the gospel in the early church happened more by this "embodying" of the gospel than by public announcement or preaching. On page 43 he describes the church as the "living exegesis" of the gospel. This is something for the church today to aspire to.

Gorman wants the church today to learn from the Pauline Churches' sharing in God's mission by becoming the gospel that we proclaim. To this end he concludes each

chapter with a look at a contemporary community or ministry which he regards as embodying the gospel.

Based upon careful exegesis of a number of Paul's letters (1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans) Gorman challenges the church today to not simply believe and preach the gospel, but to become God's Christ-like (cruciform) agents in our world, sharing with the Cruciform God in mission to that world.

*Becoming the Gospel* is highly recommended. Gorman sent me back to read Paul's letters with a deeper appreciation of what it means to be a church and to proclaim Christ, not just in Paul's day but in every generation. It challenges the contemporary Church to become more Christ-like in its life and mission, to become, in Gorman's words, once again a "living exegesis" of the gospel.

Tim Gill  
Sheffield

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### **Stanley Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)**

Stanley Porter's readable yet scholarly book on John's gospel and what it teaches about Jesus comes highly recommended. It is divided into nine main chapters. First, Porter discusses John in comparison with other Gospels. This includes discussion of the date of composition of the Gospel. Second, Porter turns to public proclamation of Jesus in John's Gospel. By this he means the original audience. Turning completely away from the "Johannine community" hypothesis, Porter argues that the Fourth Gospel was written primarily as a public document. He defends this view through examination of the Prologue, and treatment of particular groups such as the Galileans, Jews, Pharisees and nobility, as well as Jesus use of the "I am" sayings. Chapter three focuses on sources. Porter argues that John's Gospel knows much material that is also evident in the synoptic, and that much of this material goes back to Jesus himself.

Chapter four engages with the Gospel's prologue in greater detail. Porter utilises four types of critical engagement: form criticism, source criticism, musical-liturgical criticism and functional criticism. He concludes that each have valuable contributions to make to the task of understanding the text and so should be used to complement each other. The fifth chapter focuses on the "I am" sayings. Having discussed the background of the sayings, Porter goes on to argue that they shape the christological structure of the Gospel as a whole. He identifies nine categories that he discusses in turn. Chapter six tackles the vexed question of the identity of

“the Jews” in John’s Gospel. Porter dismisses those who accuse the Gospel of anti-semitism and outlines his nuanced understanding of the variety of ways in which the Greek *oi Ioudaioi* is used.

Chapter seven focuses on how the Fourth Gospel understands the “truth”. Porter comments that this is an under-developed theme within Johannine studies, before analysing the term in relation to God, Jesus, the Spirit, the human imperative to act in truth, and Johannine propositional truth. Chapter eight examines the Passover. The guiding verses are the quotations in John 19:36–37, but this is not a narrow focus. Rather, these verses are used as a springboard for a wide ranging discussion of the Passover theme that runs right through the Gospel. Chapter nine is, fittingly enough, about endings, specifically the language, function and purpose of John 21.

Porter’s aim in writing this monograph is to allow the distinctive Johannine voice to be heard more clearly. In this he succeeds admirably, writing a work of scholarly depth, clarity and insight. Anyone who wishes to engage in serious study of John’s Gospel would do well to read this book

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## 6. PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

### Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)

In this timely book, a contribution in the Emory University Studies in Law and Religion series, the Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff looks again at the perennial question of the relationship between love and justice. Leaving aside the more technical terminology used, the main thesis of the book is that there is no tension between these two terms and the realities they seek to explicate. In the case of the term “love”, a number of different phenomena are covered, but Wolterstorff has in mind the love to which Jesus was referring; this is termed agapic love. By this is meant love which seeks to promote the flourishing of the one loved beyond what justice might require.

This summary of the purpose of the book is expounded in several different directions. There are four parts to the book. Part one examines what the author calls Benevolence-Agapism. Thinkers in this group include Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren. Nygren is the most radical in his insistence that God’s love is pure grace. Human worth is created by God’s agapic love. Moreover, because God chooses love over justice, we are to do likewise. Part two discusses Care-Agapism. This is

a very broad topic, impossible to summarise adequately in a few sentences, but to give a flavour of the ideas covered, Wolterstorff considers Jesus’ treatment of the love commands in Leviticus. To treat the neighbour justly is an example of loving him, a way of loving him. Love is not justice-indifferent benevolence. There is also a useful discussion of natural rights.

Part three is entitled “Just and Unjust Love”. This is probably the part of the book which will be of most interest to Anvil readers since it is largely concerned with the large and practical topic of forgiveness. Jesus’ emphatic insistence that human beings are to forgive each other was new and unprecedented. Wolterstorff’s treatment is a healthy reminder that the dynamics and practice of forgiveness is a great deal more complicated than we often think. There is no consensus among ethicists. His conclusion is that “forgiveness is the enacted resolution... no longer to hold against the wrongdoer what he did to one... Mere resolution is not enough; forgiveness requires that one *enact* the resolution, act on it” (p.169). This sounds straightforward enough, but he goes on to discuss situations where forgiveness may be only partial. There is much more in this part which will repay careful reading including a section on whether forgiveness violates justice and all the while, there is an eye towards divine justice.

In part four, Wolterstorff moves into specifically theological territory. With the title “The Justice of God’s Love”, he offers his own exposition of Paul’s letter to the Romans. This is a bold stroke for a writer who is not a New Testament scholar. However, he demonstrates considerable skill as an exegete, interacting freely with a number of well-known figures and is not afraid to disagree with them on crucial points. His most original move is to suggest that the main topic of Romans is *Justitia Dei*, the justice of God, and the two final chapters are a defence of that view. This should not be seen merely as a cavalier disregard of mainstream Pauline theology, but as an attempt to apply his earlier discussion of Care-Agapism. The burden of his position is what he sees as the impartiality of grace (cf. Acts 10: 34-35). He explicitly disagrees with Tom Wright who regards God’s covenant fidelity as the proper context for the interpretation of Romans, especially justification. It is perhaps a pity that Wolterstorff does not have the space to develop his argument, since he has undoubtedly drawn attention to an important aspect of Paul’s teaching. A possible PhD topic perhaps.

Wolterstorff’s style is slightly clunky and at times his argument is difficult to follow. But this is a good book and Evangelicals could benefit from engaging with it. Another slight drawback is a rather thin index and no bibliography.

Howard C. Bigg  
Cambridge

## 7. ANGLICAN STUDIES

### **Paul Avis, *The Vocation of Anglicanism* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016).**

I have every admiration for Paul Avis's single-minded vocation in helping to define, interpret and shape Anglican identity over the past turbulent generation. In this latest offering, he takes "the Anglican Angst of our time" head on in an attempt to address our contemporary predicament. There is a most salutary reminder that in our fractious disputes and fights, we must never lose sight of the fact that the vocation of the title is always in the service of the gospel, not an end in itself.

The theological chapter is helpfully autobiographical, and resists the labelling epidemic that regularly infects Anglican position-taking. The two concepts which structure the argument here are those of orthodoxy (faith is not the preserve of the individual but has an ecclesiological locus) and liberalism/liberality, which calls for contextualised and grace-filled debate.

The discussion on what kind of ecclesiological "animal" the Anglican Communion is eliminates the "church" and "collection of churches" options. Rather, we are a family of churches most like the Orthodox but unique in Christendom, held together by mutual loyalty. And of course, there's the rub. The loyalty has been stretched in many cases beyond breaking point. Avis's dimensions of communion: recognition, commitment and participation are felt by many to have long since been abandoned. This part of Avis's thesis calls, then, for a restoration of communion infused with charity, echoing the theology of Jean Vanier.

Subsequent chapters on missional, covenantal and peaceable vocation develop in similar vein, and there is little that I find to disagree with. Of course our communion is missional, and we are called to demonstrate that mystical unity in Christ. Of course we must be governed by covenantal virtues. And of course we must speak to one another "in the healing voice of love". A convinced and lifelong eirenic Anglican myself, I am left at the end of Part 1 wondering whether this makes any sense at all to partisan Anglicans, for whom our vocation is to purify the Communion through radical excisions and exclusions. Martyn Percy's "civilised disagreement" is a million miles away.

The second part of the book contains three essays on "Three-Dimensional Anglicanism": on catholicity, on the legacy of the Reformation, and on the critical imperative. These are vintage Avis, and I particularly liked his emphatic "Anglicans...are called to indwell the

wholeness of the reality of the Church" (p.129). Though these three dimensions are not the same as the clichéd three-legged stool of scripture, tradition and reason, they are a sophisticated gloss on it, and indeed on Hooker's late Elizabethan insights.

Avis ends with a quote from an unnamed writing of his from 20 years ago: "To practise the grace of walking together without coercive constraints is the special vocation of Anglicanism" (p.187). If he is right, then those of us who have chosen to stay within the messiness and pain of the so-far-just-about-together Communion are vindicated in doing so: it is our vocation. The corollary of that would be that alternative structures, replacement Communion and associations are a distraction to our mission and a hindrance to the gospel. I know that sounds harsh, but it is implicit in Avis's thesis.

This book is best read not as analysis but as a prophetic challenge. God has called us as his Anglican people together for a purpose. If we lose sight of that purpose, we lose our *raison d'être*. His prayer, and mine, is that we stop our self-destructive games for the sake of a saviour to whom alone we are called into obedience.

Adrian Chatfield  
Ilkeston, Derbyshire

## 8. DEVOTIONAL

### **Wil Hernandez, *Mere Spirituality: The Spiritual Life According to Henri Nouwen* (London: SPCK, 2016)**

Mere Spirituality, not to be confused with C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, is an attempt at summarising and categorising the vast volume of Nouwen's writings. Hernandez has studied Nouwen's work for many years and is co-founder of CentreQuest – an ecumenical hub for the study and practice of Christian spirituality.

Hernandez valuably ensures that Nouwen's voice can be heard throughout. He succeeds at that most of the time, but occasionally the sentences are forced and not as fluent as they could be. Hernandez uses a clear referencing system by noting the initials of Nouwen's book, which nevertheless got a bit tiresome the more I read.

The book itself has an introductory chapter to Nouwen's life which has been helpful to put this work in context and a chronology of Nouwen's main life events and publications at the back. It's a helpful reference tool for those less familiar with Nouwen's life.

This book invites the reader to reflect on their own spirituality by reflecting on Nouwen's. It clearly invites

us to look at our heart, a term broadly used by Nouwen for “self” and “soul” as the place that draws our spiritual life together (p.xv). Hernandez segments the book into three parts: Communion – A Life apart; Community – A Life shared; Commission – A Life Given. This is based on Nouwen’s understanding of spiritual disciplines which are necessary to create room for God. These are: spending time with God – in solitude; engaging in meaningful fellowship with others from which; thirdly, flows the going out together and serving others (p.xxi). This, I feel, we all need to be reminded of regularly and evaluate where our attention lingers, which is the strength of this book. The book then goes through each of these in turn. Every chapter concludes with further focused reading referencing Nouwen’s books, a few questions to help “living it out”, some of which are helpful, and a prayer – most were phrased in a way that didn’t help me to connect with God, but may well help others.

My favourite chapter was chapter nine on hospitality. It’s a brilliant gem where the aims of the book and the various methods work really well together, making for an easy yet challenging read. Hospitality is understood as a spiritual practice which is more than just welcoming people, it’s about creating relational space (p.93) that allows the other to become more fully their God-designed self. Hernandez draws together aspects of being at home in our own house/self, intentional hospitality to others and hospitality through absence, and thereby essentially creating space for the Holy Spirit, as concepts that define hospitality. Especially for readers involved in any form of contextual mission and ministry both in the UK and overseas, this chapter is a must read and helps to review our practice.

Mere Spirituality is a book that may be useful as part of a focused journey into one’s own spirituality, as a Lent project or a book to meditate on during a sabbatical, as part of one’s own inner spring clean. For the reader familiar with Nouwen’s work there may not be huge benefit in reading this work. None of the concepts are new in and of themselves.

Having said that, Nouwen’s work still has profound significance for our ever busy lifestyles and ministries. Therefore, any book capturing the essence of Nouwen is challenging and prophetically agitating; capturing themes around our spirituality we need to come back to on a regular basis.

Susann Haehnel  
CMS

## 9. OTHER

### **Mark Meynell, *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend* (London: IVP, 2018).**

This is an honest and compelling account of Mark’s personal ongoing struggle with depression that every Christian minister ought to read. It is accessible and clear, forthright without being overly direct or blunt, rooted both in faith in Jesus Christ and also in daily life. The book begins with a short chapter on the mask that Mark wears. We all wear some kind of mask, disguising some of what we are thinking or feeling, and Mark explains something of how he masked his depression over the years.

Part one then ventures deeper into the darkness, exploring different metaphors that describe the experience of depression. As someone who has never personally experienced depression as Mark has, but has family members who do and has pastored others suffering in this way, I found these chapters really helpful. There is a lot of refreshing common sense in his explanations, a clear honesty about what did, and did not, help him and a challenge that we remain committed to pastoral care, even if people do not get “better” (whatever that might mean). Part two, “Venturing Towards the Light”, offers hope for the future, not in a neat and tidy, everything is sorted because of Jesus sort of cliché, but a realist, clear, honest portrayal of what living with depression can be, what working as a Church minister who struggles with depression could be like. The appendices offer Meynell’s personal reflections on what has helped him manage his symptoms, both practical actions and also in terms of what music he listens to and books he reads

When Darkness Seems is worked through with biblical reflections, helping the reader root personal experience with depression in a lived Christian faith. This is one of the two great strengths of the book. The other is Mark’s astute analysis of the distinctions and inter-relationships between guilt, shame and depression. It is an easy and engaging read, useful for anyone engaged in pastoral ministry, who has depression themselves or who wants to love and care for a friend or relative who struggles with their mental health.

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# *ANVIL: JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY AND MISSION*



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Registered charity number 1131655-1 (previously 220297), Registered and principal offices of all above entities: Watlington Road, Oxford, OX4 6BZ.