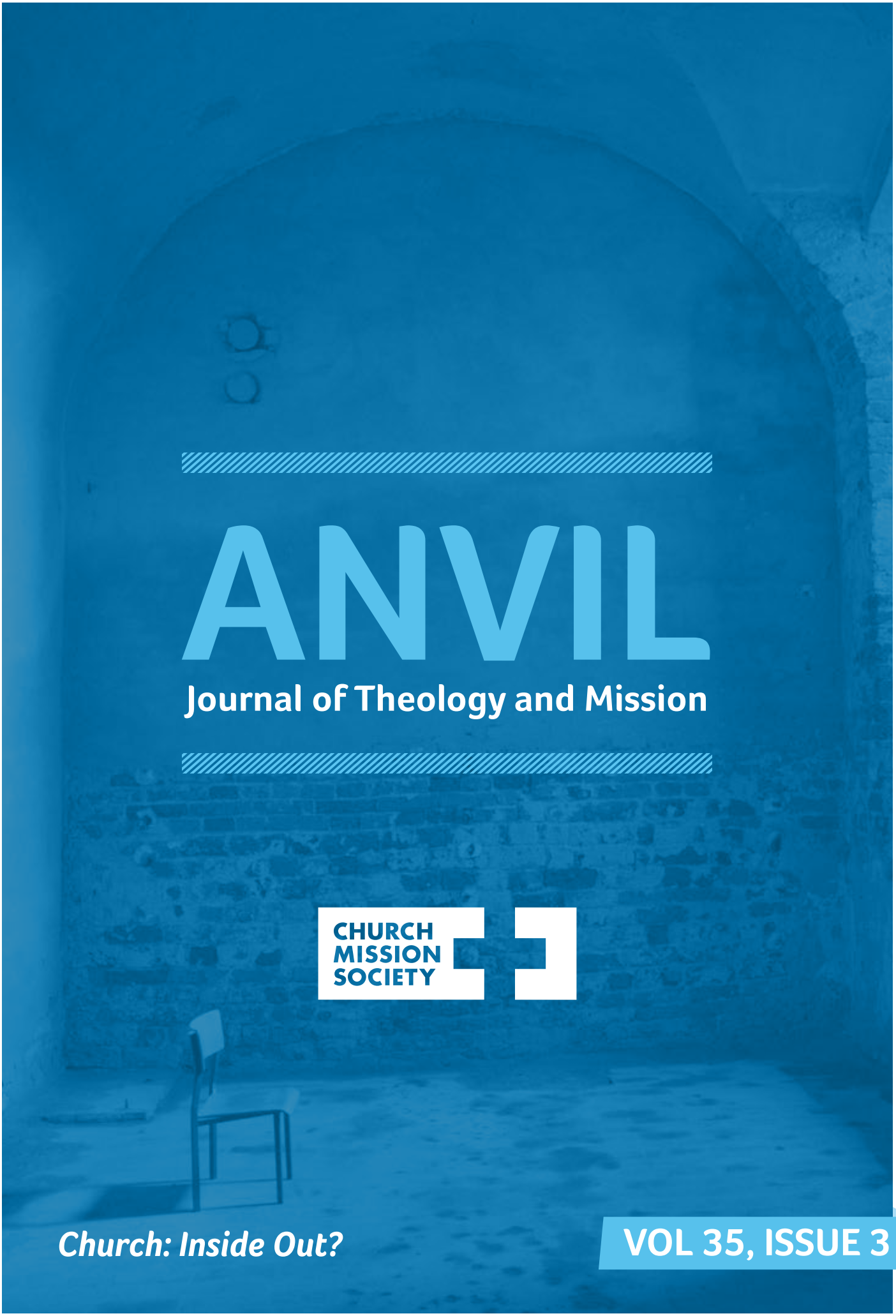


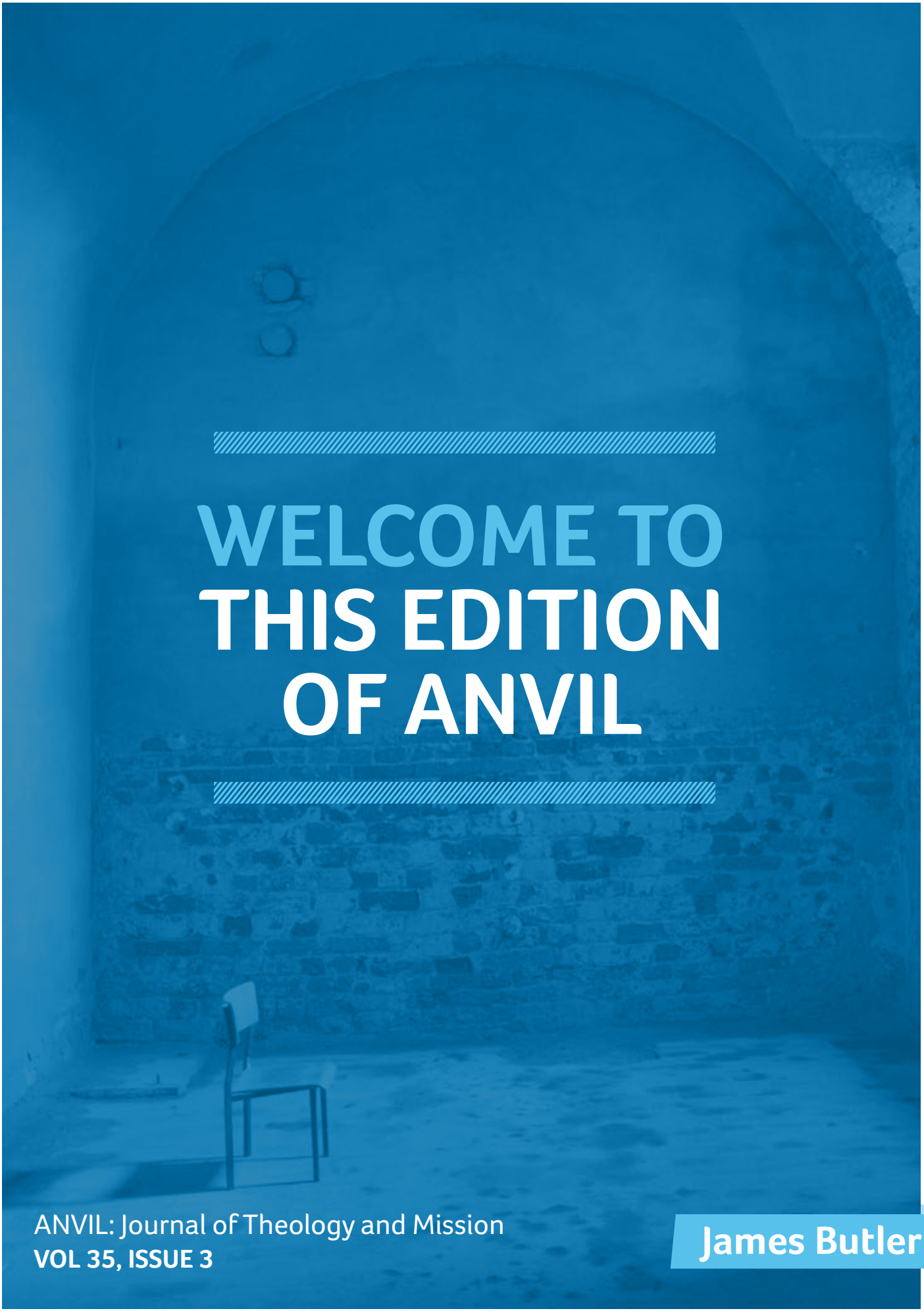
# ANVIL

## Journal of Theology and Mission

CHURCH MISSION SOCIETY

*Church: Inside Out?*

VOL 35, ISSUE 3



# WELCOME TO THIS EDITION OF ANVIL

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
**VOL 35, ISSUE 3**

James Butler

# THE EDITORIAL

**This issue of Anvil began life as a CMS Pioneer Conversations day back in March of this year, exploring church and mission. The questions around "What is church?" and identifying whether something "is church" are well rehearsed and many innovative and helpful things have been written, but the reality is that these questions remain pertinent to those working in fresh expressions and pioneer ministry. The title of the conversations day, and of this issue, "Church: Inside Out?", was an attempt to raise some of these questions in a fresh way.**

All the contributions to this issue push us to reconsider our understanding of church and suggest that the church, and certainly the work of the Holy Spirit, goes beyond our carefully drawn lines and our own expectations. This is certainly the experience of many of our pioneers at CMS: that as they follow the Spirit's work, they realise that the church has already been turned inside out, and their work, as John Taylor eloquently told us 50-odd years ago, is about joining the Holy Spirit in mission.

A key voice in encouraging this pioneering gift has been Pete Ward. He was a contributor to our conversations day, and although he has not directly contributed to this issue of Anvil, his suggestion of a liquid church has been an important one for pioneers exploring the ideas of church. I have reviewed his more recent book, *Liquid Ecclesiology*, in this issue, and I suggest that the examples given here, particularly in the work of Sue Steer, Christine Dutton, and Tim Nash with the Nomad podcasts, all reflect this liquid nature of the church in the world and offer important theological insights about church. I will introduce each contribution in turn with a view to how they fit into this bigger question of "Church: Inside Out?"

> "Many of our pioneers... realise the church has already been turned inside out, and their work, as John Taylor eloquently told us 50-odd years ago, is about joining the Holy Spirit in mission."

Our two long articles are by the two keynote speakers at the conversations day. Stefan Paas asks whether, in our move to turn the church "inside out", we may still be carrying significant colonial and Christendom assumptions about the purpose of mission. He suggests that the "why" of Christian mission is a far more pressing and important question than most people realise. His suggestion is a move away from an instrumentalised view of mission to one that is more creative and worshipful, and less individualised.

Clare Watkins brings a different perspective as a Roman Catholic theologian who is particularly interested in the theology of the church. An outsider to the pioneer conversation, she both encourages and challenges those involved in pioneering and fresh expressions. She identifies the way these dynamic examples of mission within pioneering and fresh expressions are a gift to the church and something the established structures find hard to do. What she questions is how pioneers know this is what God is doing, and she turns to the role of the prophetic and practices of discernment to help. Her concluding observation of an institutional church with a small centre and a large periphery will be appealing to many.

Jonny Baker and Tim Nash offer quite a different contribution. Through a conversation they explore the Nomad podcast, which Tim began over ten years ago, tracing the ways that it has developed into an online, and in some places physical, community. They reflect on the ways that this has become church, or something church-like, for many, making some interesting observations and developing some innovative ideas around the theology of church. As with most conversations this doesn't reach neat tidy conclusions, but offers some metaphors, insights and questions that anticipate the conversation continuing in your own communities and friendships.

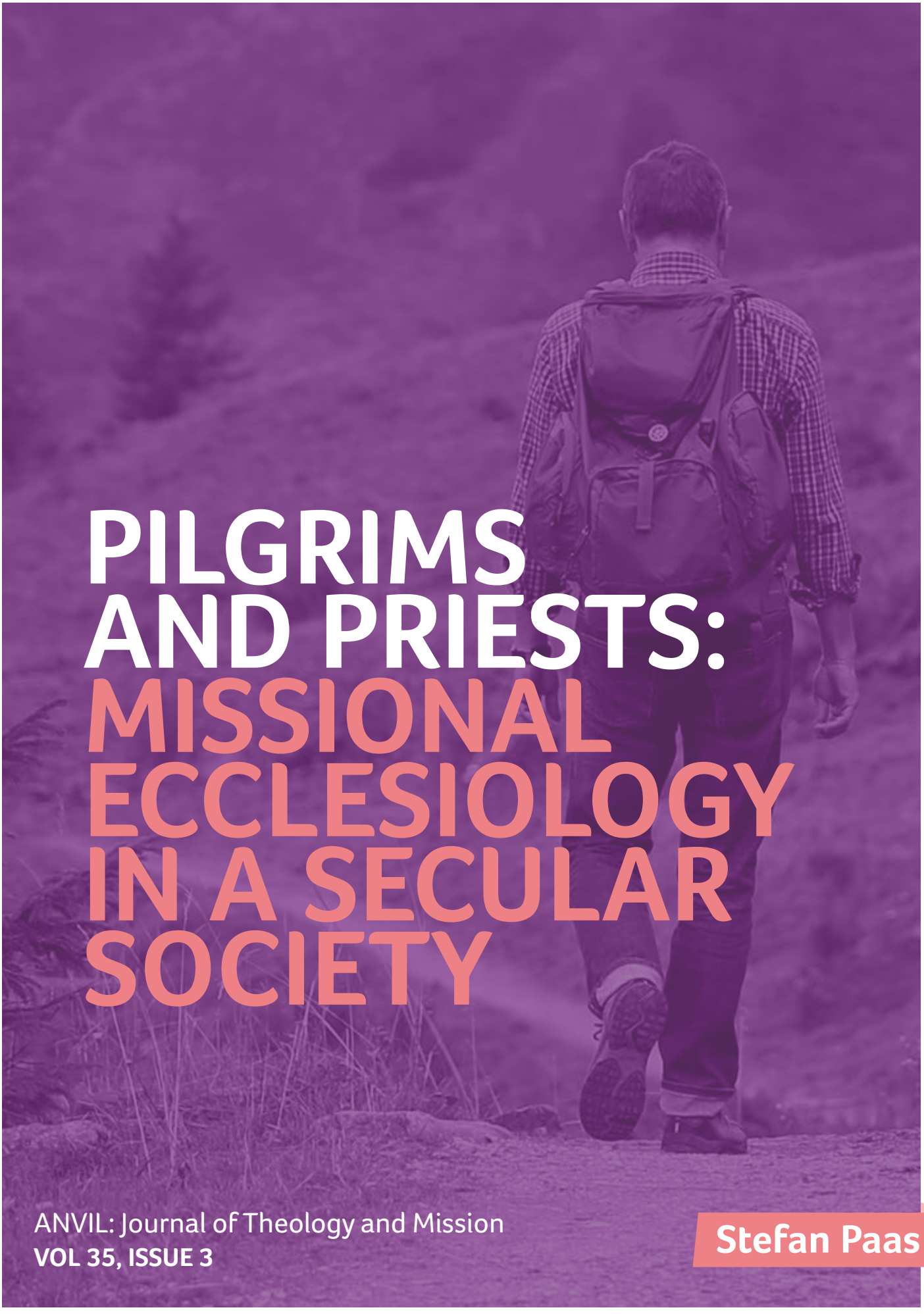
As always with *Anvil*, there are some shorter articles more focused on the particular experiences and practices of church and pioneering. Tina Hodgett reflects on Scripture and her own experience working with congregations in Bath and Wells to playfully explore how the accounts of childless women in the Bible open up new metaphors to help us to reflect on church arriving somewhere surprisingly hopeful.

Christine Dutton offers a reflection on knitting as a way of turning the church "inside out", one that not only encourages approaches to evangelism and care, but also encourages the kinds of spiritual and reflective practices that are important in Christian faith. She draws out particular examples of the way knitting encourages the prophetic, porous and relational church that Clare Watkins and Stefan Paas are calling for in their articles. Similarly, Sue Steer's reflections on her own experience of being a pioneer community worker as a new town forms around a tiny village demonstrates this more porous and relational understanding of the Christian community. By engaging with the fresh expressions models of mission and focusing primarily on building community, she saw how church formed and grew, and she encourages us to recognise and embrace pivotal moments in the journey.

Finally, Ed Olsworth-Peter points to the importance of the "where" of pioneer ministry and explores how people relate to their context. By discussing "dwelling patterns" of pioneer ministry, he shows how bringing these into a wider framework of the "pioneer charism" can be helpful for pioneers and for those encouraging pioneers to think carefully about where to start, the importance of partnerships and managing expectations.

We have a large collection of book reviews around the subject of mission and church, which provide some good avenues to engage further with these innovative ideas. I hope that this issue will be a helpful and stimulating way for you to reflect again on church and mission.

**James Butler** is pioneer MA lecturer and assistant coordinator for Pioneer Mission Leadership Training at Church Mission Society. He teaches in the areas of mission, ecclesiology and practical theology. His PhD explored how small missional communities sustain their social action. He also works as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Roehampton, researching themes of learning, discipleship and social action.



# PILGRIMS AND PRIESTS: MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
**VOL 35, ISSUE 3**

Stefan Paas

## EUROPE AS A MISSION FIELD

Since the Second World War, the need and urgency to develop a missionary perspective on what used to be the heartlands of Christendom has dawned upon many theologians and church leaders in the West.[1] Rather than mission bases, sending out faithful armies to the mission fields in the South, European nations are now mission fields in their own rights. "Mission in six continents", "reversed mission" and "mission from everywhere to everywhere" are the new realities in missiology. Moreover, evangelism and mission within Europe are no longer the somewhat dubious hobby horses of so-called "free churches" or "parachurch movements"; the traditional established churches of, for example, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands have enthusiastically embarked on a missional course. Since the turn of the millennium, "church planting", "fresh expressions of church", "missional experimentation" and "pioneering projects" have been recurring topics on the agendas of these churches.[2] Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Christians are involved in such enterprises, adding a steady trickle of new converts to the church, and increasing its diversity and expanding its reach among populations who have become alienated from the Christian message. Such enterprises also raise many theological and organisational questions, bearing promises for the renewal of Christianity in the Old World.

The deep secularisation of many European nations has been the background of much of this new trend towards mission. In the West, however, secularisation cannot be treated as a historical contingency that somehow took us by surprise. Time and again it has been emphasised that the category of the "secular" only makes sense within a Christian frame of thought, while secularisation as a historical process took off first and foremost in societies that had been Christianised previously.[3] In other words, while secularisation has alternatively been seen as an enemy of the faith or as its logical outcome, there can be no doubt that it is intertwined with long centuries of Christian mission. Secularisation in Europe has thus a post-Christendom and post-Christian character.[4] Adopting Europe as a mission field, therefore, should lead to reflection on the meaning of Christian mission in a continent that is in many ways "post"-Christian. The moralities, cultural identities, and societal and political structures of European nations have been profoundly influenced by Christianity, even though the large majority of their populations have rejected core Christian beliefs and do not go to church. And there is a history to deal with – a long, complicated and messy history where Christianity informed the laws, customs and politics of European nations and thus became implicated in their greatest successes but also in their worst moral failures.

All this presents Christian mission in Europe with huge challenges, which are reinforced by the practical experience of many missionaries that "successes" in terms of church growth or creating societal impact are few and far between. Whatever success there is does not compensate for the losses that are still suffered. In the Netherlands, for example, the churches may welcome hundreds of new Christians each year, but at the same time the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (the largest Protestant denomination) alone loses some 70,000 members per year. Of course, overall statistical decline may very well overlap with new beginnings and hopeful trends on a local level, but these statistics point to the harsh reality that many missionaries in Europe are not seeing as much measurable success as their counterparts in China, Brazil or sub-Saharan Africa, regardless of how much prayer, love and hard work they invest.

## WHY MISSION IN EUROPE?

In my new book, *Pilgrims and Priests* (publishing in November 2019), I struggle with this challenge of evangelising a post-Christian society.[5] Most of what I am writing in this article is explored more extensively there. One of the first issues that needs to be addressed is the "why" of Christian mission in Europe. What is the purpose of mission in a post-Christian culture? I believe this is an extremely important question, precisely because many Christians seem to find it so trivial. Part of the rediscovery of Europe as a mission field entails that all sorts of missional concepts and expectations that belonged to the missionary enterprise elsewhere are applied to Europe unreflectively. Church growth, revival, church-planting movements, re-evangelisation and societal transformation are thus becoming the tacit norms against which missional practice is measured – and usually fails to pass the bar. Here, European history returns with a vengeance. The traditional movement from Europe to its colonial "mission fields", after all, was inspired by the reality of Christianised Europe (Christendom). The missionary movement originated in

[1] See Stefan Paas, "The Making of a Mission Field: Paradigms of Evangelistic Mission in Europe," *Exchange* 41 (2012): 44–67.

[2] For extensive reflections, see my *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

[3] For some discussion, see Stefan Paas, "'Notoriously Religious' or Secularising? Revival and Secularisation in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Exchange* 48 (2019): 26–50.

[4] There is more on these terms in my "Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences," *Mission Studies* 28:1 (2011): 3–25.

[5] Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM, 2019).

a desire to replicate the European experience of nations formed by Christianity in other parts of the world. When mission returns to Europe, it comes with all sorts of historical baggage, including the totalising dreams of recreating a Christian culture and a Christian society.[6]

This nostalgia for an idealised Christian past has always been influential among Christian leaders in modernity, especially in contexts of beginning secularisation. In 1885 Pope Leo XII issued his encyclical *Immortale Dei*, where he wrote (section 21):

There was once a time when States were governed by the philosophy of the Gospel. Then it was that the power and divine virtue of Christian wisdom had diffused itself throughout the laws, institutions, and morals of the people, permeating all ranks and relations of civil society.

A few years before Leo's description of a Christianised society, the Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper had said that "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ... does not cry: 'Mine!'" (1880).[7] Kuyper's neo-Calvinism has become very influential again among missional thinkers who emphasise a holistic and transformationist approach of our societies. One might also think here of Lesslie Newbigin's famous question (1987): "Can the West be converted?"[8] Here too a totalising vision of a Christianised society echoes in the background. In short, our theologies and models of mission have been forged in the crucible of Christendom, and this turns out to be very problematic in societies that have emphatically rejected Christendom.

So, again, what is the purpose of mission in Europe? What should we aim for in a culture that has been "converted" and "transformed" for ages – with very mixed results? This question must be posed keeping in mind that missional enthusiasts on the one hand are happy to criticise Christendom while they often revel in dreams of "growth", "revival" and "transformation" on the other. However, what are these but dreams of Christendom? So, can Christian mission avoid Christendom? Or is some form of Christendom (that is, a Christianised social order) the logical and desired outcome of mission? As I am a missiologist and a missional practitioner in the very secular context of Amsterdam, these questions are relevant to me. For many small Christian communities in deeply secularised societies, this cuts to the heart of what Christian mission is about. If our purpose should be, explicitly or implicitly, to (re-)create a Christianised society, then we're in for despair. Only those with a great gift of ignoring reality can accept this as their mission. But if Christian mission does not depend on the ideal of a Christianised social order, and if it can adopt a minority witness as its core identity, then these communities can be places of joy and hope.

## MODELS OF MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In our search for a theology and spirituality that helps us to make sense of mission in a post-Christendom society, we turn to existing models of mission first. It is interesting, and telling, to see that all the dominant models of missional ecclesiology in recent times depend on a grand vision of unity (a Christianised world) that is either assumed or programmatically projected.

For example, the assumption that we are all still on the same page in terms of religion is seen in the mutations of the ancient European folk church traditions into the direction of a generalised "religion" or "spirituality". While we are no longer Christians anymore, we are all "religious" or "spiritual" somehow – or so goes the typical liberal response to the recurring statistical facts of religious decline. "Horse riding is also spiritual," wrote a Dutch Protestant pastor in a daily, responding to the latest report on religion in the Netherlands. By this what I call "homeopathic folk church theology" it is possible to maintain that we are still a "religious", or at least a "spiritual", nation since most of us love football or gardening.

Another, and more subtle, form of denial may be found in the current emphasis in missional literature on the "countercultural model of church", inspired by sixteenth-century Anabaptism. While this model contains much valuable insight for reflection on mission in a post-Christian society, it is also true that the Anabaptist perspective on church implicitly depends on a Christianised background culture that recognises (and, to some extent, appreciates) the radical countercultural presence of the Christian community in their midst. Without going into too much detail here,[9] I suggest that the countercultural approach depends

[6] See Stefan Paas, "Mission from Anywhere to Europe: Americans, Africans, and Australians Coming to Amsterdam," *Mission Studies* 32:1 (2015): 4–31.

[7] Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty" (1880), in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

[8] Lesslie Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11:1 (1987): 2–7.

[9] See my "The Countercultural Church: An Analysis of the Neo-Anabaptist Contribution to Missional Ecclesiology in the Post-Christendom West," *Ecclesiology* 15 (2019), 217–89.

on the monastic tradition of Christendom – offering a context for radical discipleship in a culture that was largely seen as Christian. To adopt this approach without further reflection as the main missional strategy to a post-Christian culture is to deny the hugely changed conditions under which the church has to operate now.

Missional models that have their origins in modern times usually accept that western societies are no longer "Christian" (or perhaps never were), but they set this as a problem to be solved. Take, for example, the Church Growth Movement, which became influential, especially among evangelicals, through the works of Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner, and through movements like DAWN (Discipling a Whole Nation). McGavran defined the "chief and irreplaceable" purpose of mission as the numerical growth of the church.[10] Thus he introduced a zero-sum game where the growth of the church correlates with the decline of the world, and vice versa. The mathematics are simple: the church can grow until the whole world has become church. In other words, the purpose of mission is to make the world "church" (again). Younger evangelicals have often developed some reservations against growth-driven (pragmatic, managerial) approaches of mission and have adopted "transformationist" (holistic, social justice) approaches instead. "Fundamentally," Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden write, "transformation is the transformation of communities to reflect kingdom values."[11] In practice, however, the intended outcome of such a transformation is usually kept rather vague. How does a transformed society look like if it is not to be a repetition of the Christendom experience? I sometimes ask my students to close their eyes for a minute and think of the most Christianised place in their country. Then, after a while, I ask them if they would like to live there. Invariably, this question produces embarrassed smiles. Talking about "transformation" is all fair and square, but in our post-Christian societies the question of what this means in practice immediately arises. How would such a transformed society, for example, deal with minorities (or even majorities) that do not want to be part of these "kingdom values"? How, in short, would such a society handle power?

Of course, much can be learned from these models. They all contain building blocks for a truly post-Christendom missiology. But this can only happen if they are purified from a lack of realism and, even more, from the instrumentalising approach that characterises much modern missionary thinking. Let us look at this next.

## INSTRUMENTALISATION OF MISSION VS DOXOLOGY

Modern missionary thinking, especially when it is driven by ideals of church growth or transformation, is often premised on an instrumentalising view of mission. This may not be as clear in societies where the church is growing rapidly and where Christianity is gaining much societal impact. But in secularising societies, where conversions are rare and the church's impact is ambiguous and small, this inherent weakness will inevitably surface.

To welcome new Christians should indeed be a deep desire of the church, but to buy into church growth theory is something else entirely. To accept numerical growth of the church as the purpose of mission is to instrumentalise evangelism in the service of statistics. Conversions are important signs of the coming kingdom of God; they are the first fruits of the eschatological harvest. But, as Jesus says, "There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). If church growth is the justification of evangelism, one sinner who repents is not enough. He or she will not turn our statistics. If church growth is seen as the purpose, and thus the ultimate justification of mission, the work of evangelism becomes driven by numbers rather than persons. Similarly with mission as transformation; if all the good work the church does in terms of fighting poverty or working for justice is justified by the contribution it makes to the transformation of societies, we are not just heading towards despair but we are also betraying the beauty and truth of what mission is about. "Let us not become weary in doing good," writes the apostle (Gal. 6:9). But if transformation rather than doing good is our purpose, we will become weary (and cynical) very soon. After all, the efforts of the small minority of Christians in contexts of deep secularisation are not likely to have much measurable impact in terms of "transformation".

Key to a missional spirituality in a deeply secularised society is to abandon an instrumentalised approach of mission, where evangelism is justified by "church growth" and social ministry is justified by "transformation". This leads to deep frustration and doubt, as it also puts us into competition with the world (Christians should be "better" somehow). The question is: how can we rejoice over one sinner who converts, even if our statistics are not converted? And how can we not become weary in doing good, even if our doing good does not lead to transformation? I believe that a

[10] Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 24.
[11] Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Eugene: Regnum Books, 1999), xii.

doxological approach of mission will be more fruitful here. Perhaps this is what churches in contexts of deep secularisation are learning as lessons for the global church. Essentially, doxology is praise. When Christians praise God, worship him, they say something like this: "There is One who is not good 'for' anything, but he is simply good. Period." And so too with all things divine, all works done in his service and for his glory. Mission is doxological: it is doing what is good and beautiful in love for a God who loves us freely. Perhaps we should use different metaphors here. Rather than using traditional militaristic or business metaphors, we might think of mission as creating art. Art radiates beauty and meaning that does not depend on its possible usefulness. On the contrary; precisely because of its lack of usefulness, art helps us understand that goodness and beauty are not necessarily useful in terms of impact or money. Mission might be a work of art. It is a cause of joy and gratitude; it is a work of free and undemanding love; it is serving a God who is sheer love and beauty.

## EXILE AND DIASPORA AS A SENSE-MAKING NARRATIVE

In order to make sense of a minority mission to a post-Christian society, it is crucial that Christians learn to hear God's voice again. Part of the insecurity, the gnawing doubt that is part of the secular experience for many Christians, is the fear that God has abandoned us. Conversely, the beginning of God's speaking may be found where we find ways to reconnect his story to our predicament. In other words, Christians should dare to ask the question of whether God is "in" the secularisation or our cultures. Does the deep secularisation of western societies mean that God has disappeared, or is it rather a path through which he leads his people to new discoveries, a new dependence on his grace?

Without suggesting that our experience is the same as ancient Israel's exile, I want to emphasise how much of the Bible is written in situations of displacement and uprooting. The narratives of exile and diaspora may help late–modern Christians in the West to reconnect their cultural experience with the experience of the ancient prophets who witnessed about God in situations where everything seemed lost. Let us not forget that the crisis of exile was for Israel a crisis of faith. All God's promises had become futile overnight: his promise to Abraham that his seed would inherit this land, his promise to David that his dynasty would rule forever, and his promise to Solomon that God would dwell in the temple he had built. When the Babylonians came over the walls in 586BC, the king was captured and his sons were killed, the temple was burned down, and the people was carried away into exile. God had failed; new and superior gods reigned, or so it appeared.

This was a time of trauma, as the Book of Lamentations makes clear. It was also a time of sense-making, of trying to explain why all this had happened. Reflection on past sins played an important role here, just like it might be important for today's church to reflect on the sins of Christendom and to somehow express this in their liturgies and public utterances. However, this was also a time of new discoveries. Israel had to recognise that the God of their nation was the God of all the earth; they found out that the God of Israel was the God of all nations. "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom" (Isa. 40:28). This is God's world, after all. It is a far more surprising world than Israel dared ever believe. Here God raises very unlikely servants, such as "my servant Cyrus" (Isa. 45:1), a pagan king. Israel was to learn what the church may have to learn today: that being uprooted and becoming weak may be the key to understanding more about God and God's world. God has not abandoned us, not at all. He has led us into a new environment, where we are far more vulnerable and thus far more dependent on him. Christian institutions have crumbled, Christian power has disappeared. Yet it might very well be that only by losing the "God of our ancestors" and the "God of our land" will we see how great and merciful God truly is. We are on to new discoveries of what it means to see this world as God's world, a world that gives us surprising and humbling glimpses of the Spirit working through the most unexpected "servants".

## PRIESTHOOD AS MISSION

To be an exile is to be a stranger, a minority. Christians are not necessarily hated or discriminated against (after all, Joseph, Daniel and Esther rose to great power and prestige in exile), but to live in diaspora means to live without power. We cannot any longer make life for ourselves just a little bit easier than for non-Christians. Christians don't "own" this culture any more. To be an exile means to depend on the goodwill of others.

In the New Testament this metaphor of being an exile, or a stranger, plays an important role in defining the identity of the Christian community. In my book I explore this based on the first letter of Peter. Interestingly, the apostle does not only address "his" churches as "foreigners and exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11). He also calls them a "priesthood" (2:9). Priesthood may be a key metaphor to understand Christian existence as a missional minority in a secular culture. Priests are mediators, in-between people. They are called out of

| WHAT PRIESTS DO | |
|---|---|
| *Represent God before their people* | *Represent their people before God* |
| Teach, bless | Worship, sacrifice |
| Evangelism, social ministry, etc., "seeking the peace and prosperity of the city" | Naming the beauty and goodness of the world and praising God for it, gathering gratitude and lamentation and offering it to God, intercession |

the world to mediate between the world and God. They represent God before their cities and neighbourhoods, and they represent their cities and neighbourhoods before God.

In the Old Testament, priests are charged with specific tasks. They instruct the people in the ways of the Torah, and they extend God's blessings to the people they serve. Reversely, they come to God on behalf of the world out of which they are called. Thus, they offer worship and sacrifice. (See table above.)

It is impossible to go into much detail here, but let me list a few characteristics of priesthood that may help us to reflect on Christian presence and witness in secular societies.

Firstly, priests are a minority by definition. This metaphor highlights that a vital mission does not depend on the size of the community nor on its impact. Three old ladies in a senior home can be the priesthood of their friends and neighbours, just like a crowd of 3,000 worshippers can be the priesthood of their city.

Secondly, it is important to note that "priesthood" is a collective term. It highlights that Christians receive their identity through the community of the church. I am not talking here about the institutional structures of the church (without denying that these are important), but about the organic web of relationships that is also (primarily?) the church. And we also know that it is very difficult to say where this web of relationships stops and the "world" begins. We know where salvation begins, but we don't know (nor do we need to) where it stops. Through endless bonds of friendship and other loving relationships, God works his salvation into the bloodstream of the world. Priesthood functions out of these loving relationships; it operates on the basis of sharing everyday life, without hidden agendas or recruitment pressure. If Christians have loving relationships with their neighbours, relatives, colleagues and friends, and if these relationships are such that the fullness of life can be shared, then these relationships will be the most important source for the worship of the priesthood that approaches God on behalf of the world. Priests invite people to share their lives with them, they ask if they are allowed to pray to God for them or to thank God for the beauty and goodness in their lives. It takes away the competition, and to think of yourself as the priest of your family or your neighbourhood may become a rich inspiration to love people around you, to serve them and to develop deep relationships.

Thirdly, if we pursue this further, we may find a more hopeful perspective on evangelism and social ministry. Of course, it is good to invite people to join the church and to become fellow priests, but often people will say "no". In our society the church is a no-go area, even for many people who have some sympathy for Jesus or the Bible. If our main interest is church growth or recruitment, this "no" is usually the end of the story. But if the church is a priesthood, this is not at all the end of it. Priests will worship God "on behalf of" the world. Even if you are the only one in your family who goes to church, you are doing this "for" them as well. Your calling is to be the priest of your family, your workplace or your neighbourhood. This may be hard to accept or even to understand, as we are so deeply individualised that even our relationship with God seems to be a completely individualistic adventure. Thus, we believe that everybody should have his or her own high-quality relationship with God, and nobody can depend on someone else's faith. There is truth in that, but I believe that that a good dose of covenantal or collective thinking may be a wholesome influence in our individualised spiritualities. Think for example of the righteous Job, who would sacrifice a burned offering for each of his children every morning, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts" (Job 1:4–5). As a priest he took responsibility for his children, and he committed himself to representing them in worship for God. Or think of the apostle Paul's response to the Corinthians who asked him about divorce. He answered that a Christian should not divorce his or her unbelieving spouse,

"For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (1 Cor. 7:13–14). For us who are steeped in an individualistic mindset it is very difficult to make sense of this, but it makes perfect sense if we accept that God works through relationships. Apparently, it is possible that the faith of one family-member "sanctifies" the others. I don't know what this means exactly in terms of salvation, or how far this "sanctification" will carry us, but it seems very clear that it means a lot more than our individualised spiritualities allow. To be a priest is to carry others before God; it is to "sanctify" them by representing them.

## CONCLUSION

Small Christian communities in deeply secular societies can find a joyful minority mission by abandoning instrumentalising approaches of mission, by reconnecting with the narratives of exile and diaspora (yes, God is "in" the secularisation of our cultures) and by accepting their role as the priesthood of their nations, cities, neighbourhoods, workplaces and families. In some times and places this may lead to numerical growth and considerable impact on their societies. In most times and places their presence will be modest, sometimes hardly noticeable, and always fragile. However, I hope that I have been able to argue that this is not a cause of despair, but rather a cause of joy. After all, a context of deep secularisation may become a place where great lessons can be learned about God and his world, and where Christians can find their vocation as the priesthood of the world.

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# EK-CENTRIC ECCLESIOLOGY: INNOVATION, AGENCY AND THE HOLDING OF TRADITION

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
**VOL 35, ISSUE 3**

Clare Watkins

**"And let us consider how we provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some..." Heb.10:24–25 [NRSV]**

## **INTRODUCTION:** THE MOTIVATION FOR THIS ARTICLE

In this article I aim to offer some reflections as an ecclesiologist – and a Catholic one, at that – on some of the aspects of what mission might look like in our own context: post-Christendom, secular, plural Britain. In particular I want to reflect ecclesiologically in relation to some practices and thinking of particular importance to readers of *Anvil*: pioneer mission and the work of fresh expressions. In doing this, I hope that we can begin to address some vexed and recurrent tensions around the practices of pioneer mission and its often implicit ecclesiology, and their relation to those of the received, structural expressions of church ("inherited church"), which have dominated the landscape in Britain and across western Europe in modern times.

In doing this I am acutely aware of my own limitations as an "academic" – albeit one thoroughly committed to the practices of Christian life. I am, truthfully, somewhat in awe of pioneer work, in its variety of forms. This is not my world. My own sense of a "mission call" is to what I think of as "the intellectual apostolate" – and this very often feels, even to me, a little ridiculous, indulgent and unhelpfully rarefied in the face of extraordinarily powerful real-life stories of mission and solidarity with the people of the world. Yet my heart is there; and if this odd calling of intellectual apostolate means anything at all, it must surely find a way of serving the "front line" work of mission. It is on this front line that we discover the particularly important place of pioneer work. My own interest in this contemporary and particularly contextual mission is twofold: first because of the way it seems to embody a theology of solidarity and care for "the world", the margins, for "ordinary life", which has always been my ecclesiological concern, even as a systematic theologian; but also because of the way that, when I see this (for me) intellectual faith commitment lived out by people braver, stronger and freer than I am, I am conscious of those practices calling ecclesiology to rethink in some crucial ways.

The present article is based on a talk I gave at Church Mission Society's Pioneer Conversations Day in March 2019. The description of the day included the following:

> Within pioneering and Fresh Expressions the question of the nature of church and its relation to mission is a hot topic; one that is both contested theologically but also one which matters in the everyday-life of Christian ministry and mission. Questions like "is this church?", "when does this become church?" and "can we have church-free Christianity?" are currently being asked in a huge variety of contexts and situations.

What strikes me here is that the direction of interrogation seems to be very much from established ecclesiology to the pioneer missions or fresh expressions. In what follows, I want to suggest that we might also need to allow pioneer work to question ecclesiological assumptions. Indeed, perhaps what is really called for is a questioning conversation around all these experiences and disciplines in order better to serve the living of Christian faith – life in the Spirit – in today's contexts.

## WHERE I AM COMING FROM

If this article is to offer some kind of facilitation of this questioning conversation, my own position needs to be clear. As I say, I come to the subject as something of an outsider – albeit an admiring one. I feel this "outsider-ness" on two counts, both of which are significant for what follows. First of all, I am simply an academic; but I'm also something of an outsider because I'm a Roman Catholic. I'm aware, of course, that there have been Roman Catholic contributors to these conversations before – notably Gerald Arbuckle.[1] But I would suggest that even looking at his contributions in the mix of others in this context, it is clear that there is something distinctively "Protestant" – Reformed, Methodist, Anglican – about the ways in which pioneering and fresh expressions have taken off. There *is* something of a parallel that might be identified within the Catholic tradition: for example, the "new movements"[2] and the growing (largely north American) programmes for renewal, such as "Divine Renovation".[3] Further back still, I have often thought that the mendicant orders of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were precisely pioneering in the ways in which that term is used in our context today.[4] However, these Catholic movements – both historically and in their contemporary expressions – are ecclesiologically different from what

[1] Gerald A. Arbuckle, "Conflicts in the Church: Some Mythological Reflections," in *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in Mission*, ed. Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014), 141–57.

[2] For an account of these see Massimo Faggioli, *The Rising Laity: Ecclesial Movements since Vatican II* (Marwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016); and by the same author, *Sorting Out Catholicism: A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

[3] James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission* (New London, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 2014).

[4] One of the places this is vividly and accessibly described in is Simon Tugwell, *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings (Classics of Western Spirituality)* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

I think I am seeing in fresh expressions and pioneer mission/ministry in some important ways. As a Roman Catholic the idea of setting up another "church", or even congregation, alongside the local Eucharistic community that is structurally united with the bishops and, ultimately with Rome, is distinctly odd. There might be prayer groups, Bible study groups, outreach of various kinds; but the sacramental and sacramentally structured heart of Catholic ecclesiology does not lend itself to the language, practice or implicit theology of "new church". It's just not how our ecclesiology works, as the new movements in the Catholic Church demonstrate.

I'm not here to convert anyone to that way of doing things; indeed, by the end of this short paper I think I may need to revisit these ecclesiological assumptions of mine and challenge my own confessional starting position. However, I do think that this faith of my own concerning church, and the tradition that informs it, gives me a particular perspective on the questions surrounding the kinds of contemporary mission that pioneering and fresh expressions embody. Yes, it is a critical perspective; but it is also one that bears its own gifts into today's conversations.

## THE CENTRAL QUESTION AND A PLANNED RESPONSE

So: I am an awestruck outsider, who loves what pioneering is about and has some critical observations to share. Central to these observations is the sense I have that, in just about everything I read around fresh expressions and pioneering, there is an ongoing tension concerning the relationship between the pioneering practices and the established or institutional practices of "inherited"[5] church – whether presented as parish, or circuit, or ordained ministry or whatever. Questions – theological, political and even economic – seem to buzz around how these "received" practices of church might best relate to the more "in the world", free, imaginative and novel expressions typical of pioneering. One of the well-trodden arguments that reflects this tension is that around whether a fresh expression is properly a church or not. We've seen fierce arguments about that over the last decade or so – [6] though perhaps it is an argument that is somewhat dying down now as more deeply reflective talk of mixed economy, "blended church" and "mixed ecology" has properly complexified the debates and enabled shifts in relationship between pioneer and received forms of church.[7] The language and practice of difference and diversity within church life seems to be winning the day.

For all this, I don't think these questions and tensions have entirely gone away or been resolved (even supposing that they should be – of which more in what follows). Recently this debate has been presented anew in Andrew Dunlop's book,[8] which offers a penetrating theological account of his own experience of facilitating a contextual, fresh expressions community in which the jumping-off point theologically is precisely "What elements are needed to create an authentic church?"[9] It is from the challenge around "authentic church" that Dunlop is able to develop a Christocentric account of fresh expressions of church, as contextual and new churches, which places the cross, God's gratuitous work of atonement and reconciliation in Christ at the centre. "Church" as interpreted in these terms, as the central event of God's saving encounter with people at the point of our own nothingness, becomes determinative.

## BEYOND "IS THIS REALLY CHURCH?"

This is powerful stuff – and genuinely helpful. However, here, as invariably in accounts of fresh expressions and pioneer accounts of church, there remains the question: who interprets, recognises, authorises such "events" or encounters? If Dunlop is able to see in his small contextual community signs of such encounters with God's grace, and, what's more, indicators of the creedal marks of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity,[10] what enables him to be able to see this, and what makes others (like me) question such claims? And, above all, how is ecclesial authenticity in such an endlessly contestable set of positions to be recognised beyond those for whom it is experientially "true"? (Who may, of course, be wrong, given the nature of human experience and sin.) It may be time for a shift away from these stark questions of church – what makes something really church? Can you have a church-less Christianity? – that have been so much rehearsed and, even, exhausted, in favour of giving attention to the fundamental or underlying and often implicitly ecclesiological positions that pioneer practice and language embodies, and which inform the kind of contestation I have hinted

[5] These seems to me a problematic term; after all, all church, all faith, is necessarily "inherited".

[6] For example, see Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy, eds., *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008); Steven Croft, ed., *Mission-shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today's Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008); Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

[7] Anna Brooker and Andrew Dunlop, *Mixed-economy Mission: Collaborative Ministry for Multi-church Growth* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2019).

[8] Andrew Dunlop, *Out of Nothing: A Cross-Shaped Approach to Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2018).

[9] *Ibid.*, 47.

[10] *Ibid.*, 67.

at in referring to my reading of Andrew Dunlop. The question is not so much "Is this really church?" but rather, "What kind of sense of 'church' might be being construed here?" And what demands does it make on our ecclesiology and ecclesial tradition?

This was, in fact, a part of my learning in the theological action research work done with Messy Church, Croydon.[11] Working with this group of committed, remarkable leaders, rooted in an evangelical tradition and a passionate desire to "make disciples" in their own contexts as stay-at-home parents, I began to have my own ecclesiological assumptions questioned. The practice-group's shared learning and insight focused on ideas of "not-yet-church" (drawing on the natural theology of Act 17), "church-lite" and the "shallow end of church" – not so as to minimise or dumb down what was occurring in their fresh expressions practice, but rather to speak authentically of its particular ecclesiality. What they were seeing in their own "successful" Messy Church was *not* what they had planned, hoped for and even, in faith, expected; but it was, nonetheless, a clear working of the Spirit, to them at least. (And here we can see raised again the question as to the authorisation of such a seeing, such a discernment.) In fact, this realisation was inescapable to all involved, challenging us to speak ecclesially of what was going on in practice, while needing to make sense of what kind of "churchiness" – which involved a vast majority of non-believing attenders – this could possibly be. The triggering for me was to remember my own tradition's understanding of the "soft" or highly permeable boundaries of church – the nature of the church as a reality stretched beyond itself to embrace the catechumen, the seeker, the person of goodwill. To ask "Is this church?" is already to assume too rigidly defined a "thing" is being intended by the term.

At the end of that Messy Church project I felt that the question of "Is this church?" was probably not that important. It was, even from my ecclesiologist's point of view, increasingly the least helpful question to ask. Nonetheless, the instinct behind that question – here and in much of the pioneer and fresh expressions literature, both affirming and critical – is important. It recognises that there is something going on here about the relation of "in-the-world" mission practices to the received, structural church – what, in my tradition, we would refer to as *ecclesia ad extra* and *ecclesia ad intra*. There is a tension here that simply will not go away, for all the institutional attempts to colonise and routinise pioneering mission and lay outreach more generally (largely in the Church of England, it seems to me, through its funding mechanisms).

Sociologically this is a tension that has been often described in terms of the tension between the prophetic and the priestly. This language resonates with much of what I read from pioneer literature, and I'll say a little bit more about that later on. In fact, I want to suggest it might be a distinctly unhelpful – possibly even unchristian – way of describing the difficulty or the tension that we're up against. What I want to do first, however, is to reframe the questioning of this tension by looking at two particular language clusters that come up for me when I read the literature around pioneering and fresh expressions. One of these is to do with change and agency, and the other concerns the question of tradition and innovation. After exploring these two themes, albeit briefly, I will then move to propose an understanding of church as *ek*-centric, drawing on my own confessional ecclesiological tradition, and theological action research, in a way that holds the tensions between pioneer and institutional as *proper*, and opens up ways for its being more mutually enriching than simply problematic.

## PIONEERING: INNOVATION, CHANGE AND THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

My suggestion is that there are fundamental assumptions about what is new, transformative and "fresh" in much of the pioneer and fresh expressions literature that require deeper ecclesiological attention. Furthermore, these assumptions bear an implicit (and explicit) *valorisation of change* that begs, for the systematic theologian, a crucial question as to who is/are the agent(s) of such change.

The emphasis on change and newness is basic to pioneering and fresh expressions and reflects the way in which these movements are born out of a proper dissatisfaction with the way things are, and the ways that the structurally configured churches have often failed to truly bring people to Christ in our contexts. This "holy discontent" (as Michael Moynagh refers to it)[12] is well identified by Jonny Baker in his essay "Future Present", for example.[13] What results is a newness and freshness born of a highly pneumatological reading of Christian life and mission, and a thorough-going commitment to the *missio Dei* understanding of God's mission already active in the world, and the Christian disciple – and in a particular way, the pioneer – as the

[11] Clare Watkins and Bridget Shepherd, "The Challenge of 'Fresh Expressions' to Ecclesiology: Reflections from the Practice of Messy Church," *Ecclesial Practices* 1:1 (2014): 92–110.

[12] Michael Moynagh, "Innovating the Future," in *Future Present: Embodying a Better World Now*, ed. Jonny Baker et al. (Sheffield: Proost Publications, 2018), 13–21. See 14.

[13] Jonny Baker, "Future Present," in *Future Present*, 5–9.

one who responds to this divine activity. So:

> Pioneers are people called by God who are the first to see and creatively respond to the Holy Spirit's initiatives with those outside the church; gathering others around them as they seek to establish new contextual Christian community.[14]

And:

> Believing that God is already at work in the world, Fresh Expressions reimagine how the Body of Christ can live and work in diverse and changing contexts.... **A Fresh Expression is fresh!** New, original, pioneering, innovative, different... you get the idea. A FX is not a re-brand or update to an existing model – it is a NEW thing that has developed because of a particular culture or context.[15]

Theologically this all makes perfect sense. The foundations of church on the *missio Dei*, with its implied subordination of church to the work of the Spirit in the world, powerfully resonates across the different Christian traditions, including my own. However, as is often the way, the really knotty ecclesiological problems come to light when we ask "How does this get lived out in practice?"

For example, I have just made reference to Jonny Baker's essay "Future Present". In this he offers not only an account of dissatisfaction as a proper starting place for pioneer work, but also a simple process by which to begin to respond to this satisfaction:

1. Get some people together;
2. Pick something you want to see changed and imagine a different future;
3. Design the present on the basis of that future to make the future present.[16]

Throughout the same short and inspiring piece, much is made of the language of imagining and dreaming, with the explicit link being made between this kind of activity and prophetic vocation:

> It's what the prophets did. They grieved for the way the world was broken...Then they imagined a different future through their poetry and art...[17]

Indeed, the language of "creativity", "dreaming" and "imagination" seems to feature rather a lot in fresh expressions and pioneer mission, and is reflected in those definitions that each areas give of themselves quoted above. Contributing to the same conversations, Nicola Slee robustly states: "I want to insist on the urgency of dreaming as an imaginative work to which Christians are called..."[18] and contributors to that conversation of 2018 frequently have recourse to similar language – and consistently relate it to the "prophetic".

I find this emphasis on human creativity and openness to new ways compelling, both as a person and as a theologian. However, it does raise some difficult questions for me. The first of these concerns the nature of the "prophetic". It is interesting to note that the majority of what is written in Scripture about prophets (as distinct from by them – although there is overlap) concerns the tricky question of true and false prophets and how you might distinguish between them. There is not the space to go into this in detail here – except to say that the problem seems to have persisted into the earliest Christian communities and beyond, as demonstrated by 1 John 4:3 and 1 Cor. 12:3, and by the Montanist "heresy" of the second century. The point is that not everyone who says they are a prophet, or even believes themselves so to be, or really looks like a prophet, actually *is*. The identity of the "true" prophet is actually rather tricky to determine, and requires some kind of discernment. As well as the idea that one mark of authenticity is that what the prophet says comes true, there is also, and interestingly, the idea that they should not contradict what has previously been established by another proven authentic prophet.

None of this is to say that pioneer work and fresh expressions are not prophetic; it is simply to raise an important and perduring, and authentically faith-full question: how do we know it is prophetic? Which is to say, how do we know that this work is actually about bearing God's living Word, rather than the thoughts, ideas, opinions of people? These thoughts, ideas and opinions may well be good, helpful – graced, even; but this does not, at least according to Scripture, make them necessarily "prophetic" in the proper sense of being God's own Word spoken through God's chosen prophet. The prophetic, and the prophet, is always something *to be discerned*. The question is not only by whom, but *how*?

This questioning of the language of the prophetic and its implied connections with imaginings and dreamings

[14] "Vocations to Pioneer Ministry," *The Church of England,* accessed 3 October 2019, https://www.churchofengland.org/pioneering.

[15] "What is a Fresh Expression?", *Fresh Expressions*, accessed 3 October 2019, http://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/

[16] Baker, "Future Present," in *Future Present*, 9.

[17] *Ibid.*, 7–8.

[18] Nicola Slee, "Re-imagining Christ as the Coming Girl: An Advent Experiment," in *Future Present*, 119–32. See 119.

and creativity raises the question of *agency*. The prophet, as powerfully illustrated by the reluctance of the likes of Amos and Jeremiah, is driven to prophesy *despite* their own desire to act differently, precisely because the divine agency of the Word with which they are entrusted overpowers them. When we speak of authentic change in the church we need always to remember this, and to remember its corollary: that change *towards God* is always dependent on the Holy Spirit as the primary agent of change to which we are called to respond in faithful submission – even, sometimes, against our better judgement. For the Christian, the triune God is the only authentic agent of change in the church and in the world.

Such a statement has some highly significant implications. In particular, it suggests that it is not so much (or even) our imagining or dreaming that is the place to work from for God-wards change of church, but rather a radical openness to the Spirit – who "blows where he wills", and often does things rather differently from how *we* might *imagine*! There is here an appropriate debate to be had around the cooperation of human creativity and imagining with the Spirit, to be sure; and it is a conversation I would like this paper to open up. But prior to it, the possibility (some would say *inevitability*) of my or your "imaginings" being distorted by sin needs to be recognised. I may well have a beautiful, Godly, even "good" idea of my own, which others may find powerful, moving, inspiring; but these things alone do not make it of God – prophetic. Once again, we are faced with the complex necessity of *discernment*.

## WHAT PLACE TRADITION?

It is this question of discernment – of God's work in the world, and of my response to it – that brings me to my second area of questioning observation: this concerns the place of "tradition" for fresh expressions and pioneering.

Here I am using the term "tradition" quite loosely to refer both to the "inherited" structures, life and practice of the Christian church, and the articulated and received traditions of teaching, spirituality and liturgy. Tradition refers, in all these cases, to that which has been handed on, what has been received. The language of the prophetic, the new, the fresh suggests at the very least a tension with tradition understood in this way, and might even suggest a breach with it, or a "radical freedom" in regard to it. In practice it is this tension (and occasional breach) that, I suggest, has lain at the heart of "inherited church" unease about fresh expressions and pioneering. For example, in what might be a rather vivid, even extreme example, Mike Riddell reports a contextual church's use of pies and beer in a (quasi-) Eucharistic ritual that was judged contextually appropriate but, clearly, in any material sense, in considerable rupture from both the biblical and continuous Christian liturgical tradition.[19]

I don't think this kind of expression of "radical freedom" from tradition is typical of pioneer or fresh expressions mission. Indeed, the "new monasticism", and the evident interest in spirituality that is recurrently glimpsed in these new ways of church and mission, often draw on traditions of one kind or another. Whether this turning to spiritual traditions of the past as "resources" is really in keeping with the fundamental idea of *living tradition* (Benedictine monasticism is a continuous and presently lived reality after all, as are the traditions of St Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola etc.) is another matter we might want to discuss. My own anxiety that there persists a rather postmodern, eclectic and often strangely individualist interpretation of these great traditions is hard to set aside. What appears to be the case is that for much of the embodying of the fresh, new and pioneering, "tradition" is at worst a part of the very system that cries out for radical change, and at best an interesting set of resources that can be considered, selected from and adapted for present use. Again, the question for me is: on what grounds is such a selection and the consequent adaptation of tradition made? And by whom, on whose behalf, discerned by what lights?

Michael Moynagh's reflections on innovation and tradition serve us well here:

> Innovation happens when God's future begins to re-form the present. The result is not the obliteration of tradition. It is the transformation of tradition. The kingdom gives history new life. If you like, innovation fertilizes the tradition, while tradition is the soil in which innovation grows.[20]

Here there appears to be a balanced and nuanced sense of the relation of tradition to pioneering; and I have no significant disagreement with it – except, perhaps, that I would see "innovation" as tradition awaiting authorising discernment, and "tradition" as the fertile soil (soil and fertiliser) for its health and growth. Once again, as with the questions of agency and change, the problem is not with the meaning, but with the questions around practice it raises. How, exactly, does this happen? How is "tradition", in all its complexity, structure, language and historical conceptuality,

[19] Mike Riddell, "Bread and Wine, Beer and Pies," in *Mass Culture: Eucharist and Mission in a Post-Modern World*, ed. Pete Ward (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999), 95–115.
[20] Moynagh, "Innovating the Future".

enabled to enrich innovation exactly? In answering these questions we will face, on the ground, questions of power, authority, eclecticism, expertise, knowledge, grace – and sin. We will face, in short, the Christian call to *discernment.*

It is here that we can return to the original ecclesiological question that this paper has named but also sought to come at "slant" – that of the relation of fresh expressions/pioneering to "inherited" church. Repeatedly in my questioning of what I understand of these movements, I have returned to the need for discernment – of God's will and agency, of our response to it in faith and obedience, of the grace-and-sin of our imaginings, and of our contextual living connection and continuity with Christian tradition. I want to suggest that at least one of the key ways in which "tradition" – in all its lived and historic complexity – is "held" is precisely in the structured, historical and continuous life of the traditioned, handed-on and handing-on church. If this is true, it allows us to read the relation of pioneer work to that of "inherited" church in some more interesting and, I think, fruitful ways. If pioneering and fresh expressions are all about being deeply "in the world" so as to discern God's mission there and the Christian response to that, then there is a proper and living dependency on that received form of church that holds the tradition and which thus makes discernment possible. At the same time, this structured, traditioned reality of church depends on the pioneer as the one who enables the "progress" of that tradition (it is after all a *living* tradition) in the contemporary life of the church, at the same time developing the dynamic cooperation with the Holy Spirit that is the powerful place out of which ongoing tradition is, itself, forged. The second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum* 8) puts it like this:

> This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. (5) For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.

Such a position as I am suggesting here has some immediate implications, for both tradition-holding church and pioneer ecclesial expressions. In particular it raises the questions of what sort of relationships – structural, scholarly, personal – would be necessary to best enable, on an everyday level, the kind of mutually dependent work of discernment envisaged here. Related to this, a second question is raised as to how pioneers' formation, training and ongoing development does and might enable the kind of practices of discernment that are necessary to this understanding. To be sure, this is also very much a question urgent for all Christians, especially those in mission and ministry of whatever kind; but it seems to me that there is a particular charism emerging for pioneering to which such gifts and practices of discernment would be integral.

I am encouraged in this assertion by reflection on my on theological action research work with the Action Research Church and Society team between 2006 and 2011.[21] As I now think back on that work, and write up the specifically theological learning from that work, I am struck as to how mission and context appear in the practices in two distinct ways. First of all, that research, with over 12 different church groups involved in "outreach", seemed to make clear that effective mission and evangelisation was extremely difficult for established ecclesial, and especially hierarchical/clerical, structures, and was far better served by more entrepreneurial lay-led, "in the world" groups. This will of course come as no surprise to pioneers! At the same time, it also could be seen that the most sustainable and effective of these more entrepreneurial groups intentionally founded their work on both traditional spiritual/liturgical practice and thinking from the longer, inherited traditions.[22]

For example, the lay-led London Jesuit Volunteers built around communities of discernment, Scripture reading and prayer, to equip people to volunteer and work in areas of deprivation and marginalisation. Supported by a Jesuit community, the tutoring in this ancient spirituality of Ignatian discernment enabled genuinely fresh, and genuinely continuous and traditioned ways of being church to flourish. In a rather different way, the tradition of Catholic social teaching – a normative, ecclesial and authoritative "tradition" – enabled the drawing together of Christians and people of other faiths and none into a theologically reflective and creative work of social justice and care, in the

[21] For an in initial outline of this work, see Helen Cameron et al., *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

[22] This argument is set out more fully in Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: Re-learning Ecclesiology from the Voices of Practice* (forthcoming: Routledge, 2020), especially chapter 11.

development agency CAFOD. Yes, in both cases the tradition was evolving and finding new contextual expression; but, to add to Moynagh's account above, it was absolutely clear, too, that the contemporary nurture of these "fresh expressions" of Christian discipleship was a kind of new flowering of a plant of tradition that had, in fact, always been alive. It is, I suggest, not our place to "transform tradition" through our own human agency, but rather to deeply embed ourselves in that living tradition that is held by inherited church, so as to be able to bear fruit in our own contextual soil.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: THE INTERPENETRATION OF CENTRES AND PERIPHERIES

What I am suggesting in this Catholic and ecclesiological response to pioneering is an understanding of a whole-church that holds together the peripheries of fresh expressions and pioneer ministry with the smaller, but concretely centred, traditioned church. This whole-church is without boundaries, but one that is held to its historical embodied continuity in Christ through its institutional reality. But as such the intuitional centre becomes shrunk; it is put in its place by the greater whole, as this whole struggles to participate, through careful discernment, in the *missio Dei*, active in the world. The institution becomes the servant of the greater whole, taking up a distinctive role of the complex work of discernment, chastening our imaginations and visions. The tension of pioneer and inherited church is not resolved, but is, I think, given new and creative meaning and mutuality. The gift – a gift of the Spirit – is to live, together, this tension in commitment to discern the way God is leading us.

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# SOME KIND OF COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE ORBITING AROUND A PODCAST: CHURCH IN THE NEW ENVIRONMENT

TIM NASH AND JONNY BAKER

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## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TIM NASH AND JONNY BAKER

**Jonny:** Could you tell us what Nomad is?[1]

**Tim:** At its heart, Nomad is a podcast. For the last decade we've been uploading interviews with theologians, activists and contemplatives. And we've acquired quite a large audience of listeners around the world. Everyone involved in Nomad had inherited a fairly conservative evangelical faith, and for one reason or another had grown disillusioned with it. But the Christian faith was just too much in our blood to walk away from it, so Nomad became the means through which we've been looking for signs of hope. People often refer to the Nomad podcast as an interview show, but that's not really the heart of it. It's more a record of the faith journey of the hosts. We speak to people because we hope that can speak into an area of our faith we're genuinely wrestling with. So you can track my journey over the years from conservative evangelical to whatever I am now. In fact, someone recently discovered the podcast and started working their way backwards through the archive. They said how interesting it was witnessing my deconstruction in reverse! They said it was like watching a "spiritual Benjamin Button"! Perhaps that's one of the reasons Nomad is quite popular. People can relate to our open, honest exploration. In fact, a lot of people say that it's our post-interview chat that they find most helpful. In my experience the church hasn't been all that good at creating spaces for questions and doubts, whereas we think that's where you find the good stuff!

Although the podcast is still at the heart of Nomad, an online (and, increasingly, offline) community has emerged. We have a closed Facebook group where people share stories, unpack episodes, and support and encourage each other. We also have another, similar, group, but where the focus is on reading books together. We provide devotional and contemplative resources for our supporters that have a more holistic feel, which balances the more cerebral nature of the podcast. And we've got a listener map on the website where people can register and connect with other listeners in their area. Groups of people are starting to meet all over the place to discuss episodes of the podcast and support and encourage each other (at the last count we've got 1,000 people and 21 groups registered, and I've lost count of the number of emails I've had of people sharing stories of the friendships they've made. I've also made some wonderful friendships over the years). Back in 2017 we also spent the weekend with 80 listeners, for food, conversation, music, meditation and some live podcasting, and we're doing that again in the not-too-distant future. So, I think that's pretty much what Nomad is. It's some kind of community of people that is orbiting around a podcast.

**Jonny:** You began your involvement when you were employed as a Venture FX pioneer with the Methodist Church. What was it about it that made you think it was worth getting involved in as part of your pioneering?

**Tim:** For about seven years Nomad was just a hobby in the sense that I fitted it in around everything else. But a few things happened a couple of years ago that changed that. We were having lunch with a guest after we'd interviewed him, and he challenged our self-deprecating description of Nomad and said that Nomad was a really important part of a lot of people's faith journey. He then suggested that we might want to consider drawing people together in an offline gathering. That's what prompted us to put on the Nomad weekend. And the weekend was incredible. It just flowed. There was so much energy, so many natural connections, and a tangible sense of shared journey. It was like 80 people breathed a collective sigh of relief as they realised they weren't alone on their journey. That's what prompted us to set up the Facebook groups and the listener map, so that we could facilitate more of these connections. So I began to realise that Nomad was becoming more than just a podcast. Around this time the community that my wife and I had pioneered in Nottingham was coming to a natural conclusion, and so I was wondering whether my time as a pioneer was also drawing to a close. I

For about seven years Nomad was just a hobby in the sense that I fitted it in around everything else. But a few things happened a couple of years ago that changed that.

1 See *Nomad*, https://www.nomadpodcast.co.uk.

was sharing this with my management group, and they made the point that Nomad was a pretty exciting pioneering experiment and had the potential to develop in really interesting ways, so suggested I focus all my energy on that.

**Jonny:** The podcast interview with Steve Aisthorpe was really interesting and made me sit up and pay attention.[2] He wrote *Invisible Church*, in which he explores the practice of Christian faith beyond the edges of attendance at a Sunday congregation.[3] The interview really lifted the lid off a new kind of practice of Christian faith. We are used to statistics on church attendance that tell a story of decline and church in crisis. Those that no longer attend are assumed to have lost faith. But his research shows that there are a large number of those who no longer attend church who are simply making faith in other ways. He estimates that there are twice as many practising Christians not in church as those who do attend.[4] There is a different story here that is not being told – church is alive and well but has shifted or moved. We have had similar research before through *Gone But Not Forgotten* by Leslie Francis and Philip J. Richter,[5] and *A Churchless Faith* by Alan Jamieson,[6] but the scale of what Steve is talking about is something new. From what you have said about Nomad and the journey listeners are on, I imagine a lot are in that sort of space. How are people making sense of their faith in that space?

**Tim:** Nomad's audience did seem to deeply resonate with the Steve Aisthorpe interview. There seemed to be a collective sigh of relief, as if Steve was legitimising what a lot of them have been doing. Actually I would imagine that the majority of Nomad's listeners still attend some form of "traditional" church, but as Richard Rohr put it, they feel on the edge of the inside. Many attend simply because they want their children to grow up in a faith community, many because they can't face the fallout of leaving, and many because they like the idea of being part of a local faith community. But all feel uncomfortable with it for some reason or another (which is why they often stumble across Nomad). But of course a lot have left church altogether and are experimenting with new things.

For those people who are still part of a traditional church community, the faith journey they are on is largely taking place outside that church community. So there's a lot of talk in the Listener Lounge, for example, about finding God in nature, pilgrimage, contemplative practices, home/family-based rituals, etc. And as Steve Aisthorpe found, among those who have left church, there's definitely no lack of energy or commitment for the faith journey and for the idea of a faith community. There is inevitably a lot of pain, introspection and perhaps even cynicism towards past experiences of church (Evangelicalism in particular), but people are still committed to the journey, their commitment to Nomad being just one expression of that.

The only nervousness I sense about exploring faith outside traditional church is children. I can't tell you how many people have said to me and how many conversations I've witnessed in the Listener Lounge where people have said they'd leave church today if it wasn't for their kids. People are keen for their kids to feel part of a faith community, to make friends with other kids, to be mentored by other adults and to be exposed to the Christian story in creative ways. Traditional church, on the whole, is seen as still being pretty good at that stuff. And even though parents might not be that comfortable with some of the theology, that's seen as something that can be talked through and unpicked back home. Perhaps that's why Messy Church has proved so popular.

**Jonny:** I was interested in Dave Blower's album and the related Nomad discussion about it that you published as a podcast, which was around one world or era collapsing and another waiting to emerge, and that we are living in this in-between space where the old ways are collapsing but we aren't yet sure what the new ways are.[7] That got a lot of resonance with your committed subscribers. Is that what is going on with those who choose to leave church to follow Christ?

**Tim:** I think a lot of this relates to the collapse of the old ways. It seems that in the light of the collapsing political/religious/climate systems, the more conservative expressions of faith/church are doubling down on certainty and aren't creating spaces for an open and honest wrestling with the big questions. Again, I guess that's why Nomad's popular, because we're not seen as having a particular agenda; there are no pre-prepared answers. We're happy for people to disagree with us or our guests; we're just trying to bring a variety of voices to the conversation.

2 "Steve Aisthorpe – The Invisible Church (N179)", *Nomad*, 20 August 2018, https://www.nomadpodcast.co.uk/steve-aisthorpe-the-invisible-church-n178/.

3 Steve Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church: Learning from the Experiences of Churchless Christians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2016).

4 According to his research 21 per cent of people in Scotland are practising Christians, while 7 per cent attend church.

5 Philip J. Richter and Leslie J. Francis, *Gone But Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998).

6 Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002).

7 "David Blower – We Really Existed and We Really Did This (N197)", *Nomad*, 21 May 2019, https://www.nomadpodcast.co.uk/david-blower-we-really-existed-and-we-really-did-this-n197/.

**Jonny:** I recently presented a paper at a conference on mission in a digital age and the issue I explored was the translation of the gospel across cultures.[8] It takes imagination to translate afresh in different times, cultures and contexts. And it takes some attention to the cultural processes and ways of communication as well as some inventiveness. While it's obvious when you think about it that there are multiple takes on the gospel and church across cultures, the church still has a tendency to absolutise its own way of doing things, but it is essential that the church keeps translating afresh. If that attention to culture is not there, it leads to a lack of self-awareness of one's own culture, which in turn can lead to a colonisation when the gospel is shared. We confuse our cultural way of doing things with the gospel and impose it on others so they get more than they bargained for. In many ways that is why some people are very wary of the idea of mission even. I think our imagination can be more colonised than we like to think it is. Nomad is a good example of translation in a digital age.

This issue of *Anvil* is about church and mission. The lived practice of people who are in the Nomad community seems to be that their experience of church is constructed from multiple connections and multiple places – they may go to a local gathered church but they might also connect at a festival or with friends over a meal, and they connect via the podcast and conversation about it. When we hear the word "church" we tend to imagine a local gathered group organised in particular ways, and it has members who meet at a particular times to do particular things. But I am wondering if we need other ways of imagining that. Church is after all something constructed, something that we make in cultural forms. One of the ways of talking about church in the New Testament is around gathering (*ekklesia*). But it is also described more organically as a body with various parts, or as a people, a set of relationships. I have also thought about it as a network of relational connections to Christ and to one another drawing on network theory.[9] I am beginning to wonder if the word "church" is best reserved for the wider set of relations in the body of Christ with multiple groups and congregations and communications and connecting points, all of which sit within a wider church ecology. It is unhelpful that "church" has collapsed into a local congregation that gathers in one particular way. In fresh expressions, mixed economy has been a helpful phrase but still often relates to a mix of gathered forms. We definitely want those gathered forms within the whole but I am imagining something much richer and more diverse as the mix. Within that space Nomad is part of the church ecology or environment, a node on the network of Christ where Christ is being communicated. The digital environment enables connection and communication in ways that were unimaginable when I was a teenager. I am quite happy with your own description of being a podcast and a community orbiting around a podcast and not on a mission to prove you are more. But is it possible that this is what church looks like in the new environment for quite a lot of people?

> "Nomad is part of the church ecology or environment, a node on the network of Christ where Christ is being communicated"

**Tim:** Yep, I think you've nailed it, Jonny. This kind of idea has been expressed in Nomad's Listener Lounge time and time again. And it's my experience and understanding as well. Regardless of how I might define Nomad, people often say that for them it is an expression of church. But so is Greenbelt, and so is the book club they're a part of, and so is meeting with a friend for a pint, and so might be going on a pilgrimage with a group of strangers, and going through the liturgy in a local Anglican church...

I think a great example of this is the story Edwina Gateley told on Nomad,[10] when she came across a group of women sitting on some steps on a Chicago street. She sat down with them, and one of them asked if she'd like to share a donut with them, and then after that asked if she'd like to share some ginger beer. And Edwina realised that this was a Eucharistic moment. It was an ecclesial moment. I found that story so moving, and so inspiring. Church is emerging all over the place, if I have eyes to see it.

8 CODEC's annual symposium, "Missio Dei in a Digital Age", hosted at St John's College, Durham on 23–24 April 2019 ; a book of papers from it is forthcoming.

9 Jonny Baker, "Prophetic Dialogue and Contemporary Culture," in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context and Prophetic Dialogue*, ed. Cathy Ross and Stephen B. Bevans (London: SCM Press, 2015), 208.

10 "Edwina Gateley – Missionaries, Mystics and Mother God (N189)", *Nomad*, 21 January 2019, https://www.nomadpodcast.co.uk/edwina-gateley-missionaries-mystics-and-mother-god-n189/.

It's an obvious biblical reference, but I love the verse "when two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them" (Matt. 18:20). I grew up hearing it used almost as a consolation when hardly anyone turned up for a prayer meeting! But now I see it as a really inspiring call to awareness. When we're recording a podcast, engaging in a post in the Listener Lounge, reading a book with other listeners in the book club, meeting up with some local listeners for a meal or (something new we tried in August) all coming online at the same time for a David Blower gig in the Listener Lounge, am I staying open to the presence of Jesus, to see in this a potential for church to emerge? For many of us, this is such a liberating idea.

And actually, strange as it may seem to many people, I think the internet lends itself really well to this. There's something about the distance between us online, and perhaps the disembodied nature of it, that allows people to really quickly open up and share quite personal and deep struggles. There have been a number of occasions where someone has shared their pain, and the community has gathered around them offering sympathy and prayers. And on more than one occasion people have reached out through a private message and have subsequently formed a really supportive long-term friendship.

**Jonny:** Different traditions hold up different things as essential or at the heart of church. I wonder what they look like when held up next to Nomad. Let me give a few examples for you to hold up against Nomad.

One way of doing that in evangelical circles, which it sounds like you are in, would be to think that church should have a mix of mission, community and worship.[11] Nomad has those, I think. The community is interesting in that you do have a core committed set of members in the Listener Lounge, 1,000 people on a map and 21 groups, and a much wider fringe. I suspect baptism has not been discussed that much and you wouldn't need to be baptised to be a member, so there are differences, of course.

Another way of conceiving of church would be a place where there is a ministry of the Word and sacraments around which people gather, and some traditions would emphasise one more than the other. Depending on the tradition, one or other might be held up more as a mark of the church. Nomad has an amazing ministry of the Word, I think, if that is taken as teaching and learning and reflecting on discipleship in the light of the Scriptures and the tradition. You have got some top theologians and communicators with some wonderful interaction and conversation. Avery Dulles explores the idea of church as herald and maybe Nomad isn't far off that.[12] There is wonderfully creative play on that by Andrea Campanale and Mike Moynagh in the book *Missional Conversations*, where they conceive of church as conversation.[13] It is interesting that you do have small groups who gather for meals and conversation. It's probably not communion, though perhaps it is not that far off Jesus' table fellowship with sinners. Perhaps those tables are places where Christ is being remembered.

Perhaps the simplest or most minimal essence of church that you have already referred to is Jesus saying that where two or three are gathered, he is there in the midst of them. I was reminded by a member of the Disability & Jesus network recently that if that didn't include the possibility of online, then many of their members would not be able to gather.[14]

Or we might think of church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic as articulated in the creeds. *Mission-shaped Church* used this as a way of exploring how fresh expressions might be church.[15] The catholicity is about the wider set of relationships and connections. I wonder how Nomad fits with that way of conceiving of church.

A more recent discussion around church has been that of liquid church and ecclesiology by Pete Ward.[16] He suggests we need to think about church in ways that take the fluid nature of culture seriously. Liquid church is where Christ is communicated and people connect to Christ and one another. Solid church in contrast reduces church to gathering, and it has a gravitational force about it that pulls in on itself. The Nomad community fits with this liquid form of church. I think more attention and research could be done into the actual lived practices of people who are listeners or members or both. Ward focuses in on Jesus Christ who is the gospel and quotes Ignatius, who says that wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the church.[17] I look at Nomad and I think it is fair to say that there is the church in some form at least. I wonder where you discern that Jesus is present in Nomad.

11 See for example Robert Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995).

12 Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of Church*, second revised edition (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1991).

13 Andrea Campanale and Michael Moynagh, *Missional Conversations: A Dialogue between Theory and Praxis in World Mission*, ed. Cathy Ross and Colin Smith (London: SCM Press, 2018), 128–46.

14 See Disability & Jesus, accessed 3 October 2019, http://www.disabilityandjesus.org.uk.

15 Graham Cray et al., *Mission-shaped Church : Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

16 Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002) and *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017).

17 Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology*, 40.

**Tim:** Nomad may well have elements of mission, community and worship, but we didn't plan it that way. At no point have I, or the other members of the team, had a conversation about what Nomad is, and whether it's a church or not, or what elements of church we're trying to develop. The various elements of Nomad have emerged organically. For example, I asked David if he was up for being a co-host. He's a musician, so he soon asked if he could produce some more devotional content. We didn't think that Nomad needed worship. It was similar when Jemimah joined, and she set up a book club. It was at the Nomad weekend that people said how much they appreciated the sense of community, so I did spend some time wondering how we could facilitate that. And subsequently I built the listener map and set up the Listener Lounge. I see the Listener Lounge as the heart of Nomad's community as that's where I see the support, encouragement and friendships forming. In August we gathered people online at the same time for a live gig in the Listener Lounge. It was an experiment in gathered online community and it was great. It made me wonder whether in the future we might explore some sort of shared sacrament, although I'd tread very carefully with that. David's probably got a better handle on the offline community side of Nomad than me. He's been touring his new album and has so far done about a dozen gigs across the country, and it's largely been local gatherings of Nomad listeners.

I can see that Nomad has that mix of community, mission and worship, but I would think that community is very much at its heart. I get messages every day saying that Nomad feels like their home/tribe/church. Even people who aren't on the map or in the Lounge say that it feels like their community. I guess listening to our voices month after month creates a deep sense of familiarity, and safety, especially so as we share very personally and honesty.

Similarly, with seeing Nomad as a ministry of the Word – I can see that that is true, but interestingly I get message after message saying that it's the chat between the hosts that people really appreciate – the silliness, laughter, personal reflections and the application of what we heard in the interview. I'm sure a lot of people do just tune in for the interview, but the dedicated Nomad followers seem to appreciate the pre- and post-interview chats as well. I think it's because this is where community/home/tribe is found. So, clearly, I resonate with the idea of church as conversation. I'm quick to correct people when they describe Nomad as an interview podcast; it isn't – it's a conversation. The interview is there to stimulate a conversation between the hosts, and to stimulate a conversation with the listeners that may happen with a partner, friend, a small group of listeners or in the Listener Lounge. And yes, Christ would be remembered at these gatherings, in as much as that at the heart of the Nomad journey is figuring out what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I do also like the idea of catholicity with Nomad being part of a wider set of relationships and connections. My guess is that a lot of listeners would resonate with this. As important as Nomad might be to them, I doubt very much that it is everything to them. In the Listener Lounge they are often sharing other resources, and experiences mediated through other connections and relationships. Nomad is just one well where people stop to take a drink.

> "I see Jesus when I hear about how listeners' understanding and experience is expanded."

Where do I discern Jesus present in Nomad?! I think I see Jesus when I hear about how listeners' understanding and experience is expanded – for example, with the episodes we've done on various forms of contemplative prayer recently. This has brought so much joy and liberation to people. And similarly, episodes that have picked apart penal substitution and original sin seem to have deeply affected people. As they have me. So many people, especially those brought up in a rather narrow evangelical, or charismatic, environment, have said something like, "Why has no one told me about this before!" It's helped them connect with God in a radically new way. I think I also see Jesus in the friendships that are forming. And this is happening all over the world. Someone emailed a while back saying they had to move to another country because their partner had taken a new job. They left their community behind and moved to a small town where they didn't know a soul. They had a look on the listener map and saw there was someone in a neighbouring village. They met up, hit it off, and have become close friends! Or someone recently shared some personal struggles in the Listener Lounge. There was lots of support and encouragement, as you'd expect. But behind the scenes, someone in another

country privately messaged this person because they'd been through a similar experience. And now they regularly message each other with words of prayer and support. I could give you so many other examples. It just blows me away.

As I said before, I take very seriously the idea of "when two or three gather" being the bottom line when it comes to church. It that sense, while I wouldn't definitively say that Nomad is a church, I would say that church can happen within Nomad – just as I'd say that church can happen within the church building down the road, but doesn't necessarily happen there.

**Jonny:** The way we have imagined church is so tied to solid forms of church that I think we need some different metaphors to open up our imagination. I have been thinking about woodland as a metaphor. In a woodland you want some big standards – oaks or beech or wild service trees that seed lots of other trees and are at the top of the canopy. Then you have a middle layer – hazel or hawthorn under oaks for example, and then you want shrubs and then smaller plants – wonderful bluebells and the like that appear in different seasons. You might also have woodland such that there are a few different areas or zones with a bit of a different mix of trees. If you want to regenerate the woodland, the simplest way to do so is to let light in by thinning or making a clearing. This process of letting light in is extraordinary – what seemed dormant bursts into life. There is a seed bank in the soil and seeds distributed by animals (through bird poo, for example, or squirrels burying nuts) so you don't even need to plant things. For biodiversity and resilience it helps to have a mix of large, medium and small tress and different spaces. You definitely don't want a monoculture because if, say, a disease or pest attacks it, you could lose everything in one go. Woodland is also an environment that is abundant rather than scarce – one beech tree might produce 30,000 seeds, and the soil contains so much by way of possibility for life to emerge.

I have begun thinking about church as an ecology or environment like a woodland. By church I do not mean "a church" – I am thinking about everything that is connected to Christ. In that environment are denominations, festivals, bookshops, retreat centres, podcasts and their associated communities. Standards at the top of the canopy might be a big city-centre church or cathedral or a festival or a CMS or a Nomad, or Stormzy singing "Blinded by Your Grace" at Glastonbury; then there are lots of mid-size groups and things and lots of small groups – people meeting in ones and twos, sharing meals in homes or praying via a WhatsApp group. And judging by Steve Aisthorpe's research that we discussed earlier, a large part of that environment is invisible to the church's way of counting attendance – perhaps as much as two thirds of it might be. The environment is abundant. The seeds of the gospel are out there in multiple places, such that if you were to make a clearing, it is a safe bet that something new would be seeded.

In the church ecology, it will flourish if it is diverse and if there are clearings from time to time. Growth is not a technical or mechanical process of models that can be delivered. It is more likely to take place by paying attention to what's going on and working with what's there, and trying to add diversity or reintroduce some ancient species and so on – leadership is more like gardening or woodland management. And you don't want a monoculture. In this environment, Nomad is part of the ecology of church – a gift offered – that brings life, joy, liberation, faith, hope, community – the kinds of things you are describing. It's generative seeding of new groups, ideas, relationships and conversations. It's not "a church", but as I said before, I think the word "church" is best reserved for the whole anyway. Denominations can get very anxious about growth but I think this more ecological view where a denomination is just part of the wider ecology might enable them to relax a bit, especially if we can trust that God might be the one who is at work regenerating in places we are not even looking. What may be most critical is letting God's light in.

"Nomad is part of the ecology of church – a gift offered – that brings life, joy, liberation, faith, hope, community"

This does not mean that traditional models don't have their place. They do and can be a great gift, seeding all sorts of things. But the environment is a lot more fluid. Membership can be challenging – people don't join like they used to. One of the challenges that is really an amplification of what is happening in the wider culture is that self is located at the centre of everything. I am choosing how to make a life and follow Christ through assembling various pieces in an environment that will probably change over time. There's something creative about that, but how does it relate to authority and

tradition? And ironically it requires some communities committed to the local, and to depth of commitment for the individual to draw from. Perhaps discipleship now could be conceived of as discovering the basics of the Christian faith in a gathered Christian community or congregation for five to ten years. Part of that will be learning practices to help navigate the new environment. But a somewhat heretical thought is that a new normal expectation could be that after that time you would move out into the wider world, drawing on the resources and communities in the wider ecology to fuel a life of mission, returning perhaps to that community from time to time. That's more like the monastic communities where you would experience formation into the life of the community, then be sent out and then return to the mother house every so often. I think this is something of what is going on for a lot of people, regardless of whether the wider church has noticed or likes it.

I was interested in the particular concern in the Nomad community of raising kids and how faith and tradition gets passed on. We need spaces in the woodland that do that well. How do the new forms relate to the wider church? I like the connection to the Methodists through your board, for example, who are there in the background, hopefully offering support and wisdom.

**Tim:** That's a beautiful image and so much more life-giving and inspiring than the usual businessy language of networks, etc. It's very important too, in our time of climate crisis, that we come back to nature to learn about life.

I love the idea of clearing spaces for new growth. I feel that is true not only for the ecological whole, but also when we zoom closer in. I often say that Nomad is essentially about creating and facilitating a space, and simply seeing what emerges there. And I'm sure other communities would say the same – like Greenbelt, for example. Who would doubt nature's ability to grow new and beautiful things? So why do we doubt the Spirit's ability to do that?

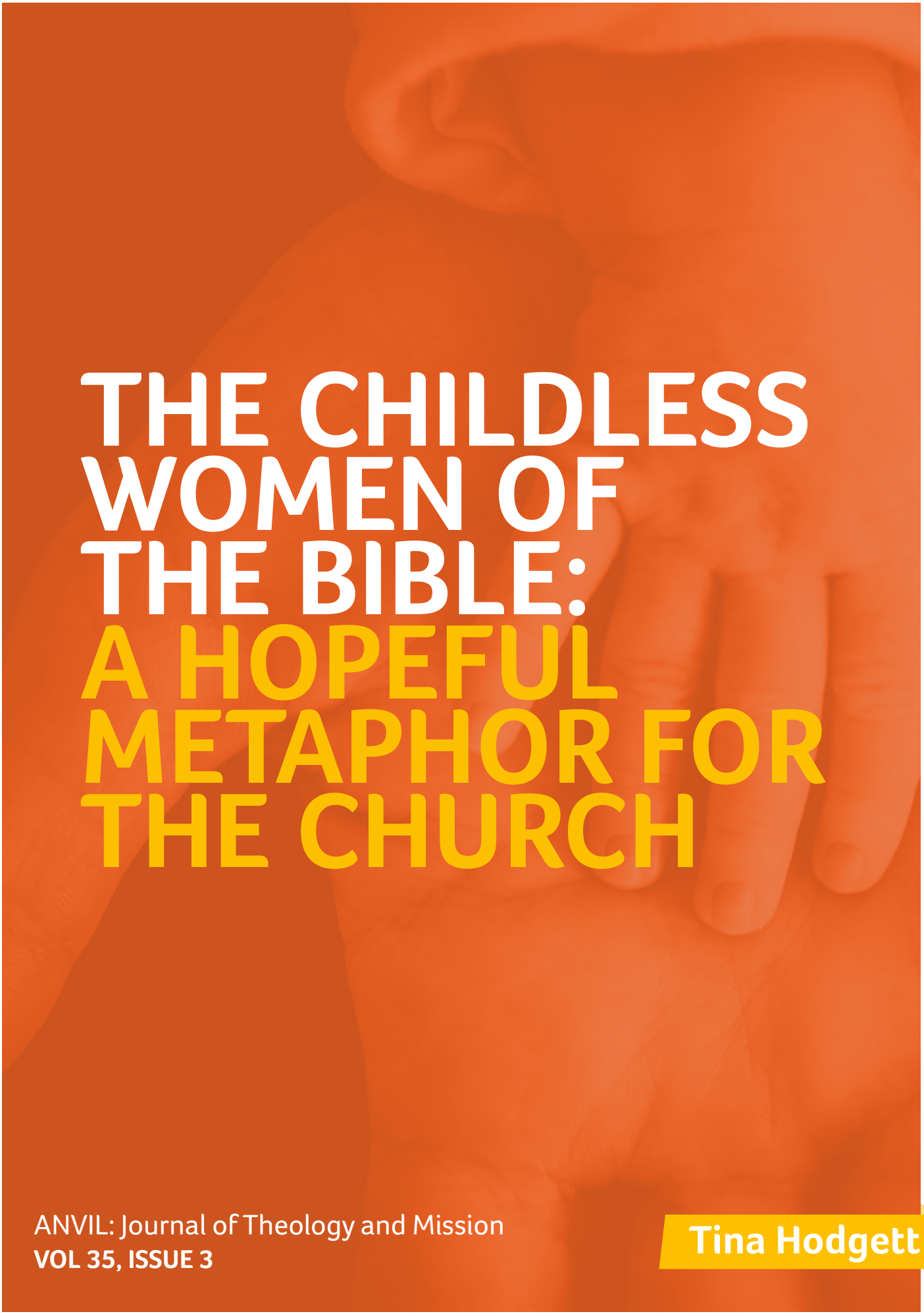
More negatively, though, a lot of people in the Nomad community would say, and I seem to recall Steve Aisthorpe picked up on this as well, that one of the main reasons people leave a church is precisely because it doesn't clear a space for new growth. Rather than a woodland, church can feel more like a factory farm! It can feel restrictive, limiting, oppressive even, and it's only by leaving that people can find the space they need to grow. I agree with your "heretical" statement about the importance of moving on. Steve Aisthorpe said that church needs to help people leave well. I'm sure there must be examples of churches that do this, but I haven't come across one. I'm sure some people must leave churches on good terms, but just imagine if a church environment existed where a member felt entirely free to approach the leadership to say they felt it was time to move on, and the leadership guided them through that process, giving them signposts to new and nourishing resources and communities. It's a beautiful picture.

I take your point about the possible dangers of people not being signed up in the old way. Of course, I'm sure that there is an element of self being at the centre of the journey (we all struggle with that to one degree or another). But I think Steve Aisthorpe's research shows that people are leaving groups not because of a lack of commitment, but on the contrary – it's their commitment to the journey that is leading them to make the (often very painful) decision to move on. I hear this in the Nomad community too.

I think one of the big challenges is how all these different expressions of church relate. In your woodland model, there is a beautiful interdependence. But what does that look like for the church? How do a big city centre church, a Jesuit retreat centre and a small WhatsApp group relate? Perhaps they don't need to, but the beauty of the woodland model you described is the interdependence.

**Tim Nash** is a pioneer minister with the Methodist Church who spends most of his time producing the Nomad podcast and overseeing the online and offline communities that are emerging from it.

**Jonny Baker** is director of mission education at Church Mission Society. He specialises in gospel and culture and applying creativity to worship. He is author of The Pioneer Gift and Pioneering Spirituality.



# THE CHILDLESS WOMEN OF THE BIBLE: A HOPEFUL METAPHOR FOR THE CHURCH

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Tina Hodgett

## INTRODUCTION

Many of our churches today, particularly in rural areas, are largely made up of elderly people. These churches may well have witnessed faithfully throughout the twentieth century to the presence of God in the community, and individuals will have given prayer, time and effort to keep the church alive. They may have displayed spiritual resilience and resourcefulness to share the gospel afresh with the next generation, and yet large numbers of churches are struggling to maintain congregation numbers, let alone grow, and many have been forced to close or dramatically reduce the number of services.

It is true that some congregations may not have done these things, for a variety of reasons, but the result appears to be the same: ever-shrinking congregations of people seeking to pass on the baton to the next generation and finding few younger people with fresh faith and energy ready to take it and run with it. The result is a loss of hope for the future that drains people of faith and energy, and their spiritual leaders may struggle to address this situation in a way that brings comfort.

## AGEING CONGREGATIONS

When we try to talk about the question of ageing congregations with the congregations themselves, people can hear accusations of failure, experience guilt or fear the loss of something important. Often they are bewildered at the current state of affairs in church and society, and sometimes angry with church authorities for their lack of support, leadership or vision. One way to approach this question with pastoral sensitivity is to locate a conversation in a place that is removed from this hard reality and try to explore it through use of metaphor.[1]

There are numerous metaphors for the church in the New Testament: the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25–27), the vine (John 15:5), the flock (John 10:14–16), the royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9), the household of God (1 Tim. 3:15), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). In recent times, a popular metaphor has come from horticulture: church as a plant, like a seedling that will grow.[2] This leads to the question: what metaphors might be helpful for an imaginative, exploratory conversation about an ageing church today?

## WHICH METAPHOR FOR THE AGEING CHURCH TODAY?

Most of all, we need metaphors of hope. There is a significant pastoral need at every stage of life for messages of hope founded in the previous activity of God. New Testament writers drew metaphors of hope from Israel's history. When encouraging the church to look for newness and rescue, they drew on the biblical stories of creation (2 Cor. 4:16), the exodus (Col. 1:13 and Heb. 2:14–15) and the return from exile (1 Pet. 5:10), using these primary events in Israel's story to encourage believers to trust in God's sovereign power to "make all things new". There is, in addition to these three key distinctive events, a recurring theme woven throughout the whole of the biblical testimony to the way God brings about newness among his people: the theme of physical birth.

There are many birth stories in the Scriptures, and one of them – the birth of Jesus – is a foundational story for the Christian faith. I have found in speaking to church leaders and congregations that birth is a most powerful metaphor for new beginnings, which resonates with people of all ages, races, genders and denominations. The stories of childbirth in the Old Testament almost always presage a new phase in the story of God and his covenant with the Jewish people. The birth of a significant baby symbolises the start of something new in the life of the nation.

## BABIES AS SYMBOLS

When we read of the miraculous births of Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Samson, Samuel, John and Jesus, we can miss seeing at the heart of each story the powerful symbolism of the baby. For not only is each baby an actual human person with distinct physical attributes and individual characteristics, as well as a divine calling and appointed task, but the baby is also a universally recognised symbol of many things, including:

- new beginnings
- hope for the future
- continuity of the family line, traditions and inheritance
- the enrichment of life through learning, play, celebration and extending the family circle joy
- grace – an undeserved gift

[1] In my first week at theological college, a conversation about the future of the Church of England compared the church as it was then to a supertanker: large, substantial, ocean-going, dependable, but hard to manoeuvre and likely to take a long time to assume a different course. Students spent the best part of the lecture exploring the topic through different types of shipping and weather conditions in a way that would probably not have happened using academic ecclesiology and data about church numbers, trends and management.

[2] George Lings records the development of church planting as a metaphor in the 1980s in George Lings, *Reproducing Churches* (Abingdon: BRF, 2017).

- unconditional love
- the focus of attention, even worship
- a focus of unity, bringing a family together

God clearly understands the symbolism of new birth: the Creator was born into the world as a baby, intending to make hope, joy and fresh starts a reality for the whole of humankind. Logically therefore he also knows that the experience of unwanted childlessness brings with it pain, loss and even despair – the emotions that ageing congregations may also feel to some degree when new life is absent from their church.

## THE PAIN OF CHILDLESSNESS

There are many well-known cases in the Bible of women who had difficulty having a child. In some cases we are told they were barren, or more specifically that God had closed their womb. We know from some of these accounts (for example, Hannah, Rachel, Zechariah and Elizabeth) how painfully the absence of a child was felt by the parents. We know from people who want children how grey the absence of children can make their world. The breaking in of God's grace for each of these couples mentioned above comes as a miracle – a sovereign act of power carried out against the scientific odds in God's mysterious way and according to his unfathomable timing, and a sign – each child brings fresh hope first to the family, then to the people of Israel.

## THE CHILDLESS WOMAN OF THE BIBLE AS A SYMBOL OF HOPE

Part of my message to ageing Christian communities is this: these stories of hope in the Bible may offer a fresh and imaginative way to think about the church today. I am aware how difficult it can be for Christian parents to read these stories if they have tried to become pregnant and remained childless after prayer and medical interventions, and I do not take this subject lightly. Having wanted children myself, I share this pain but hope to use the insight it has given me to offer a pastoral response to churches that might see themselves as childless.

The idea of an ageing church being similar to these childless women in the Bible may seem a depressing one, but it surprisingly brings hope. People do not seem to mind their church being represented as a woman waiting beyond the age of menopause for a baby. In the birth stories listed above, which many of the congregations have known from childhood, a baby does eventually arrive, bringing all the usual delights and benefits of newness and possibility for the future, as well as the reassurance God has not abandoned them. I think they intuitively understand it does not matter if they see the child or not – it will come because God has promised it.

## THE STRANGE STORY OF RUTH

One of the many biblical birth stories is the strange account of Ruth. It offers an intriguing example of the parallels we could draw if we adopt the metaphor of the ageing church as childless woman. Ruth is a Moabite woman, an outsider in Hebrew society, who devotes herself to her mother-in-law, a Bethlehemite, in the absence of any menfolk to provide for them. Both women are childless: Naomi's husband died after the family settled in Moab, and tragically so did both her sons, before either could have offspring by their Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah. This story shows how God understands the psychological damage caused when a person or family cannot establish its line for posterity and works to counter it. We might infer from this that God understands our distress when our church is unable to reproduce.

All kinds of provision are made in Jewish law and custom to ensure that human beings are remembered after their death; through childbirth, family names, genealogies, land and marriage arrangements, individuals (men in particular) have opportunities to leave a memory of their existence in the world. One of the more complicated provisions in this respect concerns the concept of the kinsman–redeemer (Hebrew *ga'al*), which comes into play when a relative is in need. A person's relative may deliver or rescue them (Gen. 48:16); redeem their property if they lose it from family ownership (Lev. 27:9–25) or marry their wife if they die without having a child (Ruth 1:1–10, Gen. 38:8, Matt. 22:23–33).

When Boaz, local Bethlehem landowner and distant relative of Naomi, decides to take on the role of kinsman–redeemer for her husband Elimelech, he does not marry Naomi, who is beyond childbearing years, but marries Ruth, Elimelech's Gentile daughter-in-law, instead. Ruth, the outsider, gives birth to Obed, who is hailed – bizarrely to our western ears – as Naomi's son (Ruth 4:17), despite the fact he is technically far from her on any family tree and biologically probably equally remote.

## PLAYING IN THE METAPHOR: DRAWING THE PARALLELS

Established churches since the Reformation have tended to maintain their life through biological growth – an inherited faith passed from generation to generation until recently, when somehow it was no longer "caught" by the offspring of lifelong believers. In the story of Ruth, Naomi's family's line finished with the

death of her husband and sons. Naomi named herself "bitter" (Hebrew *mara,* the name Naomi gave herself in the light of her situation), facing an empty future with no heritage to pass on and no name to be remembered by. The standard means of reproduction were no longer possible for her and she struggled to find hope. Nevertheless, God intervened through an unforeseen route, providing via a compassionate outsider, who saw Naomi's predicament clearly, and although she was under no obligation to provide for her mother-in-law, brought her resources to bear, joined them with those of Boaz, an imaginative and resourceful insider, to give birth to Obed – who would sustain the family line into the future.

Exploring the metaphor creatively, I wonder if Obed is a good example of the kind of "child" our ageing, sometimes "bitter" churches and congregations might look forward to receiving through God's extraordinary grace and unexpected ways of working. Our new churches may not actually emerge from the life of our congregations at all, but through strange alliances between outsiders that arouse suspicion on the part of the community, or actions by resourceful and imaginative individuals who may not conform to local norms but see possibility in pitiful circumstances and act on their creative insight, or through behaviour that is scandalous (read the story!) and compassionate by turns. Might Ruth represent the community member who partners with the believer and visionary to bring about a different kind of Christian community founded in fresh DNA and cultural assumptions? A Christian community that is a symbiosis (a marriage?) of two cultures coming together in a way that enriches the genetic inheritance of both? A culturally appropriate form of church for a given context, or, in other words, a fresh expression?

## FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH AS THE AGEING CHURCH'S GRANDCHILDREN

On a family tree, Obed would be likely to appear on a line with the grandchildren of Naomi's and Elimelech's siblings rather than on a line with their sons. Touring deanery synod meetings recently in deep rural countryside, I have been sharing the idea that any newborn churches to come will be more like grandchildren than children. It is a concept that immediately strikes home in spite of the natural conservatism of such communities and their love of tradition. Most of the people gathered are of grandparent age, and many have at least one grandchild. However, for sociological reasons, most of their grandchildren live in another part of the country. Grandparents and grandchildren meet up for special occasions, or on holiday, and in the intervening periods they communicate on various media, with parents sending school or graduation photos for display on grandparents' mantelpieces. Grandparents are acutely aware of the difference in culture between themselves and their grandchildren. The grandchildren are digital natives, whereas they are mainly digital immigrants, and would prefer to text or send a photo on Instagram rather than write a postcard or phone the landline. They see how their grandchildren dress and spend their leisure time, and are surprised by their values, hopes and expectations of the world.

They may find these differences bewildering, attractive or repugnant, but they accept them as given in the grandchildren's lives. Most recognise the reality of generational differences and culture change in this context in a way they seem to struggle to in the context of church. Culture change in church appears much more threatening. What "church" is has become, in the minds of some, an unalterable norm: in these minds God, the church and the church's culture are inextricably interconnected. To change the culture of church, its rituals, language, structure, architecture and pretty much everything else threatens their faith in God himself. In this situation, drawing a parallel between new forms of church and grandchildren opens windows in people's minds.

Grandchildren share their humanity, their DNA, their family history, some of their gifts and interests and personality traits, and aspects of the family culture. Churchgoers are reminded through this metaphor that they love their grandchildren and gain fresh life and energy from them. They are a good thing. It always raises a laugh, though, when I say, "And you wouldn't want them to live with you permanently. You're glad to see them – and very happy when they leave." This comment always elicits what comedians call "the laugh of truth" – the recognition that he or she has hit upon something the audience collectively recognise to be true. This comment always serves to reassure ageing, more traditional congregations that they do not have to personally embrace or even like fresh expressions of church. It is fine to say, "It is good they exist. I would like to visit every now and then and receive a news update occasionally, and to pray for them and be proud of them, but I do not want to move in with the family or have them come and live with me!" Establishing this distance removes unspoken fear they will be bundled into a way of being church they feel they may not be able to cope with after decades of worshipping in another culture.

## A SURPRISING HOPE

If we accept the image of the childless woman in Scripture as a metaphor for the church today, we can be assured that churches that seem devoid of new faith life have not been forgotten by God, abandoned, left to die. New life, when it comes, may turn the familiar approaches to church genesis inside out. The heir may come via a foreign (even an enemy) bloodline. New faith life may come via an outsider who appears to act more from compassion, loyalty and need than from commitment to the belief system. A renewed Christian community can emerge from the vision of an insider able to see the good things that come from outside.

What shines through is the commitment of God to bring life where it is not. The story of Ruth ends in delighted praise to God, joy for Naomi at the long-awaited birth of a descendant, exuberant admiration for Ruth, a community celebration for the whole town who make up spontaneous prayers of abundant blessing, Boaz's establishment as the great-grandfather of King David and Obed's as his grandfather – and the crowning glory the place of the family, including Ruth, in the genealogy of Jesus. What a glorious picture of hope fulfilled (Ruth 4.13–22).

**Tina Hodgett** was a secondary teacher of Russian and German and may be a spy (but you will never know). Since 2008 she has been ordained and playfully engaged individuals, communities and congregations with the gospel as a pioneer curate in Nottingham and Team Pilgrim in Portishead. She is now helping to foster a pioneering rumpus (alongside many others) as evangelism and pioneer team leader in the Diocese of Bath and Wells.

# KNITTING AS A MEANS OF SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

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**Christine Dutton**

## INTRODUCTION

Magda Sayeg, the textile artist whose work includes placing knitted pieces around lamp posts and bollards in New York City, says of yarn bombing: "I may have started it but I don't own it."

Her TED talk speaks of her desire to transform the urban space. She began to notice similar expressions of public displays of knitting elsewhere across the globe.[1]

For those of us in the church who are called to pioneer, to instigate, to provoke and to create, we can co-work with God to transform the communities we live in. We may be the catalysts for experiments, building new communities and planting churches, but as the Holy Spirit works in and through projects and gatherings, we no longer own or control them. My research on the emerging church has led me to believe that listening to those at the grassroots and allowing the organic shaping of communities to occur happens at a much slower pace than targets or programmes in church growth might dictate.

In this regard knitting (and crocheting) has much to teach us. Knitting has the ability to combine contemplation and activism; it slows down our pace, and reconnects us with God's rhythm – the three-mile-an-hour God of Kosuke Koyama.[2] When, in addition, we use knitting as a tool for evangelism, sending knitted garments and objects out into the wider world often combined with messages of hope or assurance of prayer, we echo Saveg's hope for transformation.

This article seeks to explore how a resurgence in knitting is being reclaimed as a way of sharing the gospel story with communities. This is nothing new – Hana Kageye, a Ugandan woman introduced to the Christian faith in 1901 through Ruth Hurditch, a woman who worked for the Church Missionary Society, used handicrafts as a natural starter for sharing the faith with the young women: "She taught them knitting, and in so doing she introduced them to Jesus."[3] Steve Taylor, who has been researching Christian craftivism, suggests that craftivism can be seen as a contemporary embodiment of this Christian witness.[4] It appears this overlooked skill, this "granny hobby", is being rediscovered for transforming the lives of individuals and communities in small, emerging but significant ways.

As part of my doctoral research into exploring fresh expressions of church in the Methodist Church, I engaged with a Knit and Natter group in a housing estate on the edge of Ellesmere Port, near Chester. I accompanied 60 women for two years, knitting alongside them, listening to and recording their stories, and examined how these women, many without previous church connections, were birthing new Christian communities centred around knitting.[5]

## KNITTING IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

As the yarn bombing trend continues, churches and Christian communities can join in with this trend and use it to share the gospel of hope into communities that are often hopeless. As aspects of our common lives are unravelling, not least the political, knitting items that are given away is both countercultural and subversive. These should be hallmarks, I would suggest, of the Christian community. Knitting has been reclaimed for political purposes too as the "pussy hats" for the Women's March in Washington DC in March 2017 illustrated.[6] The online knitting community Ravelry made the news earlier this year by denouncing white supremacy in a prophetic way, banning posts supporting the Trump administration.[7] This raising of the profile of knitting is witness to the renaissance of the craft and the move towards outward expressions of public knitted art. Civic and religious expressions of remembrance and commemoration of the centenary of the ending of the First World War have brought together communities and churches in creating cascades of knitted poppies on public buildings.

This visibility gives an insight into the ways that Christian knitting groups are reclaiming public space to witness and share the gospel message. They suggest ways knitting can be used as a tool to seek to connect with the wider community, beyond the more traditional form of gifting garments as an expression of Christian care and symbolic of prayers.

[1] Magda Sayeg, "How yarn bombing grew into a worldwide movement," TED Talks, November 2015, accessed July 23, 2019, www.ted.com/talks/magda_sayeg_how_yarn_bombing_grew_into_a_worldwide_movement.

[2] Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

[3] Brian Stanley, "Great Omissions from the Great Commission," sermon preached on 5 April 2011 in the chapel of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School, *Faith & Leadership*, 18 July 2011, accessed July 23, 2019, www.faithandleadership.com/brian-stanley-great-omissions-great-commission.

[4] Steve Taylor, "When #christmasangels tread: craftivism as a missiology of making," paper presented at the 2019 ANZATS conference at Carey Baptist College, Auckland, New Zealand, 1–3 July 2019.

[5] Christine Dutton, "Unpicking Knit and Natter: Researching an Emerging Christian Community," *Ecclesial Practices* 1:1 (2014): 31–50.

[6] Reuters in Los Angeles, "Casting off Trump: the women who can't stop knitting 'pussy hats'," *The Guardian*, 15 January 2017, accessed 23 July, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/15/casting-off-trump-the-women-who-cant-stop-knitting-pussy-hats.

[7] "New Policy: Do Not Post In Support of Trump or his Administration," *Ravelry*, 23 June 2019, accessed 29 July 2019, https://www.ravelry.com/content/no-trump.

The British Methodist Conference of 2018 reaffirmed "Our Calling", a connexional mission statement that claims that:

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission through worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism.[8]

This emphasis has kindled experiments within traditional and emerging church communities, combining knitting and evangelism.[9] The two current projects outlined below illustrate examples of those who are developing their knitting to reach out into their communities with the good news of Christ.

## #XMASANGELS[10]

At 6 a.m. on 22 December 2018, eight of us gathered at Wesley Church Centre in Chester to pray before taking out 365 knitted, crocheted and crafted angels and placing them around the city walls, each with an invitation to be taken away. Each individual angel had a tag attached with a message of hope, peace or joy and a hashtag for social media and a website link so that anyone who found an angel could follow up the story and connect with others. By lunchtime most of them had been "found", and on Christmas Eve I walked the walls again, praying for the homes into which the angels had found their way.

These angels were beautifully created by members of churches across the city, with community groups and the local wool shop taking part. The project originated in the work of a Methodist pioneer in Edinburgh. David Wynd and Rob Wylie, the superintendent and circuit mission worker in the North Shields and Whitley Bay circuit, developed the idea, interpreting the gift of sharing the unexpected good news that the angels bring in the Nativity stories with the contemporary phenomenon of yarn bombing. Wynd and Wylie were emphatic that the angels they distributed were an expression of God's unconditional love. They were clear that the tags accompanying their angels did not have a "condition" of attending worship or requiring a response.

Those knitting the angels individually or in groups reported using the project to slow down before and during Advent, creating a time to reflect on the angels' message. For those who receive the gift of the angel, there is the opportunity to receive the words of peace and hope the angels bring. Responses to this shared via social media have encouraged the knitters who have taken this step to share their faith.[11] The Christmas Angels project offers local churches the opportunity to articulate their faith in a demonstrable way, first praying for their communities as they create the angels and then to physically engage in evangelism as they go out and share the good news of the coming of Christ into a world in need of God's love.

## PRAYER SHAWL KNITTING

This is a combined spiritual practice and prayerful ministry whereby shawls are knitted or crocheted to be given away to provide comfort in times of illness or grief, or to celebrate a new birth or a new stage in life. Prayers and blessings are said throughout the knitting of the shawl, and then, often, shawls are dedicated before being sent or passed on.

Janet Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo, whose work in applied feminist spirituality at the Hartford Seminary gave birth to the practice of creating prayer shawls, encourage others to "buy some yarn and start".[12] Shawls can be knitted with an individual in mind – for example, someone who is recovering from an operation at home, or has just had a new baby. Susan Jorgensen and Susan Izard wove stories of those who have knitted and received shawls in their book *Knitting into the Mystery*. This guide combined practical knitting instructions and reflections on the process of knitting with prayers to use during knitting as well as when dedicating shawls.[13] Whether the knitting has a specific intercessory focus or not, the attention to the individual stitches are accompanied by vocal or silent prayer enabling the knitter to achieve a slower pace over a period of time. Joanne Turney situates this slower action of knitting in context: "Knitting, in recent years... offers 'time out', an alternative to mass consumerism and a means of slowing down the pace of life and absorbing

[8] "Reaffirming Our Calling: the future call of the Methodist Church," The Methodist Church, accessed 23 July 2019, https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/.

[9] St George's URC Hartlepool have knitted biblical scenes that they loan out for exhibitions; see "The Knitted Bible," St. Georges URC Hartlepool, accessed 23 July 2019, http://www.stgeorgesurc.co.uk/the-knitted-bible/.

[10] The story of the project can be found at Christmas Angel, accessed 23 July 2019, http://www.christmasangel.net/.

[11] Posts on the Helsby Methodist Church Facebook group such as https://www.facebook.com/groups/664467533629251/permalink/2005523212857003/ with photographs of the knitted angels were the encouragement for the knitters at the church's weekly drop-in to consider the project for next year. (Interviews at Helsby Methodist Church, 5 April 2019.)

[12] Janet E. Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, accessed 23 July 2019, "Introducing the Prayer Shawl Companion," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W302tI3P1bc.

[13] Susan S. Jorgensen and Susan S. Izard, *Knitting into the Mystery: A Guide to the Shawl-Knitting Ministry* (Harrisburg, PA; Morehouse Publishing, 2003).

oneself in a tactile occupation, connecting the self with the object under construction."[14]

The relaxation and calm frame of mind that knitting brings has been documented by Bernadette Murphy, and more recently by the work of Betsan Corkhill at the University of Cardiff.[15] Corkhill looked specifically at the therapeutic benefits of knitting.[16] Prayer shawl knitting therefore offers the opportunity for the knitter to engage in a rhythm of prayer (which in itself can bring a healing rhythm) and, in the giving of the shawl, to surround another with a symbol of God's enveloping love.

Peggy Rosenthal, whose research witnesses to bereaved women using knitting privately to cope with and reflect on their grief as well as those who might join a knitting group to overcome their isolation, says: "Knitting became my vehicle for this reconnection with life. It became a way of sitting with people and just *being* with them."[17] Rosenthal also explores the therapeutic need to work on something both repetitive and simple that requires no thought, and then the need to attempt a more difficult pattern that might require the help of others as a way of learning to ask for help. Prayer shawls given away to those who are recently bereaved are accompanied with a prayer or passage of Scripture. Prayer shawls can be given on a pastoral visit, bringing the comfort of Christ. The shawls gifted and accompanied by an invitation to worship, a small group or a knitting circle can be a gentle way of evangelism.

## CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the two examples above, knitting is being used by individuals and groups as a means by which the good news of the gospel is shared. The #xmasangels project brings the birth narratives of Jesus through the words of the angels into the public space, in an unexpected and joyful way. The message of hope and the words "Do not fear" and "I bring Good News" who have taken the angels. The prayerful practice of prayer shawl knitting is a more personal way of sharing the comfort and peace of Christ with those in stages of transition in their lives. The care and prayers woven into the knitting of shawls over weeks and months continue to assure others that they are not alone, but surrounded and covered by God's love in the symbolic act of placing the prayer shawl around them. In both of these simple acts, the knitters and those who receive the angels and shawls have encountered and drawn closer to God, discovering more of God's good news for the world.

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[14] Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 104.
[15] Bernadette Murphy, *Zen and the Art of Knitting: Exploring the Links between Knitting, Spirituality, and Creativity* (Avon, MA: Adams Media Corporation, 2002), 85–109.
[16] Betsan Corkhill, *Knit for Health & Wellness: How to Knit a Flexible Mind and More...* (Bath: FlatBear Publishing, 2014).
[17] Peggy Rosenthal, *Knit One, Purl a Prayer: A Spirituality of Knitting* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011), 82.

# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AS A BASIS FOR BECOMING CHURCH: THE STORY OF AN ECUMENICAL PIONEER IN A NEW HOUSING CONTEXT

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Sue Steer

I have been a pioneer community worker in a new housing context in Leicestershire for the last three years. Lubbesthorpe used to be a tiny Leicestershire village made up of tenanted farmland and a handful of cottages. There are currently around 350 houses and a new primary school has just opened. Over the next 20 years it will become a town of 4,250 houses, three schools, shops, community facilities and parks. Churches Together in Leicestershire (CTiL) had already spent around five years developing a partnership with the local council to help healthy community form when I arrived. My task was primarily identified as building community when residents started to move in. The creation of a Christian community was seen as secondary to this main task. I chose to work with the fresh expressions model of listening, loving, serving, growing community, exploring discipleship and then seeing church taking shape.[1] In this article I will reflect on the experience in light of following this fresh expressions journey. At each stage I will highlight a pivotal point that was key to the process.

## LISTENING, LOVING AND SERVING

The first 18 months of this journey felt quite nomadic. The story of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–9) pitching a tent frequented my thoughts, along with that of the disciples being sent out to find people of peace (Luke 10:1–12), to take nothing with them and stay when welcomed or shake the dust of their feet if not. There was very little (physically) to go to in the first instance; only the foundations of 12 houses had been laid. I had use of a desk in the council and, while it was useful for building relationships, I spent more time in the surrounding community visiting tenanted farmers and two existing residents who would have the new development being built in their back gardens. I also sought out key players in the development and learned about the history of the area. I spent time with local community organisations, on-site builders, sales teams and the developer. The first two years of my role have unashamedly been about building community for all faiths and none.

## DEFINING EXPECTATIONS

Early on I was keen to see the expectations of the denominations involved (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and the URC) laid out, and this was helped by drawing up measure packages with the denominational representatives. This resulted in the pioneer community worker's impact statement:

> We are inspired to join in a story with our stories, creating a flourishing community that is cultivated by participation, hospitality, active learning and engagement.

Defining expectations was key to ensuring I was working with the support and understanding of the denominations. While the denominational representatives have changed, these key measures of participation, hospitality, active learning and engagement have been retained throughout and continue to be core to how we operate with the community.

## GROWING COMMUNITY

It was April 2017 when the first residents moved in. I knocked on doors and welcomed everyone who arrived. (We now have a team who welcome people, and it continues to be hugely appreciated.) The risk however seemed to me that people just moved into the new housing estate and carried on their lives beyond the new community rather than interacting with the people they were living among. While many people want to be part of the community, they need a reason to interact.

> I previously lived in a new housing estate where no community existed. Having the community development role here meant early on we had a "village feel", which hasn't been something we've experienced before.
>
> Jo, Lubbesthorpe local resident

Once we had created spaces and events where people could interact, which were initially always outdoors, neighbours became friends and community began to flourish beyond the events. Looking back, I think we engendered that spirit of community right from the beginning, and it has stuck. Early on we seemed to move from the fresh expressions aspects of listening and loving and serving to building community. It wasn't always plain sailing, and we always seemed to be in a state of flux and change due to the rapid growth of this new community. Finding indigenous leaders that would commit was central to this early stage. Some early leaders, who were very active at the start, moved from the centre to the fringe. The quieter ones have now begun to come to the front. This is not uncommon in community development but is a challenge to negotiate. In the book *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development*, Christine Brooks Nolf tells of her community development experience with Mika Community Development Corporation and how heeding her mentor's advice led to committed and long-lasting volunteers.

> Ron Bueno advised me to pay attention to the quiet, faithful neighbours who kept showing up but did not have much to say. His experience had been that the first wave of neighbours to jump in are loud

[1] Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press: 2017), 45.

and have lots of ideas. They are quick to share their thoughts and ideas, but they tend to disengage once they begin to understand that we will all have to work together over a long period of time in order to act on their ideas or bring about lasting change. In contrast the neighbours who have been patiently observing and at times timidly participating will eventually rise up.[2]

This takes time and patience. It is about growing relationships, which doesn't happen overnight.

## ACCEPTANCE OF THE ROLE BY THE DEVELOPER

A pivotal point was the estate developer, Mather Jamie, accepting me and my role in building community. Prior to my arrival, CTiL had done a great job of developing the relationships with the council but hadn't realised the importance of the relationship with the developer/landowner.

Martin Ward, a director at Mather Jamie, commented:

> From past experiences on other large residential urban extensions where far too late in the project the idea of creating a community using faith was unsuccessful, I was extremely wary of what was being imposed upon the landowner by Churches Together and the district council. What became very clear early on was that by promoting and working really hard to create a sense of community, as opposed to pushing one variation or another of the Christian faith, a high percentage of the new residents bought into the community ethos. They almost have a yearning for being part of a community, which is really difficult to create in a new development, in the middle of a muddy field, and which they did not expect to find at New Lubbesthorpe from the outset. From this, I am encouraging landowners and promoters to follow the CTiL model and aim to create a sense of place and community at the very outset on new major residential schemes.

This foundational relational work with the developer and new residents was vital and has really paid off in the longer term. I believe being humble and respecting the back stories of people who have had poor experiences of working with churches and Christians should be acknowledged and respected. The church is no longer the institutional powerhouse it once was and is often eyed with suspicion, but neither is it irrelevant, as some would believe. Breaking down preconceptions and earning the right to speak takes time but pays out dividends in terms of developing healthy community.

## EXPLORING DISCIPLESHIP

CTiL had been praying for Lubbesthorpe as a community since the development was just an idea. An ecumenical prayer group had been meeting termly for years when I arrived. This continued for around 18 months, after which it morphed into a rhythm of prayer within the community.

In May 2018 three of us began to meet weekly, to pray and eat together in The Hub – our community building, provided as part of the estate development. Our little kitchen offered very little in the way of cooking facilities so we learned to be creative in our meal planning! Over the next few months we grew to around 12 regulars; we ate and prayed together, explored different community issues, celebrated festivals or just chatted depending on who came. Fundamentally we were "exploring discipleship" and we continue to work out what that means as our rhythm changes. Prayer now happens weekly with a fortnightly "going deeper" session. We have just held our first "Mossy Church", which is a mash of Messy and Forest Church for young families, and some of us "Mindfully Meander" once of month on a Sunday morning.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE HUB

When The Hub arrived in February 2018, it made a huge difference to the growth of community. We expected a grubby site cabin but were gifted a posh Portakabin. This was another pivotal point for the community; people often associate community with a place, and The Hub became that place – and continues to be.


We are currently open five mornings a week, when people can drop in to ask questions about community, meet friends (the coffee machine is always on!) and talk about ideas they've had. We have endeavoured to make

[2] Wayne Gordon and John M. Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 158–59.

it a creative space so that anyone feels at home there and can write ideas on our Ideas Tree. Afternoons and evenings are given over to community groups, many of which have been birthed in the morning drop-ins. I started some groups and others are resident initiatives. Beyond The Hub, there are walking and running groups as well as a football team and social groups between neighbours. One young dad who attends our Little Lubbers Baby and Toddler Group commented, "If the churches hadn't done all of this, we wouldn't have such a great community." Within the last few weeks, this dad and his wife have just started to explore what faith means to them.

## CHURCH TAKING SHAPE

We know The Hub is to be moved in the next couple of months to the first village square, which is under development. I'm reminded yet again that it is a tent rather than a permanent home. While it is a smallish space and is far from what we would traditionally see as a church building (it probably has a slightly larger footprint than a large four-bedroomed house), the articulation of church as a living room with God as the host resonates. Steve Collins explores this in his chapter in *Future Present*.[3] Rather than God acting as king in his throne room or lawyer in the school room, which is what Collins suggests church has been in the past, it should be a place for interaction, social networking and sharing with sofas and chairs and tables rather than pews in lines where people just watch and listen. Hospitality and welcome are key for us. I've also come to see that the small space means we don't focus on one building – we have little choice but to become the guest and go into other community spaces for larger activities and continue to meet outdoors, and, of course, in homes. We have early partnerships developing with the outdoor space maintainer and the school, which have huge potential.

While we may not be knocking on doors welcoming new residents for the rest of the life of this development, we can continue to be a welcoming presence at The Hub and through friendships and partnerships. If we are to keep up with developing this community, partnership is the only way forward. We must travel lightly and sometimes be prepared to give away to see further growth. New Lubbesthorpe as a fledgling village/town is still at its very early stages and we are still laying foundations, but I think that is the place where we should be, seeking to be in step with the Spirit as she leads, seeking to be a community-based church that is relevant for this new place as it grows and changes.

## DEFINING WHO WE ARE

At the moment, a key pivotal point is defining who we are. As the community grows, it is important that we can articulate who we are among the other community groups that are arriving. Within the last month, CTiL has agreed that we can move to become an independent community development charity and raise up residents to lead this. Our funding streams are diversifying with denominational funding decreasing. In line with this, the denomination representatives' involvement will decrease. Our aim continues to be to see our community flourish while finding innovative and contextual ways of being missional and being church. The founding story of being a Churches Together initiative will remain. Other funding is coming in via donations, Hub hire and hospitality, grants and external partnerships.

## CONCLUSION

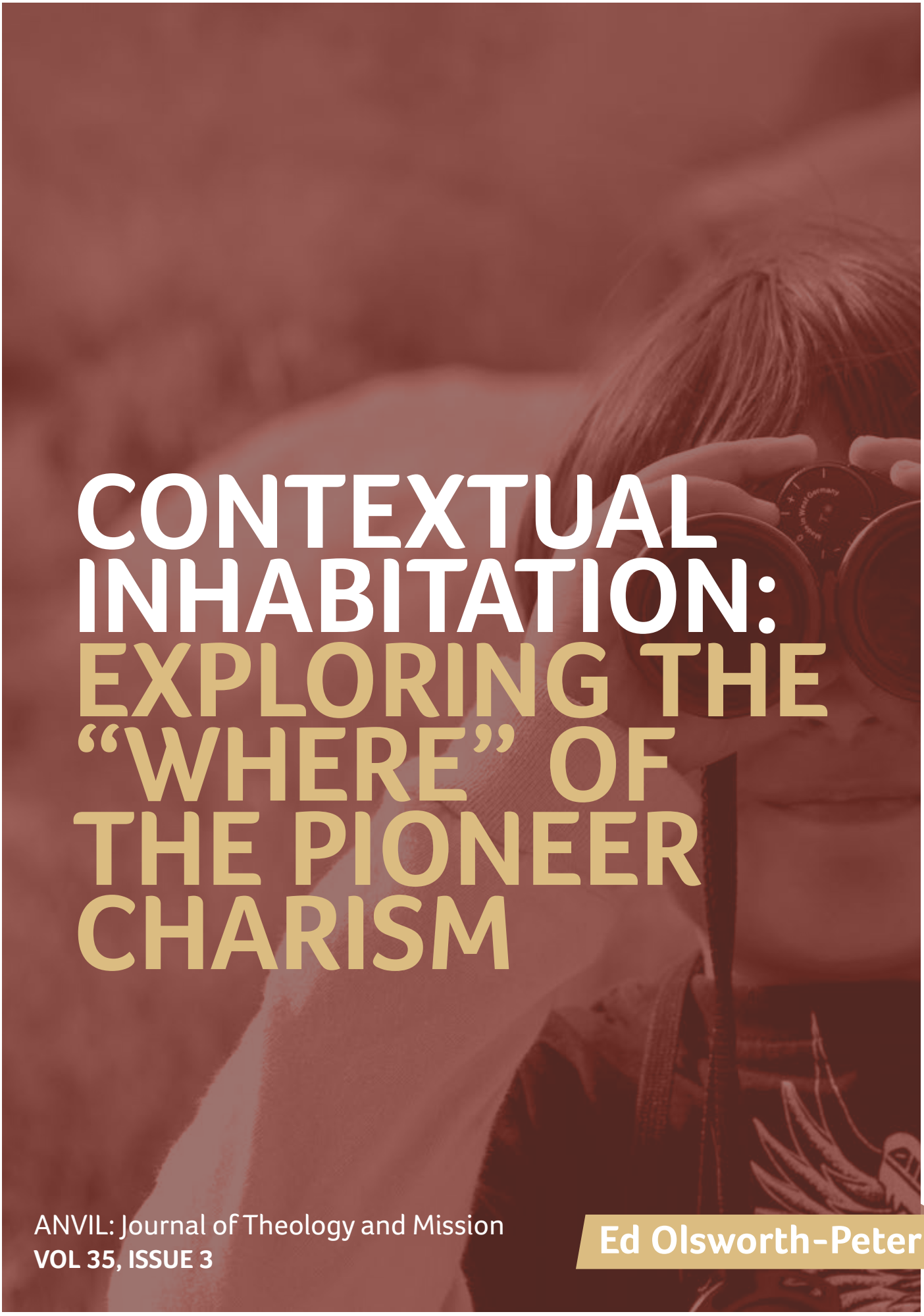
The fresh expressions journey has been helpful in attending to the primary task of building community and in recognising when people are exploring discipleship and when church is taking shape. For our community it has been important to recognise and embrace these key pivotal points, which have enabled us to grow. Our journey has been one of listening and responding to the growing community and to the Holy Spirit. Building community has been the place where relationships have grown and flourished and where friendships have sparked to life. Listening to what the community wants, whether it be a walking group or a community meal, assured the developer and the community that we really were in the business of growing community for the people moving in, not setting our own agenda. The arrival of The Hub

"Our aim continues to be to see our community flourish while finding innovative and contextual ways of being missional and being church."

[3] Steve Collins, "Open House: Reimagining church spaces" in *Future Present: Embodying a Better World Now*, ed. Jonny Baker et al. (Sheffield: Proost Publications, 2018), 51–67.

has given us visibility and people know when and where to find us. It has become a creative space for everyone to use, resulting in a connected and entrepreneurial community. Exploring discipleship is the place where faith was brought into the open by the community rather than being the first thing on the agenda. Church taking shape is where we have begun to see some clarity and where those on a faith journey are beginning to define who we are. Churches Together are beginning to let go of their overseeing role to allow the residents in Lubbesthorpe to fully take on the mantle of helping our community flourish and seeing church take shape. We are far from being sorted but that's OK; why would we think we had the final deal when we likely have around 10,000 people still to move in?

**Sue Steer** is a Baptist minister working for Churches Together in Leicestershire. Funded regionally by Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and URC denominations, Sue has been employed since September 2016 as the pioneer community worker in New Lubbesthorpe. Prior to this role she started a community centre from scratch at a Baptist church, which included ministries in dementia and mental health, a foodbank and community partnerships.



# CONTEXTUAL INHABITATION: EXPLORING THE "WHERE" OF THE PIONEER CHARISM

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Ed Olsworth-Peter

## INTRODUCTION

Inhabiting the missional context is an important journey for all pioneers. In doing so they are able to form deep relationships beyond the walls of the existing church and to grow new Christian communities with those around them. This takes time and will be different depending on how embedded pioneers are within their context. Those engaged in a contextual approach vary in who they are, what they are growing, how they are growing it and where they are doing this. A one-size-fits-all approach may limit what can be achieved. In this article I will explore how pioneer practitioners and those who support them can gain a better understanding of the timescales, resources and expectations needed to engage in a contextual approach to growing new disciples. By focusing on the "where", the "starting points" and "dwelling patterns" of inhabitation, I will show how the life cycles of new Christian communities can be better understood and offer a deeper understanding of the pioneer "charism": the character, influence and gift of a pioneer. I will begin by looking at a process I have termed "contextual inhabitation" before outlining how this can bring greater clarity in knowing where to start, the importance of encouraging partnerships and helping to manage appropriate expectations for practitioners and permission givers.

Figure 1.1


## DEFINING "WHERE"

There is an expanding catalogue of language, principles and methodologies that seek to describe the pioneer charism. Rather than seeing these as a blueprint, they are better employed as lens to explore "What are we noticing?" and "What is this telling us?" Although the Church of England has grown in its understanding of the "gift of not fitting in",[1] there is still further to go. It has the joint task of engaging with the discoveries of pioneers so far, as well as continuing to recognise, resource and release innovation on the margins.

The major distinction that identifies the work of a pioneer is the "where": a contextual, "go to" approach, with the intention of growing new forms of church in that space. This is achieved by engaging in a community in such a way as to be fully present among the people and the purpose of that place where pioneers are integrated, accepted and known: the journey of "contextual inhabitation". Individual pioneers' starting points and dwelling patterns vary but all should work towards becoming an inhabitant of their unique missional context. This may or may not involve physically living there as pioneers but it will be a process of continually responding to the changing cultural context. It's helpful, therefore, to explore the "where" further, identifying the opportunities and challenges that different types of citizenship and residency can bring.

## STARTING POINTS

Pioneers may be "incomers", those who have no previous experience of the missional context, or "citizens", those who have established networks and connections. These connections could be in the place where they live, in a work or social space or even within a digital community. As pioneers cross cultural boundaries, it is possible to be a citizen in one micro community while being an incomer in another, within the same wider community.

## DWELLING PATTERNS

Pioneers may be a "resident", living within the geographical context, or a "commuter", engaging with a context away from where they live. Four combinations of dwelling patterns that describe the process of contextual inhabitation and the "where" of the pioneer charism are possible:

[1] Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross, eds., *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in Mission*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014).

**Citizen Resident:** a pioneer who has lived in their community for a period of time and has established networks and connections and who forms a new Christian community in that same context.

**Citizen Commuter:** a pioneer who works in a different context from the one in which they live and starts a new Christian community in that context.

**Incomer Resident:** a pioneer who moves into a context that is new to them and starts a new Christian community where they are living.

**Incomer Commuter:** a pioneer who lives in one context who starts a new Christian community in a neighbouring community.

Two key factors need to be considered in reaching contextual inhabitation: time and intention.

## TIME

In my experience it takes between five and ten years to grow a new contextual Christian community to maturity. Different starting points and dwelling patterns will impact this development and different combinations will need varying timescales to inhabit and pioneer effectively. This will have an impact on the ways in which some pioneers are deployed and consequently the life cycle of the new Christian community (figure 1.2). Citizen residents may be able to grow something to maturity sooner as it's likely they will already have been listening, loving/serving and possibly building community in that context even if they haven't been conscious of the missional opportunities this could bring. Incomer commuters, however, will be starting from scratch, only present part of the time, and as such will need longer to inhabit the context.

## INTENTION

Being a citizen, however, doesn't mean that a new Christian community will necessarily emerge. There needs to be a clear intention to use citizenship in a missional and ecclesial capacity. This will involve prayerful listening, practical, servant-hearted engagement with the community, a desire to create spaces for faith to be shared and an intention for this to become a unique expression of church. Contextual inhabitation could also inform "when" to pioneer. By identifying contextual starting points and dwelling patterns, a deeper understanding of when to hold back and when to engage could emerge.

## THE PIONEER CHARISM

By engaging with the "where", exploration of contextual inhabitation can bring a deeper understanding of the pioneer charism, as shown in figure 1.3. Pioneers may be called to be "parish-based" or "fresh start",[2] they may start "seeds" or "runners"[3] and take the approach of an "adaptor" or "innovator".[4] Pioneers will often have an apostolic ministry incorporating the role of evangelist and pastor and will embrace the prophetic and the role of teacher in different ways too. There is a growing recognition of the value of practitioners being enablers of indigenous leadership. "Community activists"[5] or entrepreneurs build missional relational foundations but may not necessarily initiate a new expression of church. "Developers" mine ecclesial

Figure 1.2

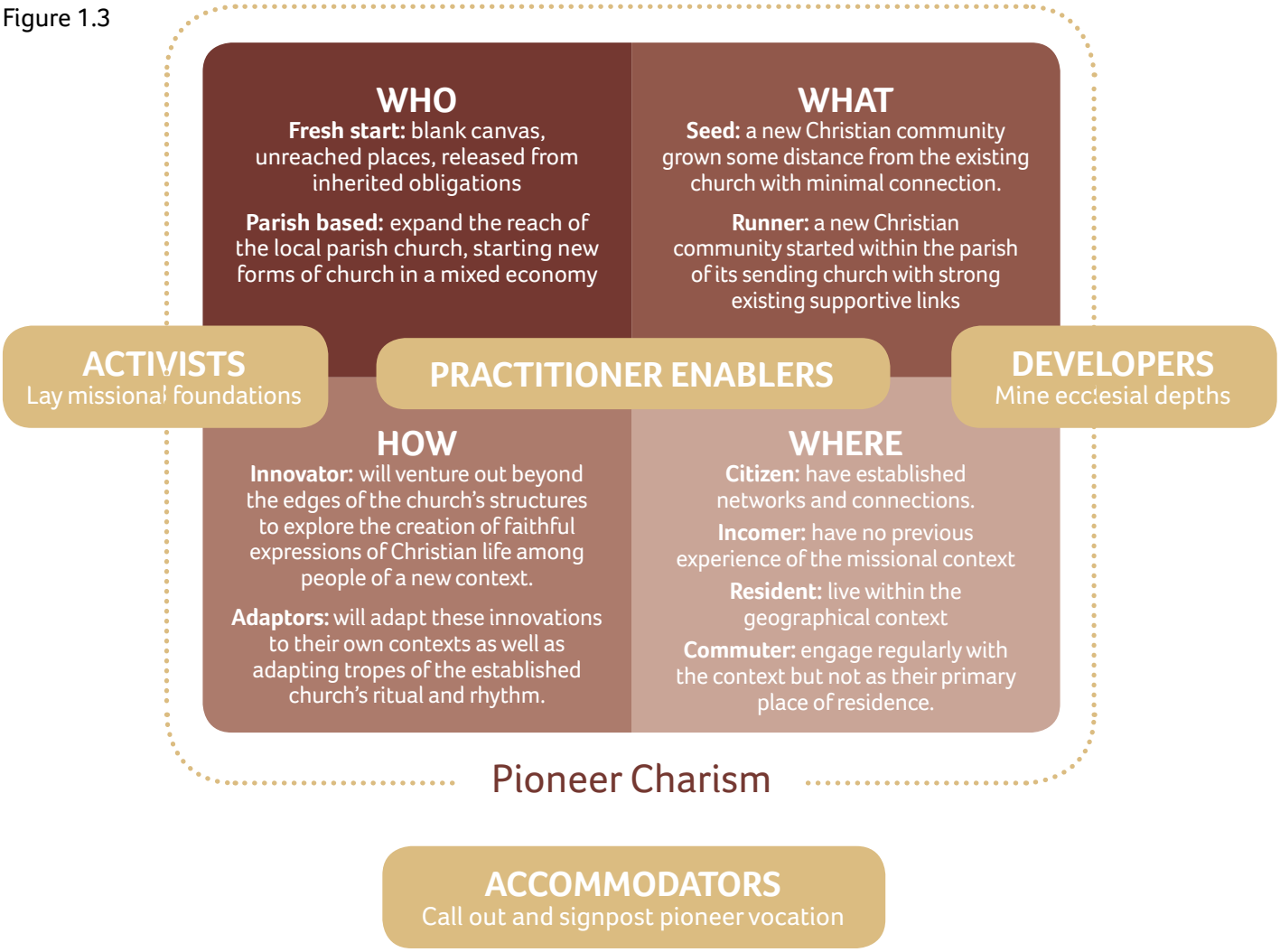

[2] "Vocations to Pioneer Ministry," *The Church of England,* accessed 3 October 2019, https://www.churchofengland.org/pioneering.

[3] George Lings, "The Day of Small Things," *Church Army's Research Unit*, November 2016, accessed 3 October 2019, https://www.churcharmy.org/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=204265.

[4] Tina Hodgett and Paul Bradbury, "Pioneering Mission is... a Spectrum," *Anvil* 34:1 (2018), accessed 3 October 2019, https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/pioneering-mission-spectrum-tina-hodgett-paul-bradbury-anvil-vol-34-issue-1.

[5] *Ibid.*

Figure 1.3




depths in the early stages of the Christian community, often once the founding pioneer has moved on. Lastly there are those who oversee and support the work of pioneers. This includes "accommodators"[6] or advocates, who could be church leaders or permission givers, who are not necessarily pioneer practitioners but are able to call out pioneer vocation and make space for this to happen. All are valuable and all are needed.

These different elements of the pioneer charism can be seen in the example of Amy. Amy is a member of her local parish church and, encouraged by her vicar, she has started a café church in her village, which meets once a month. It's reaching people who wouldn't come to a traditional form of church, although some may come to the annual crib service in the parish church. With the help of her vicar acting as an accommodator, Amy is a parish-based pioneer, growing a "runner" by adapting the idea of café church for her context. She is a citizen resident living in the context where she is pioneering and as such has drawn on the relationships and connections she has already made. Her vicar is seeing the value of empowering those who are citizen residents in the community.

I will now turn to how introducing the "where" of the pioneer charism can bring further clarity, encourage partnerships and manage expectations.

## FURTHER CLARITY

By creating a framework and language for the "where" of the pioneer charism, permission-givers and practitioners can find further clarity and understanding. For example, if someone is a fresh-start, seed-growing, innovator, identifying as a citizen commuter will help them to know that their citizenship will give them a strong head start in the way they build community. As a commuter, they will need to focus strongly on becoming embedded into networks in the knowledge that they will have less opportunity than a resident to "bump into people".

It is also true to say that the while the starting points and dwelling patterns will remain the same for

[6] Richard and Lori Passmore, *Fresh Expressions and Pioneering in Cumbria* (2018), 9.

some, for others this will change depending on their circumstances. While people may remain a resident or commuter, there will be an obvious journey, shown in figure 1.2, away from being an incomer [B] and towards becoming a citizen [A] as time progresses and missional relationships form. There may also be exceptions and nuances depending on the context.

Dan is a licenced pioneer and has recently moved into a first-stage development of new housing on the edge of a small market town as an incomer resident. He is a fresh-start pioneer, growing a seed, as an innovator. Being aware of this pioneer charism is helping him to know that it will take him a while to inhabit the context, as citizenship will take time to develop. This has proved to be useful for permissions givers to be aware of too, as they consider the resources that may be needed and set appropriate expectations for his ministry. However, he may inhabit the context faster than incomer residents in different situations, as shared experiences of moving in and developing community may help build relational networks quickly. Further to this, before he moved onto the estate, he worked with the new housing developers. By starting a new Christian community in the school, built before any housing, he began as a citizen commuter. Once he moved onto the housing estate, he kept elements of his citizenship with some while being seen as an incomer by others. This is helping him to discern the appropriate starting points and dwelling patterns to take and to manage his, and others', expectations accordingly.

## ENCOURAGING PARTNERSHIPS

The presence of pioneer teams with different skills gathered for a common purpose is something to be explored further. Combinations of starting points and dwelling patterns could be combined to extend missional reach. It might be that a resident can complement a commuter in their absence and that a commuter can cross-pollinate as they move between contexts, or citizens could partner with incomers to inhabit the space together by sharing founding stories and co-creating local theology. When activists, developers, enablers and accommodators are added into the mix, a dynamic mixed economy team could emerge, each bringing a unique perspective to the other.

## MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

The pioneer movement is made up of a wide range of different types of people: lay, ordained, paid, unpaid, full-time and those pioneering in their spare time. Further understanding of starting points and dwelling patterns could help to shape appropriate expectations for permission-givers and practitioners.

Firstly, renewed expectations could empower and value pioneers who already have the unique gift of citizenship. The Church of England has set a goal to double and double again the number of pioneers by 2027, anticipating that 80 per cent of these will be lay people.[7] "The Day of Small Things" research concluded that nearly half of those leading a fresh expression were lay pioneers, with a third of the total having no formal training or authorisation (the lay-lay). In addition to this, it found that a significant number of traditional/inherited trained clergy, some in a post of responsibility, were leading a fresh expression of church.[8] In each of these examples there may be a greater likelihood of contextual inhabitation emerging through existing residency and established citizenship.

Karen is an ordained minister who has been living in her parish for a number of years and wants to connect with the unreached in her community in new ways. Acknowledging the value of her existing citizenship and residency through the community engagement as a parish priest has proven to be beneficial. It has shown her that she already has good foundations in exploring a contextual approach and has therefore inspired her to start a runner alongside the ministry of the inherited church.

Secondly, in order to grow the movement and raise up indigenous leadership, those inhabiting the pioneer charism should be encouraged to be local enablers of others as well as practitioners. This will particularly be the case for pioneers who are commuters or short-term incomer residents who can encourage those around them to discover the pioneer gift and bring greater sustainability to often fragile and emerging new Christian communities. The pioneer criteria in the Church of England looks for this quality within the collaborative criteria set.[9]

Thirdly, there is sometimes a concern that some pioneer posts don't allow sufficient time for new Christian communities to grow from scratch. Licensed pioneers

[7] Ministry Division, "An Update on Resourcing Ministerial Education, and Increases in Vocations and Lay Ministries," *The Church of England*, 2018, accessed 3 October 2019, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/GS%20MISC%201190%20-%20An%20Update%20on%20Resourcing%20Ministerial%20Education%20and%20Increases%20in%20Vocations%20and%20Lay%20Ministries.pdf.

[8] "The Day of Small Things," table 76, 177.

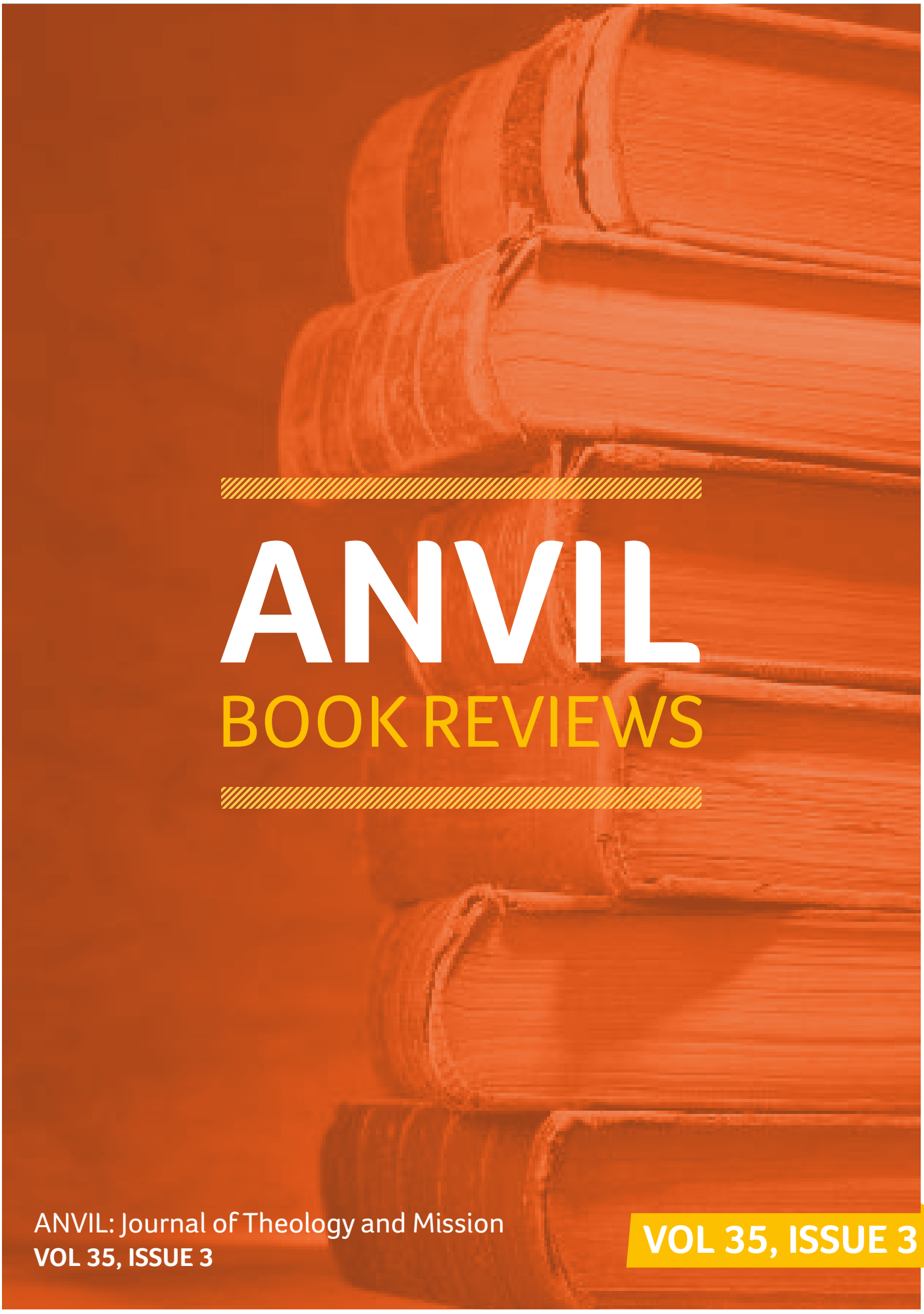
[9] Ministry Division, "Pioneer Criteria," *The Church of England*, 2017, accessed 3 October 2019, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/selection_criteria_for_pioneer_ministry.pdf

deployed to a new context often begin as incomers with greater expectations of missional growth and sustainability placed upon them over a fixed period of time, and yet will generally need more time to inhabit their context. Authorised or lay-lay pioneers, who are more likely to be citizens, generally have fewer expectations placed upon them and are given a more relaxed time frame when in reality it may not take them as long to inhabit their context. There is a misalignment here, which perhaps reveals an institutional model of ministry. Permission-givers may need to work alongside pioneers to think differently. For example, it might be that those in training for licensed ministry should be allowed to continue their journey of citizenship further into training or into posts of responsibility by remaining in the same context, as is happening in some dioceses. Greater imagination may also be needed to explore other ways of supporting lay and ordained pioneers to allow contextual inhabitation to flourish. In doing so, a richer mixed economy of leadership could emerge where training and deployment strategies are more responsive, reflecting a wider spectrum of pioneer ministry.

## CONCLUSION

Bringing together the who, what, how and where of the pioneer charism is valuable for all those engaging in a contextual approach and reveals a variety of ways this could be expressed. Exploration of contextual inhabitation adds a valuable dimension to this and can help to bring further clarity in understanding where pioneers should start, the importance of encouraging partnerships and helping to manage appropriate expectations for practitioners and permission-givers. This could also have important implications in the way pioneers explore vocation and are trained and deployed. Recognition of the pioneer charism of those God is calling will give confidence to many more potential pioneers to grow new contextual Christian communities. This will take courage and commitment to think outside of the box, but, in doing so, could be a catalyst for the development of pioneer ministry into a new dimension.

**Ed Olsworth-Peter** is the national adviser for pioneer development for the Church of England. Working across dioceses and pioneer networks, his role is to develop an integrated vision, strategy and practice for pioneer ministry in the Church of England. He is a fresh expressions associate and a council member of the Archbishops' College of Evangelists.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# 1. RECOMMENDED READING

## Paul Avis and Benjamin M. Guyer, *The Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity, and Purpose* (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017)

This collection of essays, with a foreword from the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, serves as an essential resource for reflection in advance of the 2020 Lambeth Conference. Published to mark the 150-year anniversary of the Conference's founding in 1867, its contributors are a veritable Who's Who of ecumenists, historians, canon lawyers and theologians concerned with Anglican self-understanding and Communion-wide structures. Many have staffed the ecumenical dialogues and inter-Anglican commissions of the most recent generation, as well as written scholarly and popular interventions to shape the Anglican future. The only unfortunate omission is the lack of contributors from the Global South.

The topics covered in the volume reflect and update current Anglican understandings of the Conference. The first part contains "Theological, Historical, and Constitutional Studies". Usefully, for an all-in-one resource, the first chapters consider the Conference's relation to other Instruments of Communion: the Primates' Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Later individual chapters address particular meetings or topics: Lambeth 1867, 1920, and 1998; the Conference and canon law, mission, episcopal leadership, or the Windsor Process; and the Conference on sex and marriage. I suspect the latter topic and chapter, written by Andrew Goddard, bears the greatest potential of being widely read. What its effect will be is uncertain.

The second section comprises "Personal, Pastoral and Political Perspectives." Here, contributors reflect on the Conference's significance from their own experience, expertise, or vantage point. Martyn Percy's chapter from the troubled apex of the liberal English establishment is perhaps the most individual. (We should expect no less from the Dean of Christ Church.) Admirably, he lays his cards on the table from the beginning. Declaring that "a disposition towards comprehensiveness, breadth, and inclusion" lies at the heart of Anglicanism and ought to be reflected at the Conference, he prosecutes this line through a critique of managerialism and an undue focus on evangelism and voluntary adherence, while valorising the uncommon virtue of obliquity, a process of "achieving goals indirectly". Through this, he attempts to characterise the peculiar nature of the Church of England. In all its individual and cultural specificity, however, it is hard to see how the chapter might be read and received by readers approaching Lambeth Conferences from a rather different life context, such as rural Zambia or hyper-urban Singapore.

Readers of Anvil might turn immediately to two chapters for significant rewards: Ephraim Radner's "Christian Mission and the Lambeth Conferences", and Cathy Ross's "'Such Unfolding of the Truth of the Gospel': Post-colonial Reflections on the Missiological Dimension of the Lambeth Conference". Focusing on the statements of successive conferences and writings surrounding them, Radner draws attention to the way the Conferences were both the product and facilitators of mission, meetings that arose not just from the unique problems of a global family or communion of churches but from a common impetus toward universal proclamation of the gospel. As he notes, however, the later history of the Conferences is one of "destabilization": "[C]ommunion and mission have... become vying elements among Anglicans, and as a result the Conferences have lost credibility in relation to both aspects of Anglican life" (p. 132). Later in the volume, Ross turns to some of the same source material, but with a thematic rather than historical focus, considering missiological "treasures buried in the LC documents" concerning contextualisation and culture, world Christianity, creativity and the importance of addressing moral and social issues.

Perhaps the most notable difficulty in the volume involves the tensions between essays. For example, Benjamin Guyer, one of the editors, has written a remarkably important historical chapter: "'This unprecedented step': The Royal Supremacy and the 1867 Lambeth Conference". Among other things, it lays to rest any easy dismissal of the authority of the Conferences by invocation of Archbishop Longley's "oft-quoted promise, 'I repudiate all idea of convening any assembly that can be justly called 'a Synod'" (p. 74). Guyer shows that the context for the statement was far more complicated; desires for an authoritative meeting were primarily scuppered by difficulties over the distinctive character of the Church of England's governance, namely, the authority of the Crown. Several others writing for this same volume seem to take little account of Guyer's chapter. This disagreement within the volume – might we even say an unwillingness to re-examine one's own positions? – serves as a sign for the lack of consensus within the Communion on rather basic matters, such as the purpose of the Conference and the relevance of the intentions of its founders.

All in all, taking into account these peculiarities and tension, the book is an indispensable guide for its target audiences: all "who will follow the course of the Conference closely and be affected by its outcomes" and "any and all persons who are or will be engaged in

academic research" into Anglicanism (p. xii). Time will tell how effective a tool it proves. Indeed, with Lambeth 2020 in less than a year, we will soon see the first indication from the barometer.

Revd Dr Zachary Guiliano, St Bene't's Church, Cambridge

## R. David Nelson and Charles Raith II, *Ecumenism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017)

In a very practical way, ecumenism seems to be more important than ever, as local churches form formal ecumenical partnerships and engagement in social action and mission is increasingly interdenominational and ecumenical. It is interesting that the foundations of ecumenism came from a vision for mission and a practical need for churches to work together in this. And yet, the energy for the ecumenism envisioned in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and post-Vatican II Catholicism seems to have waned somewhat. It is timely then to have an opportunity to review and explore ecumenism. The book takes a fairly typical approach; it plots a historical overview of ecumenism and maps out the current landscape. It helpfully balances the big picture with particular examples to give both breadth and suitable depth.

The book is split into two sections. The first is a historical review and begins with definitions of ecumenism. It starts with what it is not – interreligious dialogue, syncretism or minimalistic unity – before affirming that ecumenism is about pursuing unity between churches "grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and manifests itself in common faith and practice" (p11). The following chapters explore the history of the modern ecumenical movement, locating its origins in the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910, where ecumenism was a practical need to pursue the conference's vision for mission. It continues to trace the history through the formation of the WCC, the importance of the Second Vatican Council and the development of ecumenical dialogues. The authors spend time exploring the particular contribution of evangelicalism to ecumenism and do not shy away from the criticism or tensions within the history. While a pioneer may not be so interested in the nuts and bolts of ecumenical dialogues, the book raises important challenges about the nature and purpose of church.

The second section of the book turns to the contemporary challenges seen in "basic differences", ecumenical reception and the criticisms of ecumenism. These are perhaps the most helpful chapters, raising important questions about its vision for unity. Personally, the chapter exploring criticisms was the most helpful, drawing out some of the potential theological problems behind ecumenism, but remaining hopeful of the ecumenical vision. As I turned to the epilogue it described the vision of fulfilling Jesus' prayer for unity and I realised that this broader biblical and theological vision for ecumenism was something I would have appreciated more of.

The book provides a great overview of recent and contemporary ecumenism, but, in attempting to be even handed with the material, failed to inspire me beyond a general interest in the subject. As an introduction it is therefore very helpful and would be a good place to start exploring the subject, with plenty of suggested books and documents to take this further.

James Butler, CMS

## Joseph D. Small, *Flawed Church, Faithful God: A Reformed Ecclesiology for the Real World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018)

Substantial books on ecclesiology are something of a rarity these days. Small's book is therefore a welcome attempt to offer a rounded description of what it means to be a church of Word and Sacrament. His title reference to a Reformed Ecclesiology is intended in a generously broad sense, since the book engages in a rich ecumenical conversation. Small has the experience of long involvement in dialogue between Christians and Jews and the implications of this will be discussed below.

The book covers a broad range of topics in 12 chapters. Small begins his study by asking "what (in the world) is the Church?" Small writes for an American readership but his observations are largely applicable to UK churches, although the subtle effect of the Anglican establishment is, of course, not paralleled in the USA. What Small recognises is that beneath the sometimes bewildering profusion of denominations, groupings and sub-groupings lies a reality which neither sociology nor theology alone is adequate to understand. Theological talk apart from the reality of actual churches easily becomes irrelevant to lived faith.

Having outlined his basic understanding of the nature of the church in the world, Small goes on to examine key aspects of its life, its essential characteristics as understood from Scripture and the developing tradition in the early centuries. There are thus three chapters on the church's foundational beliefs, looking in some detail at the growth of the creeds and the rule of faith, followed by the "Church of Word and Sacrament" and the "Church as a Communion of the Holy Spirit".

There is then an excellent chapter on the "Church as the Body of Christ". Small candidly admits that what he calls a "shocking metaphor" has become a cliche. This is painful to read as the author at point after point shows how Christian preachers have misunderstood and domesticated Paul's brilliant exposition of this potentially life-giving metaphor. Chapter six on "Call and Response" is a valuable discussion of what we mean by the "real presence" of Christ, stressing the importance of the Ascension. He writes: "Ascension is not Christ's evaporation into a disembodied spiritual realm, but rather the entrance of Jesus – son of Mary... crucified, dead and buried, raised – into the glory of God". This again is a chapter that calls to mind issues which have been long neglected. The last three chapters, "Professing the Faith", "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" and "Hope for the Church" round off a thoroughly stimulating and much-needed study.

I would like to end this review, however, with a discussion of chapters seven and eight. These taken together explore the question of "who are the People of God?" Small emphasises the importance of treating the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and alongside this the danger of anti-Semitism. Indeed, so keen is he to play up the role of the OT that he aligns it alongside the NT as the single revelation of the one Creator God. He employs the notion of figural interpretation as recently espoused by Richard Hays among others. He quotes Hays: "The literal historical sense of the OT is not denied or negated; rather it becomes the vehicle for latent figural meanings unsuspected by the original author and readers". Most readers will endorse this and would probably employ the principle of sensus plenior, "fuller meaning". Small, however, wants to go further. Because (he says) the churches do not see themselves together as the people of God, they fail to understand their faith and life as communal response to God's covenantal faithfulness. In short, Small wants to claim that the ongoing Jewish people are just as much the people of God living out Torah as are Christians under the New Covenant. All this of course raises huge questions which it is not possible to pursue here, not least how Small would understand Paul's critique of Judaism in Galatians and Romans.

Despite these reservations, this is a book to be read and pondered and I commend it warmly. The book is provided with a good bibliography, indices of subjects and Scripture references.

Howard C. Bigg, Cambridge

## Bradford Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience: Ecclesiology for a Dialogical Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016)

This book collides together three big ideas: it takes the ecclesiology of the church as the "people of God" expounded by the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 (referred to as Vatican II) and examines how far it was implemented in the Roman Catholic Church. Then, via a forensically detailed analysis of the canons and encyclicals used in the church's structures, Hinze compares the realities on the ground in the Diocese of New York, where he himself works in the church's administrative structure. He then assesses the ecclesiology and theology of Pope Francis today.

The book is extremely dense and not an easy or clear read, but there are some golden threads weaving through it which I found illuminating in terms of ecclesiology for pioneering new forms of church. The main premise is that Vatican II ecclesiology, in illuminating the church as the whole people of God, conferred recognition of the "prophetic character of the people of God", emerging from the "Holy Spirit's anointing [upon baptism] of all the faithful into the prophetic office of Jesus Christ. This prophetic mission is a still underappreciated feature of Jesus of Nazareth's messianic identity and mission." (p. xiii). This put me in mind of the Anecdote to Evidence Report by the Church Army, which showed the majority of new forms of church were being led by "lay lay" people, i.e. people who were responding to need and the Holy Spirit in their locale, without the recognition of church structures.

Several of the early chapters of the book are devoted to assessing the extent to which the people of God ecclesiology was implemented in the Roman Catholic Church and what impeded its development. There is a lot of church history here, perhaps only interesting to those with a particular fondness for it, but in summary Hinze suggests that prior to Vatican II, the Magisterium (the teaching office of bishops and cardinals) constituted what he calls "the teaching church", while "the learning or obeying church" was comprised of priests, religious orders and the laity (p. xv). This illustrates a power dynamic which Hinze believes was significantly altered by the ecclesiology of Vatican II, in which the prophetic people of God are invited into a dialogical, mutual relationship with Scripture, the world around us and the wider church.

To reference the title, Hinze defines prophetic obedience as the cultivation of practices of collective discernment and decision-making that inform the wellbeing of individuals and their engagement in

society around them. To live a prophetic existence requires the development of:

> a spiritual center [sic] of gravity based on a discerning way of life; this provides necessary ballast as one takes risks and acts courageously in the exercise of judgement and freedom, moving into unknown territory in order to develop one's identity and mission in the world as an individual and in community. (p. xxi).

This seems to me to share similarities with the spiritual and monastic practices and rule of life that pioneers develop. In order to sustain them and their ministries while working largely alone and outside of the structures of church, pioneers learn what is needed in their settings by listening attentively to the context, Scripture and others who surround them, hopefully with care and accountability. Developing a discerning way of life reminds me of the prophetic need to "read the skies" and discern when to take risks in new territory, searching for what God is doing in order to join in with it at the right time. Hinze finds this mandate offered to all Christians, not just pioneers and certainly not restricted to the hierarchy of the church's structures. For him, the "people of God" ecclesiology shapes the vocation of all God's people and their activities in all parts of society. Interestingly, he suggests that the impact of this sweeping call to prophetic obedience was responsible for a sea change in the church as "more and more lay people and women religious took on active leadership roles."

In relating its history, it became clear by 1985 that the new ecclesiology was being "eclipsed" (p. 37) and a swing back to central control in structural, liturgical and missional practice was evident. By 1999, Cardinal Ratzinger was considered to have fully reversed the teachings of Vatican II and re-established Roman centralism (p. 49). Fascinatingly however, many communities of women religious continued to develop their "radical vision and practice" in mission and dialogical power sharing practices well into the 2000s, and this has continued to impact their contexts and the wider church. In the present day, Hinze believes Pope Francis is working to de-centralise power again and empower the laity in local contexts for mission.

In response to these losses of empowerment, Hinze advocates lament as the appropriate prophetic response. He speaks into the situation that many denominations find themselves in today's era of decline: "[Church] leaders prefer to accentuate inspiring images and stories... while bemoaning personal sin. We are presented with the mystery and beauty of the church [but] rarely is attention given to the church's failures in living up to its identity and realising its mission" (p.73). This resonates with the continuing child abuse scandals in various denominations, which seems to elicit structural hand wringing but no commensurate liturgical response such as sackcloth and ashes and wholesale repentance. Surely lament is a needful response that would help us acknowledge and sorrow for the pain caused to many, while reflecting on our practices going forward.

For pioneers, lament is also a helpful response regarding the church's responses towards us and our vocation. Martyn Percy, in a recent lecture at Salisbury Cathedral titled Redeeming Evangelism: Authentic Mission in the Church of England, lampoons new contextual church communities and "so-called pioneers":

> [these are] forms of congregational life that appeal to homogenous groups, and are largely Evangelical and evangelistic in character, appealing as they do to specific, identifiable and narrow interest groups (e.g., certain kinds of youth culture, etc.). These new emerging genres of church are usually apolitical in outlook, and often tend to be socially, politically and theologically conservative, as Robert Bellah has observed.[vi]
>
> Thus, new forms of "Fresh Expression" promoted by the Church of England are normally careful to avoid anything that could be construed as theologically, politically or socially divisive. At the same time, these groups inhabit a social and theological construction of reality in which they believe themselves to be risk-takers and edgy. But they are usually anything but this. So, for example, we rarely learn of "Fresh Expressions" for the LGBTQ+ constituency. We rarely find any "Fresh Expressions" that focus on disabilities. Or, for that matter, on serious forms of exclusion from the mainstream of our society.

As a solution to all of this, Martyn Percy un-ironically tells the story of a small monastic community that engages contextually with local people! These un-researched and unsubstantiated views are only one part of the struggles many pioneers have, in living in churches that have not expanded their ecclesiology to include new forms of ministry and social justice work of the kind that Hinze advocates.

However, his conclusion is that, despite the interventions of history towards centralisation, we should lament and continue on, because "all Christians have received an anointing, calling and mission to live a life of prophetic discipleship" that is "made manifest... in everyday life... by means of struggling against rulers... authorities and the cosmic forces of evil" (p.117). Amen!

Kim Brown, Cirencester

## 2. ECCLESIOLOGY

### Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: the Gospel and the Church* (Boston: Brill, 2017)

Much of Pete Ward's work and research has been about exploring the relationship between culture and church. In his research he has turned to practical theology and empirical methods and has become a key figure in the field of Ecclesiology and Ethnography. In Liquid Ecclesiology, Ward seeks to build on his previous books about liquid church, incorporating those empirical methods with his insights about culture and his theological convictions.

When exploring ecclesiology, the theology of the church, the book cautions against any assumption that there is something solid, a blueprint, from which church can be understood. In one sense church, and therefore ecclesiology, is fluid because the church takes form within a particular, fluid culture and because theology is always developed from a particular perspective and history. However, on a more fundamental level, the church is fluid because the Trinitarian being of God is fluid. Liquid Ecclesiology lays out a particular way of doing theology, one which is committed both to the lived reality of those cultural expressions of the church and to Scripture and the Christian tradition.

The first part of the book develops this argument more fully. There is a theological commitment to Jesus' presence in the world, what Ward calls "the gospel", and to the fact that the church takes cultural form in the world. Jesus Christ is present in the cultural expression of church in a partial way. The church expresses the truth of Jesus Christ, but it cannot be equated with Jesus Christ. This means there is a paradox: the church is both the body of Christ and a human society. Jesus Christ, through the Spirit, is living and active in the life of the church, leading the church into truth. It also means that the truth of Jesus Christ is always expressed through a culture, one which changes the emphasis and meaning of its message. Because of this, discernment must be at the heart of the study of the church. For Ward this discernment takes the shape of close attention to the lived expression of the church and "abiding" (taken from John 15) in Christ through reflection, contemplation and worship.

Part two of the book takes the form of a case study exploring this liquid nature of the church through the evangelical expression of the gospel and the worship song. Ward notes that the regularly repeated phrase "the methods change, the message doesn't" is problematic in this light. Through careful study of the evangelical expression of the gospel and by drawing on his previous work studying charismatic evangelical worship songs, he demonstrates this liquid nature of the church and expression of the gospel and the problems of assuming that there is a fixed expression of the gospel in a short sequence of doctrinal statements.

The third section turns to how these problems identified in part one and two might be overcome through "abiding in Christ" and in careful attention to the church. In this way he advocates an approach to the study of the church which seeks to avoid either slipping into a liberal prioritising of experience, or a more conservative approach which assumes a fixed doctrinal understanding. In a liquid ecclesiology there needs to be equal attention given to the presence of Jesus Christ, understood in Scripture and Christian tradition, and the lived expression of the Church because Jesus' presence is always expressed in and mediated through culture.

The significant contribution this book makes is its theological foundations for an ecclesiology which places equal importance on the church as body of Christ and the church as a human society. One thing which is missing from this book is any account of the networked and relational church which formed the central argument of the book Liquid Church. Pioneering and fresh expressions would appear to be rich accounts of wrestling with this liquid nature of church, and discerning the presence of Christ in the midst of the cultural expression of the church. This leaves plenty of space for others to build on the foundations which Ward has laid.

James Butler, CMS

### Paul Avis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* (Oxford: OUP, 2018)

Ecclesiology is one of the core subjects in current theology, though still relatively young as a distinct discipline. It has much to say in the current state of ecumenism and dialogue interdenominationally, and even intradenominationally – as with the Church of England, where numerous models interact. The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology sets itself out to cover many aspects of the current field on the subject, and largely achieves this under the guidance of the veteran ecclesiologist, Paul Avis.

The Handbook is divided into four parts of between five and nine essays in each, with an introduction by Avis at the beginning. Part one concerns "Biblical Foundations", with notable essays from Walter Moberly, considering the pre-ecclesiology of Israel, and Edward Adams, on the nature of the Pauline churches. Part two,

"Resources from the Tradition", gives a chronological overview of what constitutes the church within differing traditions from the early church and the Orthodox, Medieval, Magisterial Reformation, through to Methodism and Pentecostal ecclesiologies. The essay by Avis on Anglican ecclesiology will be especially useful to readers of Anvil, as it articulates much of the nuance in the history of Anglican self-identity.

Part three concerns the particular ecclesiologies of eight theologians, four of whom are 20th century Catholic theologians, including Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI). The other four essays are on Barth (Reformed), Zizioulas (Orthodox), Pannenberg (Lutheran) and Rowan Williams (Anglican). The weight given to Catholic theologians is understandable given the upheavals of 20th century Catholic theology, particularly in the rise of the Ressourcement movement over and against the Neo-Scholastics which led to Vatican II and a sea-change in much of Roman Catholic self-understanding. The essay on Rowan Williams is particularly noteworthy for Anvil readers, as it offers insight into recent tensions within 21st century Anglicanism. Part four, "Contemporary Movements in Ecclesiology", offers insights into contemporary lenses such as feminist and social science, as well global south perspectives in the form of Asian and African ecclesiologies.

As a resource Ecclesiology is an excellent starting point for those looking to explore the subject. With substantial bibliographies appended to each essay, there is plenty of direction offered to those who wish to read further. It would have improved the volume to have some essays on the church within its mission and I was surprised that there was no essay on Lesslie Newbigin within part three. Nevertheless, though academic in presentation and tone, this is an excellent reference point for those looking for further guidance.

As with all the titles in the Oxford Handbook series, this tome is useful as a reference guide, but likely too expensive for the interested layman or student for actual purchase. This being said, it is a very useful starting point for all who are interested in the nature of the church, particularly leaders who are engaging their congregation in the vision-building of what church ought to be and is worth seeking out.

Isaac Frisby, Durham University

## Gerado Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

This is a social analysis of emerging Christianity. It draws on observation and ethnographic research and interviews to paint a picture and offer some sense making. The suggestion is that emerging Christians share a religious orientation built around deconstruction. And that there is enough about the connections through conferences, festivals, publishing and online spaces to consider it significant transnationally. It is a movement that is a response to the times, to the wider cultural shifts in the Western world in particular and carries many Western sensibilities.

The authors make some really interesting observations and I think that is in large part because they come as social scientists. They describe communities that value openness and non-judgement, wanting all to be accepted regardless of their views. They reflect that while it can seem reactionary or even just freewheeling, actually what is going on is a strategic or tactical religiosity that enables a religious self to be nurtured and sustained through shared life in communities of fellow Christians. It is not simply deconstruction that is going on, though that is essential for people to navigate the churches they have come from, but there is an approach to living a religious life that is practised drawing on tradition in new and playful ways. They name leaders as religious institutional entrepreneurs as their innovation is within religious fields. Everything is a conversation – indeed the movement is described as a conversation. I thought this was one of the best chapters.

The congregational practices are also interesting: the authors identify preaching, leadership, the church environment and how worship is directed as four areas of deconstruction. Again I suspect this is very familiar to those who have been part of the movement. A chapter explores engagement with the world and the range of views and practices on this – and whether intention to share Christ with others is a factor or not. The answer is that it varies but it is clear that there is (unsurprisingly) a lot of postmodern angst in this area. I think the US and UK are different contexts in this regard and mission is a more familiar organising principle in the UK, perhaps because the church has declined earlier and faster.

There is a concluding chapter which provides a helpful summary. The area I found most interesting in that was the discussion of religious individualisation. As with so

much of the wider culture, the performance of self is at the centre, navigating and finding agency in a complex world and church. The authors also stressed this did not mean individual and separate as there is a strong community theme in the emerging church. But it is quite painful to hear reflected back that self is at the centre of new forms of Christianity, perhaps more than we would like to admit or than is healthy.

The book largely draws from the emergent network in the US and the associated networks, communities, conferences and contributors, and from Northern Ireland and Ikon in particular. It is somewhat less informed about England, which does leave some gaps in the account, at least from where I am standing. For example, the authors suggest that most people come across the emerging church movement through prominent leaders like Brian McLaren. In England, that simply didn't happen and wouldn't have had authenticity if it did. There were probably at least 15 or 20 years of conversation and practice in England before his first book came out.

The book came out in paperback in 2018 but the hardback was 2014. In a fast-moving landscape there is probably another chapter to be written. It reminded me of the energy and excitement that is in this conversation and I hope the authors prove correct in their concluding remarks that emerging Christianity is well placed to thrive.

Jonny Baker, CMS

## Helen D. Morris, *Flexible Church: Being the Church in the Contemporary World* (London: SCM Press, 2019)

Morris sets out to develop an ecclesiology for new expressions of church in the Western world. She uses the term "re-contextual church" for the wave of new forms of church and Christian community that have been called various things over the last few decades – emerging church, fresh expressions, missional church, liquid church and so on. She writes as an enthusiast for these forms, sensing that the wider culture change calls for innovation and flexibility. She describes re-contextual church as being a Free Church movement. I thought that was unfortunate and would have preferred a term like Low Church, as many of the new expressions of church are actually in and around the edges of denominations rather than independent. Morris writes as someone concerned that the sort of ecclesiology currently being used is not stable enough. It is a very thoughtful book which engages with a huge number of sources and references. In particular she engages Pete Ward, Mike Moynagh and Stuart Murray Williams.

Morris has two issues with ecclesiology as it is engaged with. The first is that it tends to be abstracted rather than embodied. The second is that the "Social Trinity" does not provide a robust enough basis on which to develop a theology of the church in mission. I think the first point is well made, though I think it would have been good to engage the body of thinking and reflection on ecclesiology and ethnography – which is reflecting on ecclesiology from what is lived and embodied. This is a network that seems to have a lot of creative reflection and theology in it. The second issue is very familiar. I have heard countless talks that cite the relationships of the Trinity and invite the church into participation in the Divine Life in perichoretic fashion. I still like it as a metaphor, but there are a number of critiques, which Morris discusses. It is wise therefore to explore and use other metaphors and ecclesiologies and not hang all your ecclesiology on one idea that is coming under theological fire as it were.

Morris first of all looks to the body of Christ metaphor developed by Paul and offers that as an excellent basis for developing a robust and flexible ecclesiology. That makes good sense. It is a remarkably creative metaphor that has stood the test of time and it is a living, organic, and dynamic metaphor. Then she develops her own new metaphor of a suspension bridge which is accompanied by diagrams. She uses this metaphor because a suspension bridge has to be flexible in a range of conditions, but it is also pretty robust. In particular she offers a number of tensions like immanence and transcendence, institution and network, spiritual and religious that are held quite nicely in this metaphor. The bridge is then also a site for gift exchange as traffic can move across it. The idea of gift exchange in relation to ecclesiology is particularly rich and innovative. The bridge is anchored in Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection and in eschatology. There are plenty of interesting insights in what is a comprehensive chapter of 120 pages.

I personally welcome new metaphors. I think it is a creative way to engage with theology. Every metaphor has an "is" and an "is not" – i.e. it works in some ways and not in others. There are certainly some things that work in the suspension bridge idea, especially the tensions. For me the "is not" aspects of it included that it doesn't seem that flexible an image: it's a large metal mechanical structure! And the metaphor is complicated: I had to keep going back to it to remember all the aspects and I confess I am unlikely to retain them.

I found the writing style and structure a bit frustrating. Morris tends to develop either an elaborate definition such as for re-contextual church or a very elaborate model as in the suspension bridge and then in linear fashion goes through every point in turn. It results in feeling analytical rather than a book that flows in literary fashion. But having said that I suspect some evangelicals

will like it because it is reassuring on the stability of doctrine and goes through things point by point.

The book is a welcome addition to the conversation around mission and church and, as I have said above, is very thoughtful and a lot of work has clearly gone into it.

Jonny Baker, CMS

## Mart J. Cartledge, Sarah L. B. Dunlop, Heather Buckingham and Sophie Bremner, *Megachurches and Social Engagement: Public Theology in Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)

Megachurches and Social Engagement is an ethnographic study of five of London's megachurches: two Anglican (All Souls, Langham Place and Holy Trinity, Brompton) and three Pentecostal (Kingsway International Christian Centre, Jesus House for All the Nations and New Wine Church).

The introduction sets the context of the study, discussing charismatic renewal in the Church of England, African Pentecostalism in Britain and the methodology employed by the study. Megachurches and Social Engagement combines practical theology with a case study based qualitative approach that used participant observation, focus groups and interviews. The researchers also collected various electronic and print documents. The analysis was conducted through a grounded theory-based approach.

Part One, Theoretical Fields, contains two chapters that examine first the field of megachurch studies and second the fields of public theology, social theory and social engagement. Chapter two, on megachurches, provides a stimulating overview of the literature, as well as a global survey of the nature and scope of megachurches in the main continents of the world. Chapter three begins with a discussion of how – and whether – theology can be truly public, that is recognisably Christian while speaking into wider procedurally pluralist society. This leads naturally into a discussion of the sociology of religion as it pertains to the religious landscape of the UK, focused almost entirely on Christianity. The next main topic is the relationship between faith and social policy before examining in more detail the role of the Church in social engagement.

Part Two, Empirical Studies, has a chapter on the Church of England and a chapter on African Diaspora Pentecostalism. Chapter four therefore discusses the social engagement activities of Holy Trinity, Brompton (HTB), and All Souls, Langham Place, devoting more space to the former than the latter. In each case a brief history of the church is followed by a more detailed description of their general activities and then their different social engagement projects. The key points related to HTB are that many of the social engagement projects were started by lay people, not clergy; that charismatic spirituality is evident as the under-pinning of this approach and third that social transformation is perceived as coming about primarily through individual change. For All Souls, one of the key points concerns personal discipleship, the individual follower of Jesus studying the Bible, while also engaging in evangelism and social action as an outworking of this personal commitment. The second key point is the intersection between the parish and the city; the focus is local but because of the nature of that locality, it is also global.

Chapter five examines the three African Pentecostal megachurches that took part in the study. The format is the same as in chapter four. For Kingsway International Christian Church the researchers note the blurring between spiritual outreach and social action; thus for example offering prayer for healing is seen as much as social action as spiritual outreach. Two other key points are made: the prosperity gospel preached at KICC is more accurately described as a "narrative of self-betterment" empowered and driven by Christianity (p.214); and second, there are more internally focused than externally focused social engagement activities. Jesus House for All the Nations is argued to integrate social engagement activities within the mission of the church. There is a clear focus on community development but while four thousand people per week attend Sunday services, Jesus House still struggles to recruit volunteers for its programmes. Finally, the activities are as much evangelistic as they are social action. New Wine Church is also described as focused primarily on evangelism; thus an outreach activity does not offer sausages but "sausages and salvation" because the two are so inter-related (p.249). Second, New Wine Church is much more locally rooted that the other two churches discussed in this chapter; third volunteer numbers are significant, and are celebrated, although as with the other churches discussed here, the social engagement projects do not always attract the numbers they need.

Part Three is entitled Explanations and Implications. Chapter six, on theological motivations, outlines the ways in which megachurches motivate for social engagement, including explicit teaching and preaching, training courses, advertising, and prayer and worship. Volunteers described their own motivation as a desire to demonstrate love, in response to encounters with God and a desire to witness. It closes with a discussion of a theory of motivations. Chapter seven, on globalisation and social engagement, reflects on the relationship

between megachurches and globalisation, engaging with both global Pentecostalism and global Anglicanism. The argument is advanced that the three African diaspora Pentecostal churches in the study act as "bridge-heads" between African and British culture, while the two Anglican churches "function like city-centre parish churches and mission training institutions in relation to the global presence of people of a non-British origin" (p.311). This global audience means the influence of these churches spreads far beyond London. Chapter eight, implications for church and society, explores the ways in which the personal encounters with Jesus Christ that all five churches promote impacts both individuals and wider society. The authors suggest there are four implications for church leaders. First, the need to reflect on language and storytelling, ensuring it is open and welcoming. Second, questions about the scope of social engagement: although the numbers of volunteers across the five churches is impressive, they actually represent a relatively small percentage of total attendance. Much more could be done, not least through collaboration between megachurches. Third, questions of power and empowerment, both in developing new forms of social engagement and also in ensuring recipients are not coerced and mistreated in the way they encounter the Christian message. Fourth, the question of collaboration, which is also discussed in relation to relationships with local and central government.

The final chapter draws together the threads of the discussion and discusses areas for future research. Overall Megachurches and Social Engagement is an enthralling read. Part one is perhaps overly academic for a general audience, but for those with the relevant sociological or ethnographic background these chapters are a useful resource. General readers will therefore benefit more from parts two and three. Anyone wanting to think seriously about how large churches can influence the nation would do well to read this book.

Tom Wilson, St Philip's Centre, Leicester

## 3. OTHER

### Sally K. Gallagher, *Getting to Church: Exploring Narratives of Gender and Joining* (New York: OUP, 2017)

Getting to Church offers a fresh approach to well-established questions: Why do people go to church? Why do people leave church? Yet significantly it asks a third question: Is this different for women and men?

Sally Gallagher and her team conducted a seven-year study into three congregations. A Presbyterian Church, a Baptist Church and an Orthodox Church. The research is based in the USA, which does limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts around the globe. Nevertheless, this was an impressive undertaking. Gallagher and her team journeyed with the three congregations, their current members, potential members who were exploring, as well as past members. They tracked down a number of former members and interviewed them in an abbreviated form of the semi-structured interviews with the other groups. She outlines her research methods in the appendix and in so doing is transparent about the constraints of the study.

She explores the themes of church attendance and gender through the lenses of more established social and religious constructs such as becoming, belonging and growing, as well as practical aspects such as buildings, giving and changing.

Gallagher offers some interesting findings but they can be hard to find amid the detailed descriptions of congregations. Firstly, she debunks some of the popular myths that Western Christianity appeals more to women than men because it is focused on creating a space for emotional connection. She finds evidence that while both women and men appreciate doctrinal teaching, it is in fact the women in the Baptist Church who place a higher emphasis on it than men. However, secondly, she does offer evidence that in highly gendered American society, it is these churches that offer spaces for men to express "aspects of their personhood that otherwise have limited opportunity to play" (p. 188). In fact, this is true for both women and men. Thirdly, she also highlights that in her research, denomination still mattered (p. 183) as it is reflected in the distinctive buildings, teachings and programmes of the various churches. However, congregants identified with their local expression of that denomination rather than the broader denomination.

Sadly, though, the attempt to hold both attendance and gender in tension throughout the discussion did not work well. I was particularly interested in the gender discussion, which Gallagher did not come back to until the last chapter and I therefore struggled to keep focused on the material at hand. The research is interesting for academics exploring issues of church attendance and sociology of religion and therein makes a contribution to the academic field. But the nature of the three specific congregations makes the findings difficult to apply in other contexts. It is not a self-help, "make sense of things" book either and, because of the magnitude of research material and descriptive discourse, it is an unlikely read for a church leader. If the book was shorter, it would have some interesting points for church and denominational leaders in order to understand church attendance, growth and decline – but the length of the book will prevent that. It feels a shame to say that as there are some real gems but they

are not easily found. The group I would recommend it to are people who are actively wanting to understand church demographics and social movements.

Nevertheless, it is an impressive piece of research which picks up on current themes that do need exploring both from the academic and practitioner's point of view.

Susann Haehnel, CMS

## Andrew Wilson, *Spirit and Sacrament: An Invitation to Eucharismatic Worship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2019)

The essence of the argument of Spirit and Sacrament is in the title. Andrew Wilson (no relation!) wants to persuade his readers to fully embrace life in the Spirit, including the personal and corporate exercise of spiritual gifts, while also being fully sacramental, celebrating the Eucharist regularly, revelling in historical and new forms of liturgical worship. He therefore sets himself a big task, and comes a long way in such a short book, but left me, at least, feeling there was more to be said.

The structure of the book is logical enough. Wilson begins by explaining why he believes Christians must pursue what he describes as "the best of both worlds", that is being both fully Eucharistic and actively Charismatic. He makes no apology for his neologism eucharismatic, but does acknowledge it is a bit trendy and not as rich in meaning as the two separate words from which it is derived. The challenge he offers is an accurate one; many churches are distorted in their presentation of the Christian faith as they only emphasize one aspect of the richness of the gospel. But the question remains as to how they are to be encouraged to both broaden and deepen their expression of saving faith in Jesus.

The next four chapters then take an aspect of Wilson's key argument in turn. Chapter two expounds a brief theology of charis, "gift". Again, the points made here are sound. To give two examples, in Jesus' parables which feature a God-figure, he is always over generous, giving far more than he should, as indeed is Jesus himself in his miracles. Second, the gifts of God should, Wilson contends, elicit four responses: thankfulness, worship, stewardship and pursuit. There is little to argue with here.

Chapter three argues that joy should be the defining characteristic of the Christian, and then goes on to ask why that is not always visible amongst Western Protestant Christianity. The analogy of the trampoline that Wilson uses in this chapter is a striking one. He explains that you cannot have height without depth; so a gymnast will first bounce low before flying high. To put it another way, he exhorts us to plumb both the riches of tradition and the heights of spontaneity, the depths of confession, the creeds, the sacraments and the heights of forgiveness, choruses, spontaneous singing. "Friday, then Sunday. Kneel, then jump" (p.51).

Chapter four makes a strong case for the Eucharist as a regular activity during corporate gathered worship, including an argument for the richness of Cranmer's theology and Bible-rich liturgy. As a convinced Anglican like myself (who needs no persuading of the value of the liturgy) I found nothing to quibble with here, but I did find myself wondering how persuasive this would be to a skeptic. A bit more on how to keep liturgy fresh, engaging and meaningful would have helped the case being advanced here. Wilson builds on the work of James Smith in this section, but Smith's arguments are richer and deeper; that is perhaps the place to find the persuasion that is lacking here.

Chapter five then argues in favour of the Charismatic movement, explaining why we should use the gifts both personally and in corporate worship. Wilson's concern is partly to convince a cessassionist skeptic that the gifts are for today, with only a minor secondary interest in the how they should be used. His argument is this primarily historical, showing how the gifts have been used down the ages, and that just as we long for the boldness and conviction of the faith of the first-generation of Christians, so too should we long for their use of spiritual gifts.

In his final chapter, which draws together his argument for eucharismatic worship, Wilson begins with an analogy of a shop that is both barbers and coffee shop, pointing out that coffee and men's haircuts are not normally associated with a one-stop shop. He follows up with ten "how to" pointers for people coming from different perspectives who want to introduce a bit more balance to the activities of the church. He concludes with a call for Christians to be fully Eucharistic and fully Charismatic.

While I found nothing I really disagreed with, Spirit and Sacrament did not persuade me to change in the way I hoped it might. I think this is because of the lack of stories of transformation. The theory and the theology Wilson offers are sound, but they do not tug at the heart in the way stories do. The vision of church Wilson works with is a compelling one, a place where history is honoured and lived out and God is at work in powerful and different ways, suiting the needs and desires of the whole breadth of his people. It is, I think, a vision that many local church leaders would want to work towards realising. Spirit and Sacrament can start them down that route, but they will need more help than this book offers to get there.

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