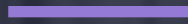




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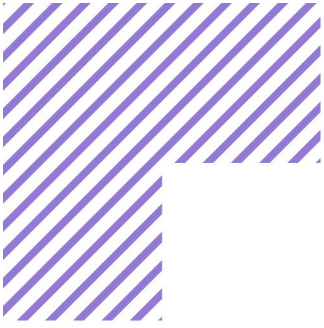


*Learning faith:
reflections from researching
everyday faith*

Vol 39 – Issue 2

 **CHURCH
MISSION
SOCIETY**





The Editorial

James Butler

Discipleship, faith formation, learning and training are important themes within mission and the church. At Church Mission Society there is a particular interest in how people grow and develop in faith, and their gifting around mission and pioneering. Within denominations, the questions of faith development are high up the agenda, particularly with declining church attendance and the decreasing prominence of faith in the West. This edition of ANVIL picks up the question of how people learn, grow and develop in faith. It presents some of the fruits of the Methodist learning research project carried out at the University of Roehampton and funded by the Susanna Wesley Foundation. By turning to the everyday experiences of faith and learning within eight sites across the British Methodist Church, the project sought to develop a grassroots account of what we came to call “faith learning” and draw wider insights for how churches and groups approach the questions of discipleship, learning and growing in faith.

Some of the key themes that emerged from the project, and are reflected on in detail within the articles and interviews in this edition of ANVIL, concern the importance of conversation, informal spaces and care in faith learning. As the articles in this edition will describe, while much of the attention within narratives of discipleship and faith formation focuses on formal learning through courses, Bible studies and sermons, very often the most significant times of faith learning happened in the midst of everyday life. It was through life events, big and small, through informal conversations, in the chance encounters that took place, and through the long-term relationships of life lived together that faith was shaped and changed. This will not be a surprise to most people, and as we share these insights, people often recount similar stories and experiences from their own lives. However, what we have felt as a team is that the significance of the informal and conversational nature of learning is yet to be seriously integrated into the accounts of discipleship and faith formation, and its implications for mission and evangelisation are yet to be deeply and practically understood, in ways that keep them central. There is a need to learn how to honour and value the informal without somehow trying to formalise it or instrumentalise it for our courses and discipling methods. In the articles and interviews within this edition we hope that there will be much to stimulate your own reflections and thinking around faith and learning, and some helpful and constructive ways to honour and value the kinds of faith learning we saw within the project, in churches and mission contexts.

This edition begins with a brief introduction to the research project and to the methodology used. The short article “Researching the grassroots experience of faith learning” provides a summary of the research project and an introduction to theological action research. This gives the context for the rest of the articles and will provide a point of reference for some of the



terms used in the rest of the edition. The nature of collaborative research projects like this is that the different teams, research sites and participants have all experienced the journey differently and learned different things. By hearing from multiple voices across the research, this edition of ANVIL provides multiple perspectives on the project, in keeping with our commitment to paying attention to diverse voices, and to the renewal of grassroots practice. In the light of the whole project these different accounts, within the articles and interviews, act like a prism that refracts that light differently depending on the context, experience and role of the writer, resulting in different patterns of faith and learning.

The University of Roehampton reflector team have written the three main articles. The first is from Clare Watkins, the principal investigator on the project, who was particularly struck by the richness of the accounts of church and mission within rural settings. So often the rural church is seen as being in need of the resources and support of thriving urban congregations, and yet Clare's article highlights the many ways in which rural churches, though small and fragile, have much to offer the conversation too and are themselves a gift to urban and suburban churches.

I was the researcher on the project, carrying out much of the data collection. For me one of the most interesting things has been the way that the very ordinary accounts of people I have met have seriously challenged the narratives around discipleship that are often pushed in church and mission settings. I heard how people's faith was shaped and changed by the ordinary and everyday experiences of life, and how that shaped much of what they did. In contrast to the impression that many people in churches simply fill the pews on Sunday, I met faithful people acting in generous and servant-hearted ways in their families and communities, which was often invisible to the churches they attended. In this paper I explore how these insights can help us move away from thinking of discipleship as something that a leader initiates, and instead put the Spirit's work and everyday life at the centre of learning and discipleship.

The third article is co-written by Sue Miller, Stan Brown and Graham Jones. Given that this was a project focused on British Methodism, they particularly explore the ways the insights of the project relate to, illuminate and draw on Methodist and Wesleyan accounts. Making connections between the insights of the project and many of the recent initiatives of British Methodism, they demonstrate that this is in keeping with the historic emphasis on holiness within Methodism, and argue that seeking wisdom is at the heart of grassroots learning.

The project focused on eight different research sites. One of the research sites was the Wales Learning Network and the fourth article describes this group's experience of being a local research team. Delyth Davies, part of the network, writes about her experience of the project and the way in which participating in the project shaped the network's work. She particularly draws out the ways in which conversation and relationships became key focal points for their engagement with churches and groups.


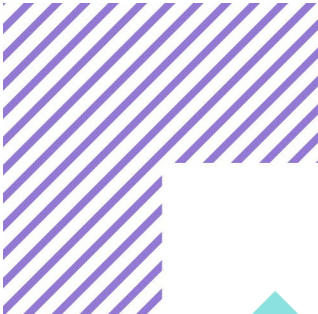
The last three articles are short interviews with participants in the project. We asked them to reflect a bit on their experiences of learning and some of the insights from the project. We gave all three pseudonyms to protect their identity. Liz reflects on her experience of life-long learning and the way she has been shaped by the people and places around her. Eleanor talks about how participating in the project caused her to look a little differently at learning and how her own journey as a pioneer has shaped her learning since. Finally, Sarah spoke about how her own faith has been shaped by her experiences and about being a family worker in her local Methodist church. She reflects on the learning she has seen around her in the families she connects with.

As always, we have a healthy selection of book reviews of recently published books around mission, pioneering and theology from our broad team of reviewers.

We hope you enjoy this edition of ANVIL. If you have enjoyed exploring the themes in this edition, we would like to draw your attention to the fact that a book about the project will be coming out in 2024 (hopefully!).



James Butler is pioneer MA lecturer and assistant coordinator for Pioneer Mission Training at CMS. 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.



Researching the grassroots experience of faith learning: introducing the learning project and theological action research

By James Butler

This project exploring the grassroots experience of learning in the Methodist Church was conducted by a team from the Theology and Action Research Network (TARN) at the University of Roehampton.¹ It was funded by and carried out in partnership with the Susanna Wesley Foundation.² This theological action research project ran for four years from 2016 to 2020 and worked with eight different sites across the Methodist Church in Britain, particularly focusing on the lived practice and experience how people learn, grow and develop in faith.

The project sought to respond to the rise in use of discipleship language as part of many churches' call to renewal and mission. At the time that the project began, discipleship language had appeared as an important part of British Methodism's own focus on renewal, particularly evident in the self-description of a "discipleship movement shaped for mission" and with the introduction of the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (which later became simply the Learning Network).³ A key document that had sought to reimagine and restructure learning within the Methodist Church was the "Fruitful Field" report, and one strand of this research was seeking to explore how people learn in light of the changes brought around by that report.⁴ The instinct of the research team was that while there was much that was good about the turn to learning and the language of discipleship, there were some problems and blind spots that needed attention. There was an expectation that there was much more to be learned both theologically and practically from the lived experience of

¹ *Theology and Action Research Network*, <https://theologyandactionresearch.net/>

² *The Susanna Wesley Foundation*, <https://susannawesleyfoundation.org/>

³ Martyn Atkins, "Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]," *Methodist Conference Reports 2011* (The Methodist Church in Britain, 2011), accessed 4 June 2018, <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf2011-pc-2-gen-sec-conference-report-0812.doc>

⁴ The Ministries Committee of the Methodist Conference, "The Fruitful Field: A consultation document (The Methodist Church in Britain, Autumn 2011): accessed 19 December 2022, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/you-fruitful-field-consultation-171011.pdf>

Christians who were learning and growing in faith. This project sought to pay close attention to such experience.

One of the commitments in theological action research projects is to work in partnership with the sites taking part. It is a participative and collaborative approach to research, where a team from the site is involved in every stage of the research from the initial designing and planning to data collection and all the way through to discerning the data and identifying the learning from the project. In working this way, we seek to break down a researcher–researched paradigm and instead see everyone as co-researchers, albeit with different levels of expertise and experience in different areas, all bringing a wide range of different skills and experience to every stage of the research. We talk about them as reflector teams: local reflector teams from the different sites, and the University of Roehampton reflector team who reflect on the data across the sites. They are named reflector teams because of the particular role that they have in reflecting individually on the data and coming together to engage in reflective conversation.

Each site becomes, in effect, its own mini research project with its own research question, plan and data reflection. We worked with a range of sites across the Methodist Church: two local churches; a circuit; one learning network; two formal training institutions; the local preachers and worship leaders' training team; and an ecumenical charity supporting rural learning. Each site identified a team of about five or six people from among them who would carry the research for the site and would work collaboratively with us through the project. There are a number of advantages to working in this way: it focuses the research on the details of lived practice and the questions, joys and tensions within it; it brings a broader range of perspectives and interpretations; it creates a range of feedback loops where practitioners are able to add to and challenge interpretations of their practice; and perhaps most importantly, it builds in the renewal of practice into the process. This renewal of practice comes about because the people whose practice it is are directly involved in reflecting on that practice, and it was often the experience that rather than identifying actions points to be implemented, the final steps were identifying the learning and change that had already taken place or the things that had been planned.

Theological action research has five key characteristics:

- ◆ Theological all the way through
- ◆ Understanding of “theology in four voices”
- ◆ Disclosing theology through conversational method
- ◆ Theological Action Research (TAR) as formative transformation of practice
- ◆ Method allowing practice to contribute to the transformation of theology

In terms of understanding the project, what is key here is the commitment to conversation, to theology and to practice. It is a conversational method that means having actual conversations between people, preferably in the same room. These conversations happen all the way through the project: discussing the possibilities of working together, deciding together on a research question, planning the research, in the data collection and in reflecting on the data together. Another key characteristic is being theological the whole way through. This means seeing the whole process as theological rather than seeing theological reflection as one part within a wider study. To do this, theological action research understands that theology has coming from four different voices: the theology embodied in what people do


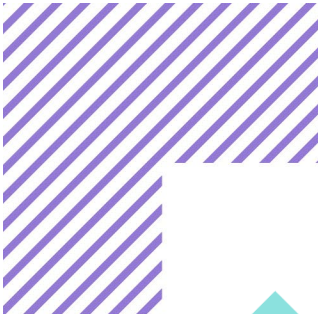
(operant voice), what they say (the espoused voice), normative documents such as Scripture or church tradition (the normative voice) and the formal work of theologians (the formal voice). These voices are not discrete but are overlapping and interpenetrating. The conviction of theological action research is that these voices need to be heard together. It is in listening to these voices in this way that fresh theological disclosures emerge – new learning and connections. Theological action research has a deep commitment to both the renewal of practice and the renewal of theology. More details about these characteristics and theology in four voices can be read in *Talking about God in Practice* and *Disclosing Church*.⁵

While there are many strengths of theological action research, there are challenges. Working in collaborative teams is more labour-intensive and the project is much more closely tied to the ups and downs of the research site. Collaborative partnerships are more demanding and there is more work involved in developing the research sites and the relationships needed to carry out the research. We have a number of stories about the ways in which our research has gone in different directions, been interrupted and been frustrated because of different agendas, approaches and live events; however, we also have plenty of stories of the ways in which the process and the outcomes have been enriched by the journey through such issues and the collaborative work needed to navigate them.

The University of Roehampton Reflector Team have all contributed to this *ANVIL* edition. Clare Watkins is the principal investigator and one of the originators of theological action research. She is a reader in Ecclesiology and Practical Theology at the University of Roehampton. James Butler is the researcher and has worked on a number of theological action research projects. He is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Roehampton and MA lecturer at Church Mission Society. Sue Miller is the director of the Susanna Wesley Foundation, who funded the research, and has worked in various roles across the Methodist Church. Graham Jones is a regional learning and development officer within the Learning Network in the Methodist Church and is an ordained presbyter, and Stan Brown is also ordained and during the duration of the project was a circuit superintendent. We are grateful to others who contributed to the research team, particularly Elizabeth Davies, Susy Brouard, Janice Price and Roger Walton.

Theological action research is an invitation to a conversation, a process of reflecting together on lived practice, not so that one can then do theology, but as a theological practice of attentiveness to the many theological voices around us. On one level it is simply the process by which this research was carried out, but it was also interesting to see how the different teams at the different sites identified the kinds of conversations and practices involved as the things they needed to invest in more to encourage the kind of learning we were seeing in the research.

⁵ Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010); Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020).



“Looking out for the small things”:¹ the pedagogical and missiological gifts of rural churches

By Clare Watkins

One of the joys of any qualitative research, but of theological action research in particular, is that it is, in principle, open to surprise. While we had in our project an overall aim of exploring discipleship, learning and growing in faith, we knew that by working with co-researchers in a variety of sites across the country we would be listening in to questions, concerns and realities that we may not have anticipated. In this project we are still thinking and writing about certain questions around clergy and laity, normativity and learning, and the multi-faceted issues of agency in faith learning, in ways we could not have imagined before hearing from our research participants. Another area that struck us, and for which we were largely unprepared, is the realities of discipleship and learning in rural areas. It is this “discovery” from our research that I want to reflect on a little in this article.

While a focus on rural churches was not an original priority in our basic research question, we were nonetheless aware of that basic need in qualitative research to be concerned with context. In a large, national project such as ours it was clearly important to hear from a range of locations, differentiated by both type and geography. We were intentional, then, about seeking to work with an organisation specialising in rural ministry and committed to resourcing rural churches.² In addition, working with a Regional Learning Network was important to the work; and in finding the Wales Learning Network receptive, we also found ourselves working with a second site much concerned with rural areas. These two research sites increasingly enabled our sensitivity to similar dynamics in areas of research that were not obviously or in fact “rural”. It is not that there were rural churches with things to learn for their context, and then (sub)urban churches with their own learning; rather, as this article will set out, there were things that surfaced in the rural communities that actually had powerful resonance with realities encountered across our site, though often in less clearly revealed ways. The “smallness” of rural Christian discipleship retuned my own thinking to look in different places for the signs of learning, growth and the graces of following Jesus across

¹ This quote is taken from the presentation of Bridget Down, West of England Learning Network, to the 2022 Methodist Learning Network Conference.

² Arthur Rank Centre, <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk>

contexts. I have become convinced that there is powerful learning to be received from these rural communities for the mission of the church wherever it is carried out.

In arguing this position, the main part of this article will be concerned with describing areas of learning from rural contexts, which, I believe, can be gifts for deepening mission and faith learning more widely. These gifts are described under three headings: cultures of conversation, chat and connection; numbers and knowing what counts; and the receiving of time. In order to give a little context for these themes, however, I will begin with a brief critical account of the place of the rural in missiology and ecclesiology today.

The valorisation of the urban and the rural as problem in contemporary church thinking

After *Mission-Shaped Church* was published nearly 20 years ago,³ there followed sometimes heated debates in the Church of England and further afield as to the implications of the “mixed economy” of fresh expressions, church plants and “traditional” forms of church. Pioneer ministries, about which many readers of *ANVIL* will be more knowledgeable than I, and which have been well-supported by CMS and doctoral researchers at the University of Roehampton, have contributed significantly to these debates about mission, new ways of being church and the place of “received” forms of church. I am not going to rehearse these debates here. However, early on there was a particular response to these movements and conversations from rural churches – perhaps most immediately from Sally Gaze in her *Mission-shaped and Rural*.⁴ While Gaze’s interesting work, drawing on her own considerable experience of rural ministry, is broadly supportive of the vision offered in *Mission-Shaped Church*, she recognises that a great deal of what that publication stimulated was discussion and practices within more urban settings:

There are lots of stories of exciting, resource-hungry, big projects, with dedicated teams of professionals that seem so far from the rural situation that country people like me feel we could never emulate them.⁵

Yet, as Gaze goes on to point out, fundamentally the missionary call is shaped *not* so much by a specific ecclesiological vision, as by *God’s* plan and promise for a particular context. To understand what mission calls us to in a rural setting, as with any other, requires the careful discernment of cultures, and participative inculturation.⁶

In the good number of years since these publications, it still seems to be the case that the missiological wisdom of rural Christian life plays second fiddle to the bigger, more visible urban and suburban church projects of the various denominations. Many of these particular churches do have stated concern for rural Christian communities: the Methodist Church in Britain recognises rural settings as a particular aspect of mission and evangelism;⁷ and both

³ Graham Cray, ed., *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

⁴ Sally Gaze, *Mission-shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006).

⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27–.

⁷ See “Rural Hope,” *The Methodist Church*, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/rural-hope/>

the Church of England⁸ and the Catholic Church in England and Wales⁹ are developing strategies for rural ministry and mission. At the same time, much of these initiatives seems to engage with rural settings as in some way problematic and especially challenging – a sense exacerbated by the marked number of closures of rural Methodist chapels in the last decade, and the increasing number of multi-parish benefices in the Church of England’s country ministry. Yet even now it is reckoned that 40 per cent of church attendance in the Church of England takes place in rural areas,¹⁰ against a backdrop of only 21 per cent of the general population in England living in such areas.¹¹ The nature of church and mission that is lived around these statistics is particular and fascinating – but also, I would suggest, under-researched and ecclesially neglected.¹² What literature there is in this field still seems to present mission and Christian faith in rural settings along the same generic paradigms of church growth, and what distinctive strategies might be needed in the village settings where there are often tiny congregations and few professional and monetary resources.¹³ What I have come to see, however, through our research on discipleship and faith-learning is that the rural experiences of faith and growth have their own distinctive wisdom – a wisdom much needed, in fact, by the “richer”, bigger centres of Christian life.

Gifts from the rural churches for mission and faith learning

For the remainder of this article I want to illustrate from our research project the three significant gifts for mission and faith learning from the lived experience of rural Christians and their communities. Each of these gifts individually raises questions for the ways in which we speak about and practice handing on faith, whether through evangelism, witness or teaching and learning. Taken together, I argue, the account given of these rurally grown gifts suggest that there are some fundamentals of human faith learning and Christian living that can be seen here more starkly and vividly present, *precisely* because they arise out of situations that are less ecclesially heavy, less “well-resourced”, less “strategic”. They invite us, rather, to attend to the “small things” as the places of the Spirit’s prompting and the growing of faith and discipleship.

⁸ For reports of rural mission and growth related to the Renewal and Reform movement, see “Reports on Rural Mission and Growth,” *The Church of England*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/rural-mission/reports-rural-mission-and-growth>

⁹ See “Rural Issues,” *The Catholic Church: Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales*, <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/rural-issues/>

¹⁰ “Reports on Rural Mission and Growth”.

¹¹ “Official Statistics: Key Findings, Statistical Digest of Rural England,” *Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-findings-statistical-digest-of-rural-england/key-findings-statistical-digest-of-rural-england>. This percentage rises to 35 per cent in Wales – see “A Statistical Focus on Rural Wales: 2008 Edition,” *Statistics for Wales*, <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2018-12/080515-statistical-focus-rural-wales-08-en.pdf>.

¹² Curiously the essays of Steven Croft, ed., *Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today’s Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008) offer no sustained discussion of the particularities of rural communities, and often speak of “the parish” in generic, composite ways (e.g. 168–70), which fail to differentiate demographic differences.

¹³ For example, see James Bell and Jill Hopkinson, *Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups: A Summary of Key Findings and Implications of Recent Research* (London: The Church of England, 2017), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/shaping-strategies-for-mission-and-growth-in-rural-multi-church-groups.pdf>; Rural Affairs Group of the General Synod, *Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church* (London: The Church of England, 2015), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs-misc-1092-released-for-mission-growing-the-rural-church.pdf>.

Cultures of conversation, chat and connection

As is evidenced across the sites of our research project, and witnessed to in a number of other articles in this *ANVIL* edition, the significance of conversation for faith learning and mission is a major theme across our work. In the rural contexts, however, the nature of this key theme is thrown into particular relief as its integration with the ordinary patterns of daily life and relationship are evidenced. It was not so much that conversation was discovered to be the best way of learning, but rather that faith was being grown and shared through the established practices of talking together. In these smaller communities, even if it couldn't always be said that everyone knew everyone else, there is, nonetheless, a tangible sense of connection, daily recognition and greeting. As one of our participants remarked:

Now, one of the things I learned was that farmers feed you. The old-fashioned way of learning through conversation around a table is pretty key in rural life. The integration, the knowledge of who's who, the fact that there's often a familial link as well. Be careful who you talk to. They're probably related to somebody. That kind of thing opens up doors for life skill learning through conversation around meals. (Alice)

The witness from more rural settings was very clear that such daily chat, including with those outside your immediate household, is a staple of activity and shapes the day. It isn't so much intentional as an ingrained part of the social culture. This is the way that learning happens in a village, commented Michael, through “the gossip around the well or the gossip in the pub”.

One important aspect of this culture of daily conversation, alongside its “ordinariness” and properness to rural living, was the way it changed the perception of “church” and “wider society”. This was especially well expressed by one respondent, Kevin, with a long experience of working in rural ministry. He spoke of not really “getting this sacred-secular divide thing”, and how it really didn't seem to work in rural settings, “Because when people say, well this is church and this is community, I think, yes, it's kind of both.” This was rooted for Kevin in the kinds of relationship that rural ministry threw him into – not the expected norms of minister and congregant, but rather those of one villager among the rest, all be it one with a recognisable social and, for some, religious role. In a startling way it was clear to Kevin that it was his job to support and recognise the conversations of the wider community around him, rather than expect to be the one always spoken with, or at the centre of important talk:

... when I started off as a probationer minister, it became even more obvious that people didn't talk to me, as this newly qualified minister. They talked to the people who washed up in the WI and went to the pub and they met in the shop, who they knew went to the church and the chapel. And it was my job then to support them within that process. That's how I ended up in rural ministry, and I've done it ever since.

The rural community is, already, a community in conversation, chatting and sharing and knowing each other. The Christian mission is not to bring these relational gifts to that community, but rather to celebrate, support and nurture them, working with and learning from the connections that already exist and which extend beyond the ecclesial boundaries. We cannot simply look at explicitly church or chapel activity as a measure of what is going on in Christian life. As Kevin puts it, “We've got to get beyond the numbers thing to actually look at what the engagement is. I've always found that with rural churches, because they're so much more linked in generally... a lot of the ones in Devon were really linked up with family, with community.”

This emphasis on quotidian chat and connection also goes some way to explaining the ways in which the excellent resources and programmes were – and, significantly, were *not* – used

by the rural communities we worked with. Many church leaders and rural officers valued these resources, but more for the ideas they might spark than as simply applicable materials, to be put to use in their published form. Courses and programmes weren't seen to fit the realities of sometimes very small and ageing Christian communities, for all the helpful insights they might contain. What was more likely, in both the Wales Learning Network and national rural networks, was that particular people in these organisational teams would be valued for the advice over the phone, the helpful conversation, the local visit. The personal and conversational remained the staple and effective means of sharing the things of God, in ways deeply and properly embedded in the day-to-day realities of people's lives and work.

Numbers and knowing what counts

In speaking of the importance of relationship and quotidian connection, I related how Kevin spoke of this, commenting that “we've got to get beyond the numbers thing”. In churches whose increasing managerial preoccupation is with institutional decline, all too often the smallness of the rural congregations that gather on a Sunday is cause for alarm, and also reason for rationalising resources, moving personnel and investment away from such places to where there is a critical mass of people. On a business model this is, of course, entirely understandable; but, as our respondents were keen to express, such a reading of numbers in rural settings risks missing the heart of the type of mission and discipleship that is flourishing in just these settings. Not only that, it fails to understand the special graces and gifts that accompany such small numbers, both in terms of small faith gatherings, and the relative smallness of the local communities themselves.

If it is the case that the personal, relational and daily conversational are key parts of mission and discipleship, then the smaller community can be seen as having distinct advantages over larger gatherings. This was vividly described by Alice:

The thing is, James, if I were retired and I could choose any church to go to, I'd go to one of these little churches because that's where they know me, that's where I know them. That's where I can have intimate conversations and personal conversations. That's when I come up face to face to people and see God in their face and hear God in their story. If I go to a church with 50 or more people in it, what do you offer me? Better singing? A screen to look at? So, this assumption that these people want that bigger church is an arrogant assumption. If a farmer is in a field all day on his own, every day, why does he want to be with 200 people?

When we consider all the strategies and resources invested in mission by our churches, this witness calls us more fundamentally to consider what could be more compelling for the learning of faith and for the evangelising of hearts and cultures than being in a community where you can “see God in people's faces and hear God in their story”. And if this is a key way in which the Spirit touches people, then perhaps we should be nurturing smaller, located communities rather than longing for larger, packed churches.

There have, of course, been many attempts – more and less successful – in encouraging small groups as a part of faith learning and discipling in urban and large church settings.¹⁴ However, I want to suggest that what we are seeing here in rural settings is something a little different. These are not intentionally formed small groups, organised as part of a parish or congregation's strategy for learning and discipling. Rather, what is being referred to by our

¹⁴ In the Methodist context we would mention especially the work of Roger Walton, *Disciples Together: Discipleship, Formation and Small Groups* (London: SCM Press, 2014). See also Anna Creedon, *Do Small Groups Work? Biblical Engagement and Transformation* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

respondents is the natural experience, authentic to their way of life, of getting together to talk about things with people you know and share that way of life with – a way of life that is primarily outside of explicitly church activity. It is in these contexts that a particular kind of readiness for thinking and learning can be experienced, even while it takes by surprise and is unintentional. Patricia describes this:

I think if you're happy and comfortable in a situation, you take in a lot more than if you're anxious or whatever. And the group we have, the coffee and conversation in [another congregant's] house, with just a half a dozen of us, that's a really nice group. It's only a small number of us and we can share things. And we're just talking about what's happened during the week. Different people's experience and you think, I never thought of it from that point of view before.

In fact, it becomes clear that “numbers” need to be thought of differently in rural contexts. For if we simply measure numbers attending church, we will miss the power of the connections, conversations and simple *presence* of even the tiniest number of Christians in a small, rural community. Alice's conversation with an urban ministry colleague highlights what is at stake here:

We number crunch, don't we? Talking to one presbyter, he was in a city. He said, this Messy Church you're doing, how many to get, Alice? I said well, we've only had two, and I can't believe how many we got. We got double figures. I was really amazed. You got 90? No, we got 10, and I was really pleased. In fact, I think I'd done three at the time, and I said something like we got 10 and then we got 15. And now we get an average of 15, 16. He said, why are you bothering? Pack up and go home. How many do you get? [I asked] He said, I never get less than 30. I said well, the population in the village of children is 12. So, I get more than 100 per cent of the population. What's your population? How many children in your school? We number crunch wrong. It doesn't mean it's not right to do it [Messy Church] because we get 15 children or 14 children. It means it's absolutely right to do it, because that means the percentage of children in that village, they're all hearing God's story at some stage. All of them. Every possible child. We just count our numbers wrong.

“We number crunch wrong.” When the managerial assumption is that it is large numbers that will be impactful, or better enable learning and growing as disciples, there is a failure to recognise the wisdom of these rural experiences. Nor is it, I suggest, just a matter of counting differently in relation to village settings, as distinct from urban and suburban churches. If we take to heart what is being learned and nurtured in rural communities, we will begin to recognise something more fundamental about the local, and the essential nature of the existing local relationships as the basis for conversations about life and faith. The faith learning builds from and is intertwined with the growing of the person in the relationships, work and social engagement of their everyday. There may be an occasional delight in the big event, the professional music, the excitement of numbers and that's OK; but I suspect that in terms of a rooted faith, and a daily growth-in-ordinary, we might be better to attend to the ways in which rural communities care for people in more domestically scaled numbers, enabling conversation and relationship to develop in more humanly quotidian ways. I am reminded of one of the responses to our survey to rural church officers, where one respondent named as their “best example of learning in a rural context” the experience of communion preparation with a “group” of just two people. What they witnessed to in this experience was a profound unlocking of personal potential and growth in learning. When asked what they thought made this possible, the answer was clearly about the relationships and conversation enabled by

such “smallness”: this was “not a course, but discussion space; and it was driven by the individuals taking ownership for their own learning”. Such personal attentiveness, however, cannot be manufactured from the right course, training or technique; the gifts required are different, and one of the most important, our research informs us, is *time*.

The receiving of time

More precisely, this third gift of learning from rural churches concerns our relationship with time. What has already been described – about connection and daily chat or conversation, and about the gifts of smallness and the interconnections that can follow – all depends for life and effectiveness on a certain kind of inhabiting of time. This should not be read in terms of some romanticisation of the rural as occupied by places less characterised by stress, busyness or long working hours; indeed, all these things are very much a part of rural life, today and historically. Nonetheless there seemed to be an openness to spending time with others, in conversation and hospitality, that found its proper place in the particular rhythms of rural work and life. Earlier we saw how one of our research respondents spoke warmly of the kitchen table and the shared meal, recognising them as places of traditional conversation and learning; this was further elaborated on in something said by another respondent, Cathy:

So there’s a huge wealth of faith there that I think they would find hard to speak about, and yet it’s there. It’s so rooted, you think you’re privileged to go and have a cup of tea with them... There’s a lot of tea and cake. You could advance tea and cake, that could be the resource, tea and cake. Tea and cake and time.

Very often, as discussed in other articles in this *ANVIL* edition, church leaders and educators reach for the course, the programme, as a way of further enabling learning and growing in faith; and these things do have their place for some – rather a few, in fact. For most it is “learning moments” that really count for something as they reflect on how they have learned and grown in faith. Learning takes place in life’s little moments of epiphany, of glimpses and senses of something of grace, of God. As Sarah describes it:

But yeah. I mean, I think in in everyday life, there are times when you... It sounds really cliché, but you go for a walk or something, and, [it’s] like really pretty or really lovely, and you kind of think maybe there is a God, you know, like that. Yeah, that does sound really cliché, but you do. I kind of experience those moments in time, like, in time and space and outdoor life. And yeah, and I do experience those moments with kids as well. Like, they do something and I’m like that’s lovely and so pretty or, you know, yeah, and that does feed my faith.

This “momentary learning” alerts us to the significance of our attitude to time in the practices of and theological reflections on mission and faith learning. It seems to me that the understanding of time upon which more formal learning is predicated sees time more as something to be committed, carved out, “found” and “used”. We are called to “make time” and “take time” to attend to our learning. Yet it was Cathy’s identifying of “tea and cake and time” as *the* “resource” that was needed, that resonated most authentically for many of our rural reflectors. This was a living of time that seems to come from a place of the inhabiting of the time given – a graced receiving of time, as gift rather than a limited commodity.

This reading of time and its place within faith learning and mission has significant practical consequences. We need to learn again what our missionary foremothers and forefathers knew – that it may take a lifetime of faithful service and love in a place to build living relationships in the Spirit of the kind that can really enable others to encounter Christ in their midst. Accompanying people is, by definition, a long-term commitment, with rhythms closer

to those of the domestic and familial than to the schedules of the school, university, factory or business organisation.

Concluding reflections

In 2022 I had the privilege of attending the Methodist Church's Learning Network Conference, not only sharing some of the wider insights from this research project, but also taking part in conversations around learning, mission and the visions of the Methodist community in Britain concerning these matters. Helpfully, there were concerns raised by a number of those attending – all expert practitioners in their field of Christian learning – about our project's emphasis on the affective, the everyday, the personal learning and accompanying growing in faith, which so many of our participants attested to. What happens to the normative in such subjective learning? Aren't these accounts all rather “vague”? How can “we” (professionals/clergy/“experts”) ensure that what was taking place in people's everyday faith growing was “good learning”, and not “bad learning”? These are important questions and there is a well thought-out response to them to be included in our writing further about the project. But what struck me at the time, and is especially pertinent to this article, is that it was those committed to working in rural areas who more readily understood the “hidden” learning and faith development of the small things of everyday. For the rural churches, it was not more training, resources or strategy that was sought, but rather central investment in time and people, and a recognition that their work does not lend itself to the metrics so often used to reductively describe the “success” or “failure” of church life.

When asked to reflect on “the spirituality of the church of the future”, German theologian Karl Rahner famously remarked that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he [sic] will not exist at all”.¹⁵ In saying this, Rahner argues for the significance of the deeply human and personal encounter with God *in all* things, seeing this “mysticism” as an often hidden, even individual, relationship with God and God's world in Christ. Such a living of faith is developed

not from a pedagogic indoctrination from outside, supported by public opinion in secular society or in the Church, nor from a merely rational argumentation of fundamental theology, but from experience of God, of his Spirit, of his freedom, bursting out of the very heart of human existence and able to be really experienced there, even if this experience cannot wholly be a matter for reflection or be verbally objectified.¹⁶

The spirituality of rural mission and learning I witnessed and was enriched by spoke of precisely this “mysticism” for Rahner's future, and our present, church. It suggests a “simple” matter of being alongside people, receiving and living the time needed for the building of authentic relationship, so necessary for conversations in the Spirit. I am left wondering why so much of “church management” finds this simplicity, and its very human demands and graces, so difficult to nurture. I have a hunch that Rahner is right and that our future life as Christians, wherever we are, will depend on precisely these gifts of rural mission and discipleship.


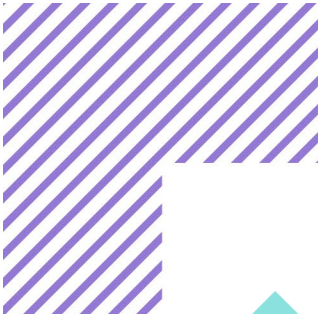
¹⁵ Karl Rahner, “The Spirituality of the Church of the Future,” in *Theological Investigations 20: Concern for the Church*, trans. Edward Quinn, ed. Paul Imhof (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*



Clare Watkins is reader in Ecclesiology and Practical Theology at the University of Roehampton. A Roman Catholic, lay-woman theologian, committed to teaching and research in the areas of ecclesiology, sacramental and practical theology, Clare has a particular concern for working in ways that contribute to the integration of academic theology and faith practice, for the good of both. A co-originator of “theological action research”,

Clare is now director of the Theology and Action Research Network (TARN – www.theologyandactionresearch.net), director of the UK Network of Catholic Practice-Engaged Theologians and principal investigator on a theological action research project exploring the realities of faith learning. She has worked with a wide range of church providers of adult formation, as well as with agencies of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales and international ecumenical bodies. Her latest book, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020), reflects and develops these varied concerns.



Challenging discipleship, noticing the Spirit and nurturing everyday faith

By James Butler

The suggestion that what is needed in churches in twenty-first century Britain is better discipleship is an almost irrefutable statement. Discipleship has been held up as a direct response to church decline and a cornerstone of church renewal. The logic goes that if people grew and deepened in faith, then they would become more actively involved in church, evangelism and mission. Engaging with the grassroots experience of learning in the Methodist Church, through this research project, has brought some helpful insights that challenge typical narratives of discipleship and church renewal. In particular is the insight that the development and deepening of faith often take place in informal and conversational ways in the midst of everyday life. This raises important questions about the discipleship narrative, particularly around who is disciplined, who is doing the discipling and where that discipleship happens. In theological terms, this is about agency within discipleship and the relationship between the work of the Spirit, the work of the leader and the actions of the individual Christian. I will argue that the accounts of learning and deepening faith from our participants challenge a notion that the leader is that agent of discipleship and instead put the emphasis primarily on the work of the Spirit. They also suggest that churches need to see everyday life, and not the formal patterns of church, as the primary site of learning. I propose that Christians should, rather than seeing themselves as teachers who pass on knowledge, be seeking to cultivate practices of noticing, nurturing and naming in response to the work of the Spirit. I argue for a much more reciprocal approach to discipleship that promotes mutual accompaniment rather than a relationship of disciple and discipler.

I will begin by outlining the turn to discipleship within Christian denominations and the problem of agency particularly in the work of David Heywood and Mike Moynagh. To do this critique I will turn to the lived practice explored in our research, and finally I will outline the practices of noticing, nurturing and naming as key practice of mission and discipleship.

The turn to discipleship

In denominations, organisations and training institutions the language of discipleship continues to gain currency. It was at the heart of the Church of England's programme of

Renewal and Reform,¹ it has been highlighted in the Roman Catholic Church by various voices,² and British Methodism has used it as a key way to understand its core principles and the Methodist Way of Life.³ The World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism put discipleship front and centre in the Arusha Call to Discipleship, and it is pointed to a key within many texts about mission.⁴ In their edited volume, Andrew Hayes and Stephen Cherry highlight how the term discipleship has been raised to "new levels of prominence and significance within the church" and how there has been a huge range of programmes, materials and books on the subject.⁵ They chose the title *The Meanings of Discipleship* to reflect the "diversity and plurality of discipleship" and their volume is a witness to such diversity.⁶ Simon Foster observes similar trends but highlights how often the perspectives of ordinary Christians are missing.⁷ During his research he identified that the language of "disciple" held little traction with these ordinary Christians who did not regard themselves in that way, so much so that he left the question referring to disciples out of his questionnaire.⁸ While Foster continued to use the term disciple in his research, his experiences raise interesting questions, given the prevalence of the term in wider literature, of why it had so little purchase for ordinary Christians. The fact that they don't recognise themselves as disciples does not necessarily mean that they see no need to grow and develop in faith, but it might indicate that their self-understanding is rather different. What is the benefit of naming them as disciples and to whom? This is the focus of this paper: exploring questions of agency in learning and discipleship.

To demonstrate this problem with agency in the accounts of discipleship, I will briefly turn to two authors who use the language of discipleship within their proposals for church renewal within the C of E: David Heywood and Mike Moynagh.⁹ For both, discipleship is a key means to developing a focus on mission and seeing churches grow and flourish. Both make observations that are in keeping with the findings of this project: around the need for discipleship to be focused around everyday life; about it being relational; and how it is different for every person, relating to their own vocation and journey. Heywood recognises that "most learning is unplanned and completely informal", is often unconscious, is normally related to personal goals and vocation, and takes into account past experience.¹⁰ Likewise

¹ Renewal and Reform has three stated goals: 1) contribute as the national church to the common good, 2) facilitate the growth of the church in numbers and depth of discipleship and (3) reimagine the church's ministry. See The Archbishops' Council, "General Synod: A vision and narrative for Renewal and Reform," The Church of England (2017), https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs_2038_-_a_vision_for_renewal_and_reform.pdf.

² Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntingdon, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).

³ Martyn Atkins, "Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]," *Methodist Conference Reports 2011* (The Methodist Church in Britain, 2011), accessed 4 June 2018, <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf2011-pc-2-gen-sec-conference-report-0812.doc>; Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*.

⁴ The Archbishops' Council, "Setting God's People Free," The Church of England (2017), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs-2056-setting-gods-people-free.pdf>; Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*; Atkins, "Contemporary Methodism"; World Council of Churches, "The Arusha Call to Discipleship," *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 2 (2018): 542–46.

⁵ Andrew Hayes and Stephen Cherry, eds., *The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now* (London: SCM Press, 2021), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ Simon Foster, "What Helps Disciples Grow?" *Saltley Faith and Learning Series 2* (Birmingham: Saint Peter's Saltley Trust, 2016), 2, accessed 21 July 2023, <https://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/?download=760>

⁸ *Ibid.*; something similar is lamented by Weddell.

⁹ David Heywood, *Kingdom Learning: Experiential and Reflective Approaches to Christian Formation* (London: SCM Press, 2017); Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Heywood, *Kingdom Learning*, 49.

Moynagh emphasises the “varied nature of people’s [faith] journeys toward Jesus” and how in contemporary Britain that journey tends to be more prolonged.¹¹ What is striking about both accounts is that despite acknowledging the importance of the informal and unconscious, when they turn to talk about discipleship, they address the leaders as those who are responsible for discipleship. Heywood addresses “Christian educators” and leaders helping them to plan curricula and encouraging them to lead Christians into reflective learning. While often emphasising their facilitating and enabling role, they are positioned centrally within the discussion of developing discipleship and he spends some time offering a justification for the leaders determining the aims and objectives of learning.¹² Although he recognises the place of both formal and informal learning, he quickly turns to learning in the formal processes with a section headed “planning a programme of Christian learning”.¹³ Moynagh is less explicit about who is being addressed, but the implication is that there is a leader or a group of Christians who are helping other people coming along to the fresh expression to grow as disciples. Moynagh draws on models of faith development such as the Engel Scale, encouraging those leading to pay attention to the milestones of faith and to ask, “What stages have people reached and what would help them to take the next step?”¹⁴ In both accounts the leaders are those who plan, determine what is needed, identify the next steps and initiate the conversations. Both Heywood and Moynagh identify the significant role of the Spirit, but the primary focus of each book, at least in terms of the practices and approaches encouraged is the leader. Heywood states, “In everything I have written in the previous section about shared reflection I have assumed the presence of the Holy Spirit”¹⁵ and later states that “the Holy Spirit co-operates with the normal mechanisms of human learning”.¹⁶ Such broad summary statements cause me to question the extent to which the work of the Spirit is truly integrated into the account of learning given by Heywood. In reality, much of the focus of his writing remains on the leader and on the leader’s agency in the process. By turning to the lived experience of how people learn and grow in their faith from our research, I want to explore ways that the Spirit’s work can be seen as central and the conversational and informal nature of learning can remain the key site of learning.

While I have framed the paper around discipleship, and the turn to the language of discipleship in denominations was something which motivated the research, the language we used in the project was learning. We saw this as a more neutral term, although we found that it still had negative and unhelpful connotations for some within the research. In the next section I will therefore use our language of learning and particularly faith learning, before returning to discuss discipleship at the end of the paper.

Faith learning and the current context

As described in the editorial and project introduction, the accounts within our research reveal quite a different understanding of what we have called “faith learning” than is front and centre in the accounts of discipleship above. They tell of how developing, growing and changing in faith takes place in the midst of everyday life, often in the informal spaces, through conversations and through the ups and downs of everyday living. In this section I will highlight how these grassroots accounts offer a different perspective on the issues of

¹¹ Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 339.

¹² Heywood, *Kingdom Learning*, 137.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁴ Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 340.

¹⁵ Heywood, *Kingdom Learning*, 108.

¹⁶ Heywood, *Kingdom Learning*, 124.

discipleship discussed above. Through them I will suggest a different way to understand faith learning and “discipleship” that retains the centrality of the informal and of the work of the Spirit.

In the discussions within the research sites, “learning” was most immediately associated with learning in school. Those who had enjoyed their school experience and succeeded in that kind of formal learning were happy to embrace similar patterns of learning in church. We met with a number of Bible study groups who enjoyed that approach and found the discussion helpful and enriching. The kinds of curricula and patterns of learning encouraged by Heywood would appeal to these groups, but for those who had had a bad experience of learning in school, there was more resistance and hesitancy. Rose,¹⁷ from Oakfields Methodist Church, a small suburban congregation, was worried about not being able to find the “right answers” in the Bible study she participated in. She reflected on the way their new minister ran the Bible study in a much more discursive way.

[The previous minister] was very good at explaining and it was lovely to hear her and to understand but the truth is she did all the work, you know. I think [the current minister] makes us work a bit harder but we never seem to know the answers or I don't, anyway.

She was happy to listen to someone else talk about the Bible, but when the rest of the group was asked to contribute, she felt that they didn't know the answers. Anne, from a church in a small rural town, described her experience of leading such a Bible study.

One of the ladies in particular was very reluctant to join in anything that she thought was too academic. She used the word theological but I think she really meant academic. And therefore, the word “study” was off-putting so we called it Bible chat. And we said that it was going to be easy enough for everyone to take part in.

People within the group... were thinking it was going to be too difficult, too hard. But I don't think any of the material was particularly. It was just their expectation that it might be.

Thinking of it as a chat rather than a study was not simply a case of disguising the learning, it changed the expectation of what kind of learning might be taking place and what kind of participation might be acceptable. Ann found that everyone had enjoyed it and they had had some really good conversations. Rita relayed something similar from the Lent Bible study group on the book of Jonah that she had been involved with.

It wasn't just about learning facts and things like that. Having a laugh at some of the peculiar and wonderful situations that this dear gentleman got himself into. It was also about how this changes your own spiritual growth and where you are. And you can't put a finger on that.

In our conversations we tried to move the discussion towards other ways of understanding learning. In contrast to her concerns about giving “right answers”, when Rose reflected on the ways she had grown and matured in faith, she expressed how it was through “comradeship and the support, seeing everybody Sunday through Sunday”. She describes how being a Christian means to “follow Christ's teaching. You have to understand other people, how they see things. We don't put people down, we try and be kind, try and be helpful, try to be fair, do your best really.” Her lived experience of growing in faith was in the everyday faithfulness of following, loving and serving. In the same church Tom talked about how “it's been a

¹⁷ All names of people and churches are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

continuous journey... your faith deepens, you learn and you change through experiences and just by going on this journey of life with other people". When we asked where this happened in the life of this church, people began to talk about the "deep conversations". Learning and growing in faith happened through conversations where people shared more personally and openly. It was easiest to identify deep conversations happening in times bereavement and serious illness. The church had previously reflected how to encourage these conversations and had tried to have lunches together after church, but it did not work as they would have hoped. These conversations where faith deepened could not be easily made to happen.

There were some clues from other sites about how conversations deepen. Keith, from one congregation in a fairly small, semi-rural town, made this observation.

You learn more in a coffee morning than you've done in church because you start to talk about what was said then and all of a sudden it broadens out.

"Broadening" and "deepening" were ways participants described these moments when conversations take a turn and more significant connection and learning seems to take place. These are more easily identified in the big events of life such as bereavement, illness and having children. But Keith suggests that these moments can also happen in everyday conversation. These deep conversations cannot be made to happen, but when space is made for everyday conversations, like in the coffee after church, sometimes they do. Similarly, we saw moments taking place in other ways in everyday life: visiting the elderly, a walk in the countryside, a chance conversation on the dog walk, the cuppa at the farmhouse table or the conversations at parent and toddler group. Rather than try to make these conversations happen, it was more about tuning in to notice them. The more we looked, the more we saw faith learning taking place in these ordinary and everyday moments. People taking risks and stepping out in their lives also deepened faith and there were examples of people doing the prayers in church, getting involved in a children's summer lunch club, helping with RE in schools and volunteering to visit the elderly. People noticed the ways in which stepping out and trying something was an opportunity to grow and develop.¹⁸

The context for so much of this learning taking place was the caring community. There were many stories of people being supported and cared for that were important for their own faith. Wendy described how her hope was to "explore faith and what it means to us in the context of the loving group that we have, that can encourage, support and help us move on". We heard this too in more formal theological education settings. Ruth, who had trained for ordination, talked about her experience at theological college.

I learned more through that experience of kindness and compassion than I think anything because it was the relationship of being cared for. That was the formation.

In these caring groups people learned to see and experience God. Alice, who was working as a pioneer in a rural area, described how much she liked visiting the small chapels.

If I were retired... I'd go to one of these little churches because that's where they know me, that's where I know them. That's where I can have intimate conversations and personal conversations. That's when I come up face to face to people and see God in their face and hear God in their story.

¹⁸ I have written on this in more detail here: James Butler, "The 'Long and Winding Road' of Faith: Learning about the Christian Life and Discipleship from Two Methodist Congregations", *Practical Theology* 13, no. 3 (2020): 277–89.

It is in the loving group and the caring community and through the relationships that form that people can hear and see God in their interactions between each other.

As we explored faith learning in focus groups and reflector meetings, it became clear that the kind of learning associated with faith was different from learning in school or learning skills for a job. It was difficult to describe this type of learning, as Rita noted.

You've got this rather mysterious side of spirituality, haven't you, which you can't put your finger on to say is that learning. You've developed, let's say, in that side of your life. Because it's difficult to put it into words, isn't it? So how would you put that down on a feedback form?

William noted "faith is different" to learning in school. He compared biology, "where it's mostly about learning things, applying things", with faith, where "you allowed that to blossom and to become part of you and your personality and your whole being". Kate, the minister of the church where William and Wendy were members, reflected on how one sees things differently as they grow and develop, saying, "The only thing I can say to you is it's Spirit-led."

Presented in this way it could easily sound like the best thing to do is allow everyone to just find what works for them; to trust that the Spirit is at work and leave them to it. Certainly, some of the participants, particularly those who emphasised that they had a "practical faith", were reticent to identify a place for engagement with the Christian story and Scripture, what in our research we have referred to as "normative voices".¹⁹ Elizabeth, part of Westown Church, and heavily involved in serving and supporting others within the church and beyond, stated, "I guess it's more about being and doing and relationships than, you know, why would I need to talk about it?" However, we did find a clear place for normative voices. In one focus group in a rural church, we heard about how important the supportive coffee group was. It was only later in the conversation we discovered that there was some element of Bible reflection within the gathering when one member said, "If the Coffee and Conversation, it was just having a chat and coffee, I don't think it would be the same." She explained how the Bible helped to "centre their thoughts". These more formal elements of learning had a place, often feeding the conversations in natural and at times surprising ways, but the ways in which these voices resonated and the way learning came about was not really planned. It needed to be responded to in the caring and loving context discussed above.

Learning, change and growth in faith appears to happen in the peripheral spaces, in the everyday and in unexpected ways. It happens in a context of conversations and caring relationships. This can also be seen in the interviews included in this edition of *ANVIL*. It is in the moment when conversations "deepen" and "broaden" out. These moments are life moments, the events, crises and unexpected moments of life. They can come through risks and trying things out, and they are enabled because of the caring and supportive people around. Most significantly, this kind of faith learning is not easily pinned down, "you can't put your finger on it" and is "Spirit-led".

Allowing the Spirit to lead

As we have shared the insights about faith learning developed above with those involved in encouraging and enabling learning, they agree with what we have identified. The fact that

¹⁹ For more information see the introductory article in this edition of *ANVIL*, "Researching the grassroots experience of faith learning". For more on the "four voices" approach, see Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010); Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020).

people are always learning, and this learning takes place in conversational, informal and even unconscious ways, is not in itself a new insight. The problem arises when educators and leaders try to draw on these insights to develop approaches to discipleship. So often the response to such observations is to ask how these insights can be drawn into formal learning and how they shape the way the leader approaches their learning. For Heywood this meant leaders placing theological reflection at the heart of learning and designing curricula around the felt needs of learners. For Moynagh this meant leaders identifying the next steps for those exploring faith and becoming involved in the church. This results in the agent of learning and discipleship reverting to the leader, and tries to draw these insights into the formal sites of learning, rather than finding ways to enable what is already going on. A story from the data helps to illustrate this point.

In one focus group the story was told of a group of friends who would go out for a coffee together after the service, and often go to each other's houses for Sunday lunch. They described how they "discuss all kinds of things, and quite often someone will say, 'Oh, what did you think of the sermon this morning?'" which opened up a variety of conversations. "We have an opportunity to discuss and question and... ideas, so that people would get more out of it." They noticed how, within these informal gatherings, opportunities sometimes appeared for conversations to deepen. Someone responded to this story and compared that with their own experience.

We did [something similar] for a while with the Revd Jones after preaching; he decided one Sunday a month to have a discussion service. He said a few words for about five minutes, then we sat in a circle in the vestry and he faced us, and we asked questions and had a discussion. Most of the questions went over my head, but... so we did try that for a while.

The idea of learning through conversation is picked up by the Revd Jones, but it is brought into the formal space and rather than being the "opportunity to discuss and question" in the Sunday lunch example, this just went over their head. This is the move made by Heywood, and in a different way by Moynagh, to bring these insights into the assumed learning context rather than to find ways to create spaces to support and facilitate that learning. Heywood wants leaders to design curricula and Moynagh wants them to develop pathways and stepping stones, but in the context of the reflections on grassroots learning, I suggest a different emphasis is needed. Given the importance of informal conversation, peripheral spaces and the everyday experiences of life, both big and small, they need to be at the centre of what we refer to as "discipleship". Even more significant is the sense that this needs to be primarily identified as a work of the Spirit. In this section I will propose a way that this can be done drawing on the insights of "not being able to put your finger on" the kind of learning going on and naming it as Spirit-led. If the Spirit's agency is primary, what might it mean to take an approach to learning that, following a *missio Dei* theology, seeks to discern what the Spirit is doing and join in?²⁰ To do this I'm identifying three postures: noticing, nurturing and naming.

Noticing

It was interesting to see how the kinds of conversations we had within the research as we gathered with the teams, had focus groups and reflected together on what we were learning

²⁰ Quoted in Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

were identified a number of times by participants as something they needed to do more of. A *missio Dei* theology of mission sees mission as God's, with Christians and churches called to participate in that mission. This has been summed up more popularly, following Rowan Williams, as "finding out where the Spirit is at work and joining in".²¹ While this is a complex and somewhat contested task, what is needed is a posture of noticing and discernment. This can be picked up in the context of faith learning. Noticing is about developing an openness to what God is doing in our lives and the lives of those around us. In the data this happened in a context of care and through often informal conversations. Given the reflections on how deep conversations happen, one way to explore this further would be to become sensitive to conversations and deepening and to notice what keeping that space open might look like.

Nurturing

Learning was identified in the data as taking place in the context of the "loving group"; of having a supportive community and of being cared for. Interestingly some of those involved in leading and training who participated in the research showed a level of resistance to the idea that a key role for a leader was support and care. They were happier with challenge and encouragement, but what we saw again and again was that ordinary life brings enough challenges, critical moments and events without a need for them to be created artificially. If faith learning happens in the everyday events and moment of life, both big and small, then the caring community and a posture of nurturing allows these moments to be noticed, to bring insight, to spark conversation and to deepen relationships as people learn together through them.

Pope Francis talks about mutual accompaniment, disciples accompanying disciples. He writes about the importance of trusting the Spirit's work in the Christian and how the Spirit leads, guides and helps in discernment. Alongside trusting the Spirit is mutual accompaniment: "Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples."²² Francis describes accompaniment as an art, "remov[ing] our sandals before the sacred ground of the other".²³ Connecting to the idea of noticing, he encourages careful, compassionate and patient listening. "Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives."²⁴ The grassroots accounts of learning demonstrated this kind of growth, each person having their own experience of faith, and of learning together while accompanying each other in a nurturing community.

Naming

All this raises two important questions about the place of the Christian story and tradition, and how faith is shared. Rather than thinking about the Bible, the Christian story and the normative elements of faith as the things that need to be taught to encourage growth, we saw the ways the normative sources of faith-initiated conversations arose within wider conversations and helped make sense of experiences. In presenting this research there have been questions about whether we are placing less emphasis on Scripture and tradition, but

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²² Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, 2013, para. 173, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

²³ *Ibid.*, para. 169.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 171.

what we are actually trying to highlight is how Scripture and tradition, and other normative voices, come from multiple sources and connect with the learning taking place in the ordinary and peripheral. These normative voices might be the starting point of a conversation as it connects to the life and faith of the Christians engaging with it, but it could just as easily be something offered into the natural flow of conversation. Rather than thinking about one source for the normative, these normative voices are more like multiple springs and wells that are discovered in the context of the accompaniment of the “loving group”: people sharing from their own experience and wisdom. After all, Christians are not empty vessels, but many of the people in the communities and churches have long histories of faithfully engaging in prayer, Bible, worship and mission. Viewed like this, it suggests there should be less anxiety on where the normative voice might come from, and a greater focus on recognising and naming those voices when they arise. The Christian story, the Bible and tradition can be seen as offering a shared language and a way of naming faith and the experiences. Mark McIntosh talks about spirituality being the impression of the encounter with God, and sees theology being the expression of that encounter.²⁵ Naming these encounters and bringing them to expression takes them from being a personal experience to one that can be shared with others. By turning explicitly to the Bible and Christian tradition, there is a language where these experiences can be made sense of, discussed, shared and become meaningful for the whole group, not just the individual. The Christian story and tradition provide a language to name and share faith in the middle of deep conversations.

Growing in faith, hope and love – a conclusion

Rather than thinking of discipleship as something that needs to be initiated and planned by a leader or leadership team, our research suggests that it needs to be identified firstly as a work of the Spirit. The Spirit is at work in people’s lives, and as Francis highlights, trust is then one of the first responses. Rather than thinking about how leaders bring about discipleship, what I have offered is a series of postures for Christians that would enable a mutual and reciprocal approach to discipleship to develop, one that retains the Spirit as the primary agent of discipleship at work in everyday life, of learning and of deepening faith. These mean seeing discipleship primarily as participation in the work of Jesus and the Spirit.²⁶ Postures of noticing, nurturing and naming through mutual and reciprocal relationships become the basis of a discipleship that sees the Spirit as the primary agent. As Christians we seek to participate in what God is doing in the lives of those around us and walk together on the journey of faith.

Turning attention to the agency of the Spirit in discipleship also raises the question of what learning is for. Rather than seeing learning in the context of reversing decline, renewing the church or even developing faith, the turn to the Spirit encourages it to be set in a wider and expansive eschatological vision. It is a learning that has an eschatological scope, that anticipates and participates in the coming kingdom of God. At the heart of learning is a vision of participation and of growing in wisdom. The letter of 1 Cor. surfaced regularly in conversations within the research project with its themes of maturing, of wisdom, of discerning and of love, and so perhaps that is the best place to finish here. 1 Cor. 13 is a reflection on what is important, what the things that last are and what the things that will

²⁵ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, 1st edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 6.

²⁶ The apostle Paul’s emphasis on being “In Christ” and of “life through the Spirit” would be a helpful way to develop this. See, for example, *Michael J. Gorman, Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul’s Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

come to an end are. This is an eschatological vision where the things that last – faith, hope and love – undergird all that is done. In the context of church decline and uncertainty of the place of faith in post-Christian Britain, these are words that offer hope and open our horizons to the work of the Spirit above our limited and at times anxiety-driven views.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.²⁷

The kind of learning we need, the kind of discipleship we need, is the kind that notices the Spirit, participates in the work of Christ, and nurtures and names the things that arise; one that is focused on the things that last: faith, hope and love.



James Butler is pioneer MA lecturer and assistant coordinator for Pioneer Mission Training at CMS. 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.

²⁷ 1 Cor. 13:12–13 (NRSV)



“Does not wisdom call?": faith learning in Methodist practice

By Stan Brown, Graham Jones and Sue Miller

The mission of the Methodist Church

In its foundational documents, the Methodist Church in Britain “ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission”.¹ Contemporary Methodism would hold to this calling, though the word “holiness” may not feature quite so prominently as it once did, the Church having shifted its favoured language over time – more recently from the word “discipleship”, which was very much to the fore when this research was initiated, to an emphasis on a “Methodist Way of Life.” The notions of holiness, and wisdom, however, remain fundamental to the Church’s calling and mission, and are fundamental in this project about learning for discipleship and mission, where the term “faith learning” came to encapsulate what was being uncovered in different learning contexts throughout the Methodist Church.

Faith learning

“Faith learning” emerged from the project as a term that conjured up the virtues of wisdom and holiness while also highlighting the processes involved in becoming faithful disciples, holy and wise. Exploring this process of reaching out for wisdom and holiness involves various questions. Can the process be facilitated? Does it need a teacher? Is it enabled by a carefully designed, structured course or does it require a particular and distinctive approach? This paper explores some of these questions in the light of the findings from the research – research that looked at collaborative learning in a wide range of places and projects within Methodism and her ecumenical partners. It reflects on how some of the answers chime with Methodist tradition and Wesleyan spirituality and considers the implications for contemporary practices and initiatives. It also explores how theological action research as a methodology has not only enabled the discernment of these findings but also, through its methods and informing framework, elucidated some of the tensions and insights about the

¹ The Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 2* (London: The Methodist Church in Great Britain, 2023), 213, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/30255/conf-2023-cpd-vol-2.pdf>

place and nature of learning in Methodist polity and in the fulfilment of Methodism's mission and calling.

What was uncovered in the research

A broader understanding of learning

Learning has long been recognised within the Methodist Church as “a means of growth in grace and holiness”,² and the research unearthed the need for a broad and rich understanding of learning, in terms of its source, nature and consequences. Various research participants expressed that learning involved moving beyond information and knowledge. Colin notes that:

There's a difference between learning something so you can recite it, or you know what it is, and understanding it.

The recognition of the complexity of learning and its elements featured alongside other conversations about a perceived resistance to learning within Methodist churches, particularly among older members, with an association between learning and the classroom, with “right” and “wrong” answers, and a fear about anything too “academic” or “theological”:

One of the ladies in particular was very reluctant to join in anything that she thought was too academic. She used the word theological but I think she really meant academic. And therefore, the word “study” was off-putting so we called it Bible chat. And we said that it was going to be easy enough for everyone to take part in. (Anne)

The association between learning and change also came to the fore in much of the data:

With the learning that's taking place around local preachers, it's not just about learning stuff. It's about how it changes them as people and changes the people around them... You see these folks grow... (Sarah)

Learning is the sort of thing that, if we are open to it, will change us and help us to develop. Learning is something that is an integral part of life, whether we want to do it or not. (Kate)

This notion of growth through learning, this moving towards holiness and wisdom, loving and living well, was visible in much of the data, regardless of location or grouping. The term “faith learning” seems to encapsulate the process and its impact, and to be recognised by many participants even if they do not, or cannot, name or explain what is going on. Also evident was the fact that learning often takes place outside (or alongside) the formal courses and the opportunities – in the informal, the everyday, in unexpected moments and encounters, in real-life situations. Much learning was incidental, incognito or disguised, occurring while other things were happening or the focus was elsewhere. We were challenged, too, to acknowledge that individuals and communities were often more developed in their learning than had been thought. What appeared to be constraining was the lack of confidence, particularly in being able to articulate the profound wisdom and deep understanding that was clearly evident.

Learning through conversation and in community

While a degree of reticence, resistance and a lack of confidence were detected when it came to learning, especially in formal situations or when the focus was on attending courses,

² The Methodist Conference, “Stirring up the Spark of Grace: Connexional Training Strategies,” *Conference Reports 2008*, no. 42, 430, https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf08_42_Conx_Training_Strat_report210808.doc

barriers to learning were overcome when relationships, community and conversation helped to create a more propitious environment. When shared with those tasked with facilitating learning and development within the Methodist Church, there was considerable recognition of the validity of these findings. An extract from a research interview in part of the project looking at learning in rural communities illustrates this:

Oh we've looked at a very good initiative, Holy Habits. We're using some of that material to develop... But out of that, you see, really what is essentially a community activity comes enrichment, but you don't have to force it. (Terry)

The Holy Habits material is concerned with formation into discipleship and a distinctive way of life. The resource material is very flexible and has generally been well received in the Methodist Church, which produced it. Here Terry acknowledges the value of the resource, but the learning conversations in which he took part were “essentially a community activity.”

In a very different and urban context, here is another example of a response to the Holy Habits material:

Can anybody remember any of the headings we worked under? You see, I can't.
(Helen)

The structured content of the material is not what had an impact on Helen, yet her overall experience was a positive one. Indeed the “holy habit” of effective learning that seems to recur in the study is one of conversation, which is, as Terry says, “essentially a community activity.”

Meanwhile our research among Methodists in Wales revealed an interest in the relationship between learning in worship through the traditional means of the sermon, and the learning in the conversations to which it might give rise. Here we see the interplay of a traditional and formal style of learning with the conversational culture of the Methodist people:

And it was... I learned more from getting to know someone in depth through the fellowship. So, how shall I say that, if we're open... that suggests I'm just talking about the social networking afterwards but I think it's more than that. It's realising that learning in the context of the church means learning about the people as well as the sermon so to speak, which this church is pretty good at, I think. (Jen)

The preaching is acknowledged to be of a good standard, but only in the depth of relationship found through the meaningful fellowship of disciples does the real learning from the resource of preaching take place.

Learning through being involved in serving the church with others was also a significant theme. Ian had originally attended an Alpha course but did not subsequently attend any other courses that were being offered:

I was vaguely aware of them; I found that I've become involved in the church and I've taken the role of being the steward and now I'm treasurer as well. So, I found that my church work and community support have [me]... quite fully occupied in terms of property committee and being a steward. And the people I'm surrounded by keep my faith together, shall we say, and I haven't really looked in detail at anything wider than that. (Ian)

Ian's relationships are his source of learning, and, similarly, it is conversation in community that was often found among our research participants to be fundamental in “build[ing] them

up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord".³ Conversation and faith learning would seem to be inextricably linked.

Resonance with Methodist tradition and Wesleyan spirituality

Conversation as formation and learning lies deep within the Methodist tradition and Wesleyan spirituality, and thus this finding should come as no surprise. The brothers John and Charles Wesley, along with their numerous siblings, had their primary education from their extraordinary mother, Susanna, whose impact was so significant that she has often been dubbed the “Mother of Methodism”. Susanna’s main pedagogy was one of strict routine and discipline, but alongside this stood another strand – that of conversation with her children:

I take such a proportion of time as I can spare every night to discourse with each child apart. On Monday I talk with Molly; on Tuesday with Hetty; Wednesday, with Nancy; Thursday, with Jacky; Friday, with Patty; Saturday, with Charles; and with Emily and Suky together on Sunday.⁴

An education for discipleship and mission in which careful attention is paid to speaking and listening. This Godly conversation was at the heart of John Wesley’s pastoral practice as a mature minister. A few examples from consecutive days in his journalling notes reveal just how significant this practice was:

March 1741

- ◆ Monday 30... 8.45[a.m.] at Bro. Waldron’s, conversed, tea, visited... 7.30[p.m.]... conversed to some...
- ◆ Tuesday 31... 10[a.m.] at Dr. Rawdon’s, tea, conversed; 11[a.m.] at home, conversed to many...

April

- ◆ Wednesday 1... 10[a.m.] at home, conversed to many... 5[p.m.]... tea, conversed...
- ◆ Thursday 2... 10[a.m.] conversed to Bro. Hum[phreys], conversed to many...⁵

In between the many conversations on these same days Wesley frequently continues the conversations with “the bands” – small confidential groups meeting for faith sharing and mutual support. Small groups have historically been at the very heart of conversation-based learning and discipleship formation in Methodism.

In a study of discipleship formation in small groups, Roger Walton (a Methodist presbyter) argues that discipleship formation takes places around three centres of energy: mission, worship and community.⁶ He also identifies the basis of “Christian education” as enabling people to be at home in the language of faith.⁷ Learning to speak Christian is an essential part of learning to do Christian. Within this, Walton sees small groups as offering a space that is

³ John Wesley, “The Twelve Rules of a Helper” (1753).

⁴ Written by Susanna Wesley in a letter to her husband from 6 February 1711–12. Recorded in Percy Livingstone Parker ed., *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951), chap. 4, accessed 29 August 2023, <https://ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal/journal.i.html>

⁵ Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, vol. 2 (London: Epworth Press, 1938).

⁶ Roger Walton, *Disciples Together: Discipleship Formation and the Role of Small Groups* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

relatively free from the official doctrine or practice of the Church and allows a freedom of expression, exploration and growth,⁸ which is often lacking elsewhere.⁹

Methodist practice and different voices – the interface between the formal and informal

While the findings of this research are recognised by those involved in learning in the Methodist Church, with an acknowledgement of the efficacy and importance of learning through conversation, there is arguably some disconnect between this and actual practice, with a pressure to “deliver training” and run highly structured courses, particularly in areas requiring legislative compliance. There would seem, then, to be some inconsistency between (to borrow from the language of theological action research and the four voices) “espoused” beliefs about learning and “operant” practice, although even within the constraints of statutory courses, there is some recognition of the value of conversation, as in the example of the mandatory training around equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the Methodist Church described below.¹⁰

The EDI training is currently only available through an online learning platform designed for individual study and in a format that requires learners to complete every part of the course. The covering letter commending the roll out to superintendent ministers, however, explicitly states that although the course must be done individually and online, the most important learning will surely take place when this becomes part of the conversation of church committees and groups. We see the complexity and interrelation of the voices of theology identified by theological action research – the normative voice of the roll-out letter sent on behalf of the governing Conference recognising the relative place of the mandatory formal training in shaping the expressed belief and lived practice of local conversations.

Similarly, in responding to another mandatory training initiative, this time for safeguarding, research participant Julian demonstrates the complex interrelationships between different and differing voices, including the formal and normative voice of learning through courses and programmes sent down from the church structure intersecting with the conversational and community-based formation we have seen at work in their reception.

And what we try to do through the group work is open up those sorts of conversations. Recognising people may have their own personal experiences, and they will, and some people have an issue like a very dogmatic view of the world and Christian teaching. And we have to balance that with some of the statutory requirements and also the very clear Methodist policies and procedures.

The need for people to meet particular objectives, to comply, is more to the fore in these safeguarding and EDI courses than other learning activities run by the Church – there is more prescribed content – and it could be argued that these have a different impetus from the faith learning that we have been describing. However, the description of how conversation can bring such learning to life and open up perspectives demonstrates the complexities involved in enabling faith learning in the Church. There would seem to be opportunities for change and growth and the potential for contribution to faith learning through interventions with different originating emphases, with conversation releasing different perspectives and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the four voices, see the introduction to the project in this issue and Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

enabling them to be exposed and explored. Within this process, however, there is another conversation – between the normative voice of the Church and the espoused and operant voices.

The Methodist Church’s consideration of “God in Love Unites Us”, the report on marriage and relationships that was presented to the Methodist Conference in 2019 (with a subsequent vote to allow same-sex marriages in June 2021), has provided a powerful example of the value of enabling different voices to be heard in conversation.¹¹ The “prayerful discussions” that were encouraged following the 2019 report were cited by some research participants as particularly significant opportunities in the life of the Church for the exploration of different traditions, giving people a voice and permission to talk about their different perspectives:

It was just great to have an opportunity to explore an issue that was at the heart of the church. And I think it was great... And it’s very widely, we were actually very good at that, we actually made a lot of opportunities for people to discuss that. And, and it just shows, you know, how diverse we are because you know some people are very, you know, your opinion on the actual context was the opportunity to share together and learn together about, you know, we didn’t know what half the terms meant, I don’t think before we’d read the report... It was it was great to do that in in a, in a safe environment that was that was respectful and worked well. (Kieran)

The process, explicitly built on conversation, was designed to be a process of discernment but also of learning, with an interchange, too, between different theological voices: between formal Methodist theology – aspects of the normative expressed in the Methodist Conference report – and the theological voices espoused and operant in different Methodist spaces and held and expressed by different individuals.

Current initiatives and shifts in practice

We have argued that conferring and conversing are integral to Methodist tradition, and they continue to feature, not only enshrined in the governance of the Church through Methodist Conference but also newly conceived in various current Methodist initiatives, with conversation being highlighted as a means to learning and transformation.

The Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity (JDS) was presented to Conference in 2021 in a conference report that set out not only a plan and proposed actions towards the achievement of an inclusive church, but also something of the process that led to the strategy and its recommendations.¹² A number of “workstreams” were established that met regularly in order to discern what was needed to bring about change in the Church; the report notes that “the bringing together of different Methodists, for conversation and listening, has been a deeply transformative process”.¹³ This acknowledgement of the place of conversation is also reflected in the report’s recommendations, which include “gatherings to encourage real conversations”, with an endorsement of conversation and “deeper encounter” as a means to transformation.¹⁴ Similarly, the Walking with Micah project has incorporated conversation – local “justice conversations” – into its process for determining where to focus and renew its efforts in

¹¹ “Archive Marriage and Relationships – 2019,” *The Methodist Church*, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19/>

¹² The Methodist Conference, “Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity: working towards a fully inclusive Methodist Church,” *Conference 2021 Agenda*, vol. 3, no 56, 753–89, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/21966/conf-2021-56-strategy-for-justice-dignity-and-solidarity-working-towards-a-fully-inclusive-methodist-church.pdf>

¹³ *Ibid.*, 761.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 770.

becoming a justice-seeking Church.¹⁵ People were invited to be part of “a big conversation”, holding conversations in their local churches, circuits, local preachers’ meetings and class meetings, in which they discussed their experiences, what matters to them and what it means today to be a justice-seeking Church. Questions were available to prompt the conversations, with the assurance that the products of those conversations would inform the direction of the project, with project leaders reflecting on what they “heard” and learning from the different experiences that were conveyed back to them. Effectively this was a process of consultation but inherent in it was the notion of sharing to prompt thinking about the issues – a recognition that ideas and thinking could be enabled and drawn out through exchange and encounter, which would then lead to further learning if shared more widely.

Conversation is not mentioned explicitly in A Methodist Way of Life,¹⁶ a re-working of Our Calling,¹⁷ a process that began in 2018. Among the 12 things identified as being necessary if we are to live out our calling is learning, and the guidance focuses not on learning with others but on individual learning (through podcasts, books and journalling). However, it also identifies being open as one of the other steps and, within that, hospitality, described as “an attitude of openness to others, to learn about them and from them, to widen our understanding and perhaps to be changed by the encounter”.¹⁸ This comes close to the conversation we recognise as being part of Methodist identity, and which was seen in our project as being central to achieving deep learning; within this is also acknowledged the relationship between encounter and change.

In 2020 the Methodist Church adopted God for All, a strategy for evangelism and growth that connects to Our Calling.¹⁹ Subsequently resources and programmes (which also reference A Methodist Way of Life as a resource) have been developed to help people across the Connexion to connect to the initiative and to take action. Reflection and learning are central, with a view to “bringing faith into conversation with experience” and with a drive also towards encouraging and enabling people to be in conversation as a means of sharing their faith with others. This approach was encouraged in a conference attended by one of our research participants – the Reimagining Circuits Conference, a conference that drew on the evangelism and growth strategy and involved a key member of that strategy’s team. Michael, a minister who participated in our research, comments:

... the difficulty of it, I think, for people, it wasn’t quite grounded enough in day-by-day existence. What we need to be doing is grounding things in a language that people understand, that they can do something with.

Expanding on the source of these observations, he describes how:

... he was giving these examples where “when I talked to this person, and we went into this place, and we were able to sit down, and we saw this café, and we went there, and then we were able to this and talk about Jesus in this particular, and we got involved in this”.

¹⁵ “Walking with Micah,” *The Methodist Church*, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/social-justice/walking-with-micah/>

¹⁶ “A Methodist Way of Life,” *The Methodist Church*, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/a-methodist-way-of-life/>

¹⁷ “Our Calling,” *The Methodist Church*, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/>

¹⁸ “Open,” “A Methodist Way of Life,” *The Methodist Church*, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/a-methodist-way-of-life/visit-every-station/open/>

¹⁹ The Methodist Conference, “God For All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth,” *Conference Reports 2020*, no. 4, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/19181/conf-2020-4-evangelism-and-growth.pdf>

The encouragement to be bold in sharing one's faith in informal settings echoes the Everyone an Evangelist Process,²⁰ the process designed, as part of the evangelism and growth strategy, “to build confidence and skills in telling people about God”.²¹ Michael's further reflections on the input around this at the conference suggest his recognition of a need for conversations that grow more organically out of the individual's particular style, or personality, or background, rather than following a particular approach or relying on a certain level of extroversion.

For somebody who may be a little shy or a little bit more introvert in that respect, “well I can't do that”.

The extent to which the Everyone an Evangelist process will be able to equip individuals to initiate and shape conversations in which they tell people about God needs further exploration but, in the light of the research we are reporting here, it is interesting to note an initiative that is about enabling people to learn about enabling others' faith learning.

Our research suggests that the learning that takes hold in everyday and informal settings happens through a deep and complex exchange: listening is as significant as telling, and there is a degree of mutuality, which means that the learning is not unidirectional and not initiated and aimed at a predetermined outcome. This has significant implications for the extent to which such a process can be planned or curated.

Impact on our own practice

The learning from this learning project has significant implications for those in the Methodist Church who are involved in equipping others. Attempts to put the learning into practice by authors of this paper offer some examples. One is the explicit labelling of some courses as “conversations” – and not just labelling them as such but also facilitating them in line with this, not as a gimmick or educational trick but a genuine intention to engage in deep conversation. A specific case was the offering of continuing development sessions for local preaching tutors, some of whom had been resistant to “being trained”. Being invited to conversations in which their wisdom and experience were sought and valued proved to be both more appealing and more effective as a learning experience. Another example demonstrates change in the approach to learning facilitation, with a conscious decision to resist the instinct to reorder and supplement the chosen small group resources, which seemed disorganised and lacking in clear direction. Instead, allowing the cues in the conversation to determine which elements of the course material were accessed, the conversation was left to flow freely, silences respected, insights and personal stories allowed to enter and meander through the conversation and then leave freely. This was subsequently judged by the person facilitating to be one of the stronger small group series to be used in this setting in terms of depth and growth.

Supporting faith learning

The real challenge, of course, is how best to support learning that is momentary, informal and spontaneous, how to create opportunities for deep conversation, and how to build up people's confidence and affirm the language being used to articulate learning. The tendency to trip

²⁰ Everyone an Evangelist, *The Methodist Church*, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/practise-evangelism/equipped-for-evangelism/everyone-an-evangelist>

²¹ “Take your next steps in Evangelism and Growth”, *The Methodist Church*, 7. <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/20686/3507-evangelism-and-growth-strategy-booklet-for-web-single-pages.pdf>

oneself up is all too apparent when attempts are made to formalise the informal or create spontaneity. Maybe it would be helpful to take a step back and reflect on our understanding of what faith learning is and where agency lies? Are we maintaining a culture that views education as pouring into rather than drawing out?

T. S. Eliot's words from "Choruses from 'The Rock'" came to mind:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?²²

According to David Ford, for any seeker after wisdom,

the core activity is crying out for it. The cry goes first to God... But it is not self-generated. It is elicited... The One who evokes our cry generates wisdom and the desire for it. Our cry is a response to the call of wisdom herself. In the Bible, apart from the desire for God there is no desire that is more passionately and loudly encouraged than the desire for wisdom.²³

And the call of wisdom is nowhere better articulated in the Bible than in the book of Proverbs:

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks... Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

"To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live... Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her."²⁴

How well this chimes in with the notion that learning often takes place, as we described earlier, "in the informal, the everyday, in unexpected moments and encounters, in real-life situations". Faith learning is not restricted to the environs or formal processes of the church, and wisdom is accrued relationally and conversationally, and its source is the One who also elicits our search after it.

So, instead of attempting to formalise the informal or create spontaneity, maybe the invitation is to nurture a culture in which a desire for wisdom is encouraged and there is greater confidence in the God-given wisdom already distilling in each and every one of us; to recognise that the Holy Spirit is unconfined, blowing where she wills and both alive in us and seeking to draw out of us the wisdom within.

We have taken the bold step of aligning faith learning, wisdom and holiness – or at least speaking of them in the same breath. What possible purpose could faith learning have other than to help us to become more holy and wise? And while we may wish to resist the notion of targets and learning outcomes, surely we would wish for our learning to be effective and fruitful? Our research confirms that formal courses have only a minimal part to play in this, but will we have the courage to work this through in practice? And will we take this into

²² T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London, Faber and Faber Ltd., 1974), 161.

²³ David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 51.

²⁴ Prov. 1:20–21; 8:1–4, 10–11 (NRSV).

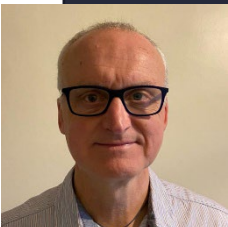
account the next time we are required to provide training to meet legislative compliance? In our list of priorities, which sits higher – the need to be seen to be doing the right thing or the actual effectiveness of the learning being offered?

If we return to the notion of “a discipleship movement shaped for mission” (a term coined by Methodism to describe itself during the early years of this century),²⁵ are there implications here for a Methodist understanding of mission? Is it also the case that mission is most effective when it involves deep conversation, when it is informal and momentary, and when it is, as expressed above, “in the informal, the everyday, in unexpected moments and encounters, in real-life situations”, often “while other things were happening or the focus was elsewhere”?

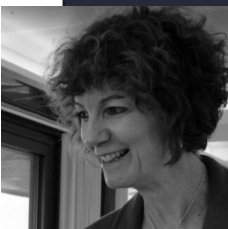
Methodism was raised up “to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith” and continues to declare “its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission”.²⁶ Faith learning has a vital role to play in that, and our research sheds light on how it might be engaged in more effectively – or indeed how it might be recognised and affirmed in the places where it is already taking place and bearing fruit. Becoming holy and wise is a work of God in which we are called to share – so why not learn to share in it well?



Stan Brown is a recently retired Methodist presbyter whose ministry has included time in HE chaplaincy and working to develop chaplaincy ministries in the wider Methodist Church. He has also served as a circuit minister in Newcastle, Halifax, Wimbledon and Kingston upon Thames. His doctoral research focused on understandings of chaplaincy as a form of mission and presence in predominantly secular institutions. Stan is a member of the Southlands Methodist Trust, working with Southlands College




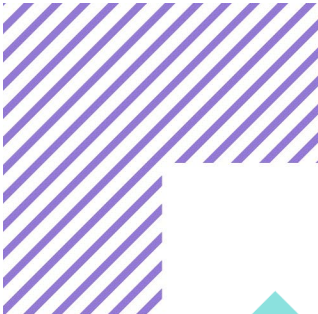
Graham Jones is an ordained Methodist minister currently serving as a learning and development officer based in York. Prior to this appointment he had been a local minister in Hull, a university chaplain in York and a rural officer based at the Arthur Rank Centre in Warwickshire. Graham is passionate about learning and developing a culture in the church in which all are encouraged and enabled to keep exploring and growing.



Sue Miller is director of the Susanna Wesley Foundation, part of the Southlands Methodist Trust, a charity based at the University of Roehampton. Formerly a principal lecturer at the University of Westminster, Sue has taught organisational behaviour and leadership to post-experience students and a range of modules to undergraduates. She has carried out research and consultancy in the areas of equality, diversity, inclusion, change and leadership in different sectors, including charities and faith organisations. Her desire is to bring theory into conversation with practice and to enable sharing across disciplines for the benefit of churches and their wider communities.

²⁵ Martyn Atkins, “Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary’s Report],” *Methodist Conference Reports 2011* (The Methodist Church in Britain, 2011), accessed 4 June 2018, <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf2011-pc-2-gen-sec-conference-report-0812.doc>

²⁶ *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 213.



Navigating the challenges of learning through conversations and relationships: reflections from the Wales Learning Network

By Delyth Davies

Introduction

In 2018 the Cymru Wales Learning Network team of the Methodist Church in Britain embarked on this theological action research project in partnership with the University of Roehampton and the Susanna Wesley Foundation. The local reflector team of three staff members, Amy Adams, Gareth Bennett and I, were eager to engage with this project in order to understand what it is to be a learning community and how this helps us in our work, supporting learning in Methodist churches across Wales.

The context we were working in at the time was very different from that of the present; not just because of the unforeseen impact of a global pandemic and how it led to enormous changes in areas of learning and development, but the picture of the Methodist Church in Wales was different too. As a team, we were working alongside two separate Welsh- and English-language synods, which were in conversation about merging while at the same time supporting Connexion-wide¹ learning and development opportunities in areas of mission and ministry. One of the areas we wanted to explore was how to enable churches to move from theory, and their vision for what they wanted to do, to practice and what part factors such as ownership, agency and motivation played. This ultimately led us to the following definitive research question.

In the Methodist Church in Wales:

- ◆ What enables or disables learning towards action?
- ◆ What ways could the Learning Network in Wales be a resource for such learning?

¹ Connexion refers to the larger connected community of Methodist churches. For British Methodism this is across England, Wales and Scotland along with the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and Shetland.
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/structure/the-connexion/>

After a process of exploration, training and planning for us as a team, a number of interviews and focus groups with churches and ministers were set up across Wales. The data gathered from these formed the basis of the reflections, and the final document recording our learning, produced in collaboration with the Roehampton team, has led to some useful insights and exploration for us as a team, in two aspects in particular – how people learn, and the importance of relationships in learning.

Reflections on how people learn

One of those most telling findings from this research project was the tension between structured training and learning through informal conversations. The experience of those questioned was that learning is far more effective when it is conversational. References were made to “conversations around the well”, demonstrating the importance of story-sharing and of learning from each other. In conversation the agency for learning is shared, and people had clearly enjoyed learning in this way. Opportunities for conversation, for discussion groups and enabling learning from each other were already key parts of many of our events both in Wales and across British Methodism. Yet as a team we were aware of the contrast between this insight of learning together and from each other and the expectations of some participants attending training events. People expected to be told how to do things, and we had heard how potential attendees did not sign up because they believed they already had sufficient information and skills in a particular area of work.

Reflecting on learning in the context of church life, another key observation was that learning has traditionally been associated with Sunday preaching. The expectation of cognitive learning through the sermon rather than, what we described as, learning for action seemed to lead to a disconnect. We saw a gap between the informative sermon and its potential for transforming lives for mission. Along a similar line, Bible studies were often associated with being academic in nature. One church had moved from naming the Bible study to Bible chat, which seemed to have made a difference in how people approached it – a simple yet effective solution. Interestingly, who was leading the discussion also made a difference. We noted that people often felt more confident in participating in conversations that were led by a person other than the minister as the minister was generally seen as the “expert”. It raises interesting questions about how, within the context of the formal and traditional aspects of church life, we in churches can provide meaningful worship and learning opportunities in which conversational and informal learning have a place.

As a Learning Network team, we have followed these findings to develop more of our work around conversation. This heightened awareness of the value of conversation in learning led us to be more intentional in initiating and planning facilitator-led discussions that enable opportunities for exploration. This of course is in addition to the normative and the mandatory training courses that we are expected to deliver or facilitate.

One example is a series of conversations we offered for those who lead “Local Arrangement” services when there is no minister or local preacher to lead the service on a Sunday. These are normally taken by church stewards and worship leaders, and they are not expected to include a sermon. As a team we had planned pointers for facilitating the conversation, but the sharing of information, experience and insights came from the participants. It was clear to us, both in the face-to-face and online events, that the freedom to share and to bounce ideas off one another brought energy into the learning space and a renewed enthusiasm for the role that they are called to and the mission opportunities that this brings.

The importance of relationships

The second key finding from the research for our work was the importance of relationships. The Methodist Church Learning Network is often presented as a means for resourcing learning, but in the research, participants expressed their appreciation of the relational nature of the network. These participants talked a lot more about the people they knew in the Learning Network than the resources produced. Creating and nurturing relationships helped provide spaces for deep conversation, reflection and growth.

In recent years, the Learning Network across the Methodist Connexion has sought to nurture and maintain relationships by ensuring that a learning and development officer is aligned to each Methodist District. Having that point of contact seems to have helped build trust and confidence in relationships with the Districts and their respective circuits and churches. Relationship building is a key aspect of the current work in Wales, following the merger of both synods to create a new bilingual synod in September 2022. This was vital, as two groups of people who were accustomed to operating separately in one language came together to embrace a new bilingual identity. The Learning Network team was in a unique position to be able to support the transition prior to the merger through our bilingual communications and resources, which we already had from working with both synods. Perhaps more importantly, we also saw that creating opportunities for coming together for conversation was key and this has resulted in two new pieces of work.

The first is in our support for Welsh language work and bilingualism, where we have developed opportunities for people to get together for conversations around what it means to be a bilingual synod and what support is needed for this. This has led to the creation of new resources to meet specific needs identified in these conversations and that has led to further gatherings to engage with new mission opportunities arising from the merger of the synods.

The second area is around “deep listening”, where we as a team felt led to explore, discuss and practise listening to one another. We gave an open invitation to anyone in the synod who wanted to join us in our exploration. We meet monthly online in a small group for an informal conversation based on a topic or reflection offered by any of the group members as they feel led. Our own experience of engaging with this piece of work confirms some of the findings of the research project. The building of relationships in the listening group provides a safe space of trust where we can be open to learning from one another and to sharing our vulnerabilities, leading to growth in confidence in sharing our faith.

The model of creating a community of practice in which there is an emphasis on learning in the context of relationships and opportunities for deep conversation was already familiar to us at a Connexional level. The coming together with other practitioners in specific areas of work has led us to opportunities to develop in our own learning and to engage in new initiatives. Our reflections on our own experience, the reflection on the wider experience in Wales through the research, and the opportunities for online work since the pandemic have led us to develop this model further in Wales with communities of practice established for tutors, mentors, administrators and youth workers.

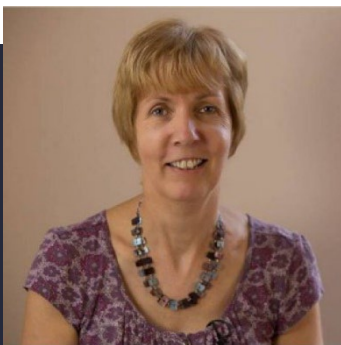
The implications for future learning opportunities

The research project shows clearly that when effective learning takes place, it becomes transformational. As a team we wanted to capture that, and to provide opportunities where

people are given the space to grow and flourish and engage in mission in their communities. The emphasis on learning through conversation and in the context of being in relationship has become a key part of our thinking.

Another factor that we have taken into account is in the way we publicise such events and, indeed, all events so that expectations are in line with the aims of the training. We have become more mindful of the need to make clear the participatory element of sessions so that people come prepared to engage in this way.

Since the research was undertaken, there have been major contextual changes that may have an impact on learning. The pandemic has led to further decline in numbers of members and attendees in churches, leading to more church closures and a reluctance by some people to engage with learning opportunities. On the plus side, the pandemic also opened up new ways of learning, with a significant increase in online learning opportunities. This has enabled the Learning Network team members across the Connexion to work collaboratively to offer shared cross-regional and Connexional online training, which is open to people regardless of where they live. In addition, there has been an increase in Conference-directed work that includes mandatory training and Connexional programmes, which have generated mixed reactions, ranging from embracing the learning opportunities to anxiety and even animosity. In the Methodist Church in Wales, the ongoing changes related to the merger of the two synods raise issues that are unique to that particular context. Finally, recent management changes within the Learning Network and changes in staff members are additional factors that affect the context. Our focus on conversation and relationship have helped us to navigate these challenges. All in all, we continue to be mindful of the importance of creating and sustaining an appropriate environment for learning and to share this insight with others.



Delyth Wyn Davies is a learning and development manager for the Methodist Church in Britain based in Wales. She has worked as the national children's work officer for the Presbyterian Church of Wales and as Wales co-ordinator for BMS World Mission. She has translated over 35 Welsh-language Bible story books for children, edited Welsh-language Christian song books and is involved in gobaith.cymru, a Welsh website with downloadable hymns and song lyrics. She has written meditations for *Fresh from the Word* for IBRA and has contributed articles to *Magnet* and *Cristion* magazines.



Life-learning of faith: “... life is wrapped around it somehow.”


Reflections from a conversation with “Liz” – a participant in a rural churches focus group

By Clare Watkins


Clare: One of the things that struck us in the research was the way in which people talked *not* about how they learned faith in formal places, but in the more kind of everyday things. There’s a lovely bit where you say, “Over the years, as you get older, there’s lots of bits you pick up all over the place. It’s nothing big. It’s just small things.” There is a strong sense that it’s not like you’ve studied a big course, but that there’s something in the everyday that helps us to grow in faith.

Liz: Yes, I remember that. My world has changed in terms of formal religion, in the sense that during lockdown things stopped and there aren’t any evening services anymore. I do miss it, but getting to daytime ones is more difficult. So, I’m having now to make do with the morning service on the radio on Sunday, and *Songs of Praise*. I’ve dropped out in terms of formal church services, but in terms of what I said about learning through life, I’ve reflected on that quite a bit. There’s people you meet, events that happen, and things that change in your life. I remember talking to my aunt... She said, if you have a strong faith that’s imbued as a child, it keeps you going through life; you’ve got that solid faith that was there from a child and it keeps you going in rocky times. And somehow, you learn from everything as you go along.

Clare: It’s that “learning from everything as you go along” that interests me. This grounding in faith – it’s a rock, a foundation; but it’s clear it doesn’t stay the same all though life. So, what happens, do you think?



Liz took part in our research as a member of a focus group talking about growing in faith in a rural setting. She is someone with a lifetime’s experience of both faith and village life, and we were interested to return to her and reflect further on some of the themes from the research.



Liz: You go through life and you – you know; I got married, had children, and your perspective on life changes. My parents died, and my husband is developing memory problems and things, and I'm following through, really. I think your vision of the world changes as you go through life, and I'm thinking end-of-life type stuff now. It's there all the time. I like dog walking and walking with nature, and I think about my mother's favourite hymn, which is "Yes, God is Good". And I tootle along, having my dog walk, having a little hum of "Yes, God is Good".

Clare: The context for our research around faith learning was the recognition that all our churches are in institutional decline, even though within those churches there are very often people of fervent faith. Chapels are closing, and I think there is a view, particularly from the "church management" and clergy people, that somehow because of that, *faith* is disappearing. And actually, I think one of the things that strikes me in what you say, like many of our respondents, was that, although it is sad when places close, nonetheless faith is still alive.

Liz: Yes, I think so, it's quietly there. Whereas in the nineteenth century, and early last century, it was very fashionable to be going to church and to have a faith in everything, now it's wildly unfashionable and it's very hard to have sensible conversations. I mean, there's one or two people I talk with, such as the farmer's wife who lives up the road. We have a little chat quietly sometimes, and not particularly about faith, but just what's happening and what's going off. But you can't speak the words these days, somehow, in the way you used to do. Which is why I've got the hymn "Yes, God is Good", because that's quite neutral. And I like my old hymns!

Clare: "Not being able to speak the words" – that's really striking.

In the focus group you described your walks in relation to growing in faith. You say: "I remember different people and have little thoughts for people who are ill, because they don't come to church, but that's my sort of outdoor church." Given what we're describing – chapels closing, generations of people who just would never enter a church – what are your reflections on that kind being at prayer, or being with God, in this "outdoor church"?

Liz: I think that's probably my church these days, and I go for my walk every day. I was out this morning; you go through the shopping list and what you are doing, and then you think. You get reflecting about people, and think about events happening, and what would my mother have said, and that type of thing. Then you sometimes sing a little hymn or something like that. It's about half an hour a day. It's my quiet reflection time where nothing else is happening. It's time for the brain to float through, really, and think about things.

Clare: And would you see that as a time of prayer? Or is that not quite what you'd call it?

Liz: Yes, it is. It is the time when I'm on my own when I can do things like that and pray for people that I'm worried about. It's not a formalised prayer, but it is – I suppose it comes to that in the end. It's just thinking of people and hoping for them, really.

Clare: When you spoke about these walks in the focus group, you also described learning from your friend – about living, and goodness, and faith, although you never discussed faith explicitly. Do you think that's happening with people who don't know the church? Do you think there are ways in which people who don't know the church can encounter that faith?

Liz: Yes, I think they possibly could. It's like you are walking with people. You don't stand back and tell them what to do. You walk in their shoes, and you understand what their life is, so you understand why they're reacting like that. That's my thoughts: "Why did that happen?" "That

was odd." "I wonder where that's coming from." You need people alongside. Our minister's very good because she'll walk with you and ask you questions and be interested in what everybody was doing. I think that's really good, but you have to give a lot of yourself for that; it's not easy. But living alongside and walking alongside, I think that's how it works somehow. It's lots of little things – but I suppose that's possibly what the early church was like, when people went and lived and walked together and worked together, before it became organised... That's how Christ started, I think, and that's how it developed over the years for me. We've got very busy doing the "up here stuff" in your head, organising things and having buildings to keep. I mean, I was church council secretary for a couple of years and we spoke most of the time about buildings and money. And you know, it's fine, it keeps it going, but we're not about buildings; we are about people. I don't know what you do. People get anxious about managing things. It's a huge responsibility; after 100 years, are you going to be the one who closes it? That is hard. We, the people who used to belong to the church, we meet and have little chats, and we're quite good friends when I see them, but they're all getting elderly, so a lot of them aren't out that much. But you've got each other through the church, I do like that. But it's about having facility for people to meet up. I don't know. It's sort of incidental somehow.

Clare: I like that – "incidental of church gatherings". Do you think you and the people that you talk to from the church have a sense of doing the kind of accompanying you talked about, just being alongside people and getting to know them?

Liz: I mean, I certainly do it through [the] Women's Institute. It's interesting; both my sons are volunteers in different things – one's a school governor, and the other one is secretary of the fencing club – and I think they've learned it's people doing things together. The church used to be doing things together. It's like doing meals, and that sort of thing is good, because you all chat in the kitchen. The best stuff happens in the kitchen! Then you have to go and do something formal, and it's nice to have a sing, but it's a bit more formal. It's people working together for a common cause, which you hope will be for the church and Christ, and God things. But life is wrapped around it somehow.

So I don't know. It's about how do you put things on, so that people can get together and support each other? And you hope then that the religion, the other things, will come in through that; but it's very complex, it's very difficult.

These reflections led Liz to think about the ways in which the churches' organisational development through history hasn't always helped this sense of grass-roots care and mutual support. She reflects on learning from her reading of the history of the Salvation Army and its founder, William Booth.

Liz: While Booth was working and doing and drawing people in and helping people, he could walk alongside people – people with alcohol abuse, that type of thing, and bring them off the streets, feed them. You were *there*. And then it became very big, and it became a world thing, the Salvation Army. And it's still there, and it's still going, but I don't know, I'd sort of read to about the early twentieth century, about the time he died, and it seemed to have become more of an organisation. The passion wasn't there anymore, and it became an organisational thing rather than a spirit and a burning to do it. It's an interesting one.

Clare: Do you think that's what's happened to our churches?


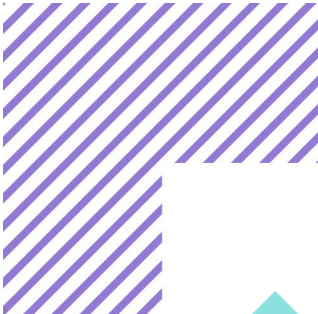
Liz: I think the C of E is sort of an institutional thing, because it was a power base. In the nineteenth century, everybody was in it – everybody had to have access to a church, so they built lots of churches. They built a lot of really interesting, nice churches and then we were slightly overdone with church. As time went on, and I think you spend so much time worrying about bricks and mortar that you forget about the people who are going there, really. I don't know where the churches are these days.

Clare: The online journal that we're publishing this in, *ANVIL*, has a mission focus, and we have a real concern about how faith is being handed on. I've been very conscious that – and I'm alongside you on this! – you've said a few times: "Well, I just don't know." And – without expecting any clear plan of "this is what we have to do" – I just want to ask: in your own context, what do you think that you feel prompted to do or called into doing that somehow responds to that sense of mission?

Liz: I think life's a journey, and you take the journey. I would say to a friend: you never know what's around the corner, life's a journey, enjoy it while you can, and do what you feel you need to do. And I feel that sometimes, you don't want to do something, and you think, well, I've jolly well got to do it, because it's important. I think it's like this. Nothing is static, nothing is ever the same. And you only learn that, I think, as you get older...

I've got to 71 now, and actually do know quite a lot. And I've learned quite a lot and it will be lovely to pass it on. But people think you're boring. So what do you do? And I kept thinking, "One day, I'll write it down." I'd love to really just hand on what it was like, and little things I've learned, really. I had started a couple of times, and life just takes over and you're just so busy that it doesn't happen.

I love the idea of nurseries and old people's homes together, and intergenerational things. We've split the generations off – the children used to be in communities where everybody was together, of all ages, and you learned, incidentally. We've actually sectioned society now so that we don't interrelate very much. Is that one of the things that's going wrong at the moment? That we've we put people into chunks, and they don't get to mix with other people.



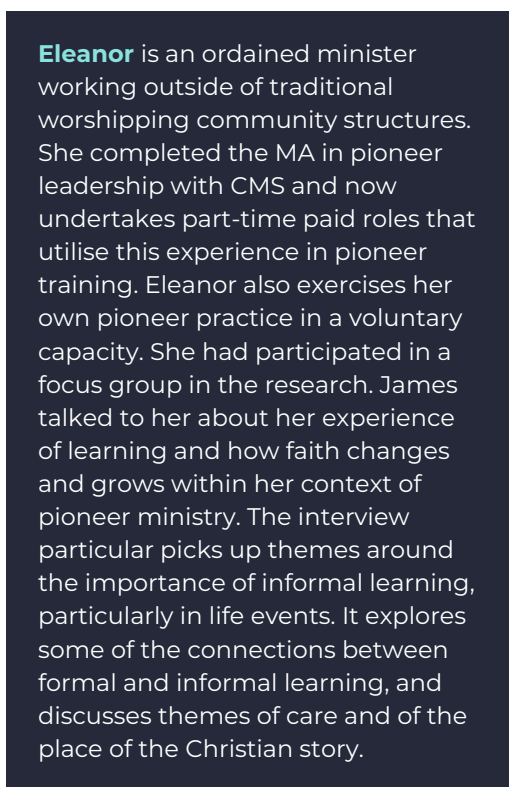
“Those times of things being crunchy” – learning and unlearning in the messiness of life. An interview with “Eleanor”

By James Butler

James: You were part of a focus group early on in the research. Are there reflections that you have on learning from being part of the process?

Eleanor: What struck me was that it wasn't the quality of the teaching, or the handouts or the reading material that we talked about as being instrumental in our learning. Not that those things aren't important, but that what seemed to stand out from the conversation in our focus group was that it was times of difficulty and stress where we really felt that God had done some of that unmaking and remaking work. Soon after the focus group, I used some of those reflections in a sermon. I looked at how it is in our brokenness that God seems to do God's best work; that experience of feeling unravelled and being reformed. We don't particularly welcome those times of things being crunchy, but so often that is actually the crucible where transformation happens.

The other thing that stood out to me in the focus group was how we narrate the things that happen in our lives. I had been friends with some of the people in the focus group and when I heard them describing their experiences, I knew more of the story and I knew some of what they didn't talk about. I was struck by how we narrate those experiences, what we offer and what we choose to leave out. How does it shape what



Eleanor is an ordained minister working outside of traditional worshipping community structures. She completed the MA in pioneer leadership with CMS and now undertakes part-time paid roles that utilise this experience in pioneer training. Eleanor also exercises her own pioneer practice in a voluntary capacity. She had participated in a focus group in the research. James talked to her about her experience of learning and how faith changes and grows within her context of pioneer ministry. The interview particular picks up themes around the importance of informal learning, particularly in life events. It explores some of the connections between formal and informal learning, and discusses themes of care and of the place of the Christian story.

we say about God and about practice when we only give a little fragment of the story or we sanitise it, or we shape it in a particular way?

James: And what difference do you think that would make?

Eleanor: It makes it overly tidy. I could tell people were choosing not to say things because it was too personal, or they didn't want to offer that level of vulnerability and embarrassment probably as well.

It made me think about how we process that learning in private spaces with trusted people, but the outcome of that learning we share more widely. You do that learning somewhere else and only when you've got to a point where you think this is respectable will you offer it, but in the sharing of that story we can lose some of the humanness and real life of learning.

James: You pointed to the difficult and the stressful moments as being the places of learning and how you were unravelled and reformed. In the research we found that through seeing these big moments in life events, we were able to tune into smaller examples of learning which had a similar shape. Where do you see similar learning in the day-to-day life of pioneering and missional communities?

Eleanor: In a more formal way, the organisation I lead had to go through a culture change recently. Our sport and faith leaders were very keen on one-to-one mentoring as a way of disciplining young people, but from a safeguarding point of view we said that we can't do that anymore. We moved to mentoring young people in a group. Some of them just can't get their heads around this and that has been a challenge.

Another place I see learning happening is in the pioneer training in the hubs, which does have this transformative effect on people's faith. In that case I think it's to do with being validated and affirmed and given permission to think that differently, and to explore the things that they believed all along. We give a space where it is OK for them to believe and think the things they do when they have felt at odds with the teaching in their church for so long. That is transformative, so in other contexts it can be about a safe space to explore different things.

James: Yes, one of the reflections that came out of the project was that although we saw faith deepening and growing in those difficult and challenging events, it was a bit problematic if this was seen as a mechanism to help people grow and develop in faith. Life brings enough challenges without the need to replicate it in more formal approaches to learning.

Eleanor: Yes, and I've seen that in formal education and heard people say that it's all very well being broken, but they just didn't feel that anybody put them back together. It makes me ask how we can love and care for people when life does throw that stuff at you, rather than it being a reason to just leave people to it. That's really important.

James: How does that connect to your own faith?

Eleanor: The focus group took place when I'd completed my ordination training and I was in a curacy in parish ministry. Since then there has been a five-year period of unlearning and detangling that I've had to do to free myself from the institution and from all the stuff that I was trained for, or at least repurposing it, and I'm still in that process. I'm happy in the pioneer work I'm doing, but people still point out more formal roles to me, as if what I'm doing now isn't "proper". I'm coming to terms with what I'm doing now being "proper", valid and worthwhile, which uses my gifts and skills. There's unlearning of institutional expectations and the way people perceive it.

I think it makes my faith stronger because I'm more dependent on what I discern is God's call, and what I think God is really about, which is fullness of life. My spirituality is the other aspect that has changed over this time. I have a really good spiritual director, who's very gentle and holds the space in a very gracious way. I feel no judgement from him and he makes some one or two recommendations that are genuinely helpful. I feel I've got a greater freedom in my spirituality, and how I practice and exercise that, than I did before.

James: One of the key insights in the project was about conversations and informal learning being central to how people grew and developed in faith. The conversations that happen over coffee, or on the dog walk. And while it might be the big life events, it could also be the small things of kindness or beauty in everyday life. Does that resonate for you in your pioneering?

Eleanor: For me personally that is where pretty much all my faith discovery comes from. While it is informal conversation, it is also informed by formal learning. So, someone says, “I've been reading this article, and it's really interesting,” and then I'll find myself talking about it to somebody else and about what I've learned from the conversation with the person. In the organisation that I lead, I host this learning community and I've been giving them loads of good stuff from CMS and from pioneer contexts, but I don't really see them using it. However, when I go and visit them individually, and we meet over coffee, and we chat things through, that's when it starts to click a little bit. It's in the conversations and in getting to know them.

James: In pioneer circles we are influenced by the *missio Dei* and the idea that mission is seeing what God is doing, and joining in. What do you see God doing in terms of people's faith, and how do you participate in that?

Eleanor: I think that we often don't see what God is doing and join in; I think we stumble along. We try some things out and we figure it out as best we can. We learn from the way that we mess it up or it doesn't quite work out. We talk about failure being part of the learning process, but I don't think we live it out. Of course, we have put all this effort in and we don't want to deal with the disappointment, but I think God offers that gracious space to receive these moments as revelation and to look back and see we are still learning. It is so easy to get sucked into doing things you think God is doing and yet be wildly wrong, particularly in some traditions which are more about control and power than about seeing people released into what God is doing.

James: Yes, and it is interesting to think about the role of the Christian story. In a pioneer context some people have experienced Christian truth more as a weapon than an invitation, so are there ways you have seen people helpfully engage with the Bible and the Christian story?

Eleanor: Yes; in my own research for my MA dissertation I looked at café church. I visited two different groups. In one of them I found people flourishing in a space where they felt accepted and genuinely welcomed. It did lead some to want to study the Bible and it was held in quite an open way, but I still felt there was a culture of wanting to please the teacher. They respected him and he had created a culture where they could respond positively, but I felt they were still a little way from owning these narratives themselves. There was one person who stood out as going on a journey of transformation with God. He had had an encounter with God where he was preparing to commit suicide and then cried out in a prayer of desperation and had been flooded by a feeling of love and warmth. From that experience he'd connected with the café and was learning and growing. The other café church I looked at felt bound up in the same traditional ways of talking about the Bible and there was very little contextual work going on.


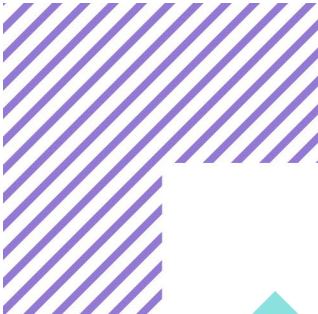
I think there is something really important about being with others of a like mind, because it can be life-generating and lifesaving to connect with others in the kinds of communities of practice which CMS is developing with pioneers. It's so important to connect with people who get where you are coming from and get the thing you are about in mission: people who want to engage with others in mission.

James: It is interesting that you used the phrase "like-minded", because that came up a few times in focus group conversations in the project. It was a slightly alarming phrase for us initially, thinking people didn't want to engage with other views, but it became clear that people were using it in a similar way to you – about finding people who wanted to have conversations that were open to different views rather than staying in a particular bubble.

Eleanor: Yes. I think there's something about what I would describe as genuine Jesus community that has values of caring for people, encouraging them and affirming them: a group of people who are just absolutely for you. That's transformative.

James: Finally, what are the things you want to continue to explore around faith learning?

Eleanor: For the contexts where I connect with faith learning, the key reflection for me is how do I navigate well the tension between providing a directed and stimulating learning space while also allowing it to be reactive and responsive? Faith learning and transformation can take place in situations that aren't planned for or anticipated. That can be owing to stressful and difficult life events, or it can be the meandering, whimsical flow of the Spirit. Both catalysts are well supported by a community of people that are open, non-judgmental and affirming of the individual. At the same time, you need something with focus and purpose to gather people around. It sounds complex but those spaces where I've received this skilful combination have been facilitated by people who did it in a natural, relaxed way – the whole "non-anxious" presence thing! It's about creating spaces where there's intention but also openness. It's an interesting dynamic to play with!



“Living alongside people” – learning in and through relationships. An interview with “Sarah”

By James Butler

James: Sarah, tell us a bit about yourself and your involvement in the church.

Sarah: I'm a children and family worker in my local Methodist church. I run activities for children and families including a toddler group and a Messy Church during festival times. I go into the local primary school to read Bible stories and listen to readers, and I lead services in the school at festival times, such as a Christingle service at Christmas. Alongside this I volunteer at the local children's centre, attend the Friday community coffee mornings and host a monthly sewing bee day. I have also been training to lead worship in the Methodist Church, which in Methodism means planning and leading the service, but not preaching. This can be very rewarding but also challenging, making sure it is interesting and accessible for all. Leading a community in worship is a real privilege. I am still working through my training as a worship leader. The material is all online, which for my learning style and dyslexia is a real struggle at times. I have a loving and caring husband, who is fabulous at supporting my work. He is also involved in most of it, helping where he can. I have made many lovely friends and I feel really settled and called by God to be here.

James: We're thinking about how faith grows and changes, so what is faith to you and what encourages or enlivens you in your faith?

Sarah: For me faith is about living alongside people, loving and caring for them. I want to bless the people I meet, including those who, like in the story of the good Samaritan, I might

In this interview Sarah reflects on her own faith learning and the learning going on around her in her role as a family worker in the church. She talks about the big things that have shaped her own faith and reflects on the ways in which she sees people learning and growing in faith around her. There is a strong mission focus to her work, and in the conversation she reflects on many of the themes of the research in relation to the families she meets, particularly on the place of care, conversation and learning together.

be tempted to walk past on the other side. The thing which has really enlivened me in my faith is the toddler group, which I run with the team. It is exciting to see the adults at our toddler group blessing each other, supporting and caring for each other and being so generous towards each other, particularly when some of them have so little. They often ask whether we need anything, and for me that is like Jesus working in everyone, even if they have no idea that Jesus is there with them.

James: As you know, this project has been looking at the grassroots experience of learning and how people grow and develop in faith. Are there times in your own life can you identify this kind of growth and change?

Sarah: Well for me, the biggest thing has been bereavement. When my husband died leaving me a young widow with two young children, I knew I was not alone and God was by my side. I could talk to him, cry with him, scream and shout. He would be there with his calming spirit. He would not leave me as I am a child of God and he loves me whatever I do, wherever I am. Knowing how much I was loved deepened my faith and made me want to know more. While praying I felt a sense of peace fall over me, knowing God had his calming hand on my grieving body. But eight years later I met a new partner who had two young children and then 18 months [later] he suddenly died, leaving two young boys orphaned, and I thought, “How could there be a God?” After eight years of being on my own, I was thinking I’d got another future ahead. A friend of mine, who had also been widowed and was a churchwarden and children’s worker, invited me to come for Sunday lunch. I thought that would be lovely. And she said, “You’ve got to come to church first.” I just thought, “Oh really, I don’t want to go, you know, I don’t believe this. I can’t say these things.” I couldn’t say them from the heart, because I didn’t know at that time if I believed that. I just thought, “She does a really lovely Sunday lunch and she’s really good company and so is her husband and daughter; OK, I’ll go sit at the back. What harm is that going to do?” So, I went, and I did sit at the back and there was somebody that I knew and she just put a hand on my hand, didn’t say anything. And then I just cried all the way through this service. At the end the person who was presiding said, “Somebody here is really hurting and these words of this, this last hymn we’ve sung, are going to resonate with them.” And I just thought, “Oh my goodness, I think she’s talking about me.” And she just looked at me, and then they prayed with me. At that point I actually felt hope, which I hadn’t felt for quite a few months. I started to realise that although I didn’t believe in God or feel that he’d been there for me, he was still there with me.

James: Thank you for sharing that. It really resonates with many of the stories we have heard, that these big things in life can actually become places of experiencing a deepening in faith for many people. Do you see people’s faith growing and changing around you in the community?

Sarah: Yes, I’m quite a people-watcher. I like to sit and watch and then kind of reflect on that. I learn from watching people and talking to people. It’s all part of getting to know them, I think. In the toddler group, as I get to know the families, I see how they learn. I hear their expectations and in response I start to change things and accommodate their needs in different ways. For me the toddler group is church. We have a craft team; we do different activities together and I see how we are forming a community and learning from each other. The mums might not see that as church, but I do. We are showing them love and blessing them, as Jesus did, and one mum has started asking questions and has asked for a Bible.

James: That’s interesting, because one of the big questions from the research has been the place of the Bible and of the Christian tradition. How do you see that in your work?

Sarah: We really don't push that. Lots of parents come from the children's centre, which is just down the road. We just we offer them a space. We offer them refreshments and we offer them support, a chat, activities, those kinds of things. We don't push the God bit as it were, but hopefully through our actions and what we share, we talk about church, we talk about what we're doing in church, we talk about the other things going on. For that woman who asked for a Bible, I think just from her seeing the examples, learning from us, seeing different things and feeling supported, that encouraged her to open up. It's more than just statutory support; I think we are learning from them too.

James: Do you see that happening anywhere else?

Sarah: Yes; before Covid we had “Brunch and Natter” once a month, where people from church would come together to eat and discuss the lectionary passage or something topical in the news. We would share a meal and chat together. I see that as church. It's about us going out to people instead of expecting them to come to us. We are meeting them where they are, and supporting them and being more like Jesus, really. It doesn't have to be worshipping in a church. It's about the practical things of life.

James: When we spoke during the research, it was in the middle of the pandemic and lockdown. How did that change how you approached community and learning?

Sarah: It was challenging. We had online coffee mornings to keep in touch with parents. We did what many groups did – recorded stories on YouTube and Facebook. We managed to stay in touch with families. It has also shown us that Zoom can help us to reach out to certain people who can't get to church on a Sunday or who work shifts and can't be there. It would be really good to still have an interactive Zoom service, as we have been doing. I don't know how that would work, but through Zoom we have been able to connect with different people.

It was also great to be able to connect with more people from the Methodist District who are involved in similar things. Before it was really hard to get together because we were far away from each other. But now we can meet on Zoom. It has been a really good learning opportunity and good way to meet different people from around the country and around the District. We have our lay workers meeting once a month on Zoom now, where we can share ideas and we can talk.

James: And what have you learned in your work?

Sarah: I learned that you can't fix everything. And you can't be there for everybody all the time. It's about being a team, not just you on your own. I've learned that whatever we do, whoever we are, God loves us and he is there. Lots of people don't see that, but I know that he does. I know that he's there supporting all these families.

James: And what is your hope in all this?

Sarah: It's encouraging to have these conversations with the parents, about life and faith and to learn together. I'd like to see the parents who come regularly begin to take ownership of the group and be able to run it. We would just be there to support, but they could lead it. We have run this on a limited budget with a small group, and it would be great to see others growing and enjoying taking a lead in this.



Anvil Book Reviews

Christopher James, *Church Planting in Post Christian Soil*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)

What is the future of the church in the post-Christian West? This is not the first book to ask this question and it won't be the last. The particular contribution of this book is its practical theology approach. It is a detailed and focused study on the Seattle area in Pacific North West of the United States of America, which has been described as "the None Zone" with a high percentage of religiously unaffiliated people. James suggests that, based on current trends, Seattle gives a good indication of what the future looks like for the church in the US. Using a mixed method approach drawing on both quantitative and qualitative research methods, James presents four models of church that seem to be engaging well in this post-Christian landscape. The major contribution of the book comes from the time he spends presenting, evaluating, learning from these models.

The early chapters present the cultural context of Seattle and the Pacific North West, the qualitative data collected about churches in the area, and the ecclesiological approach taken around models of church. Chapter 4 presents the four models, developing careful descriptions based on the qualitative and quantitative research. Chapter 5 moves from presenting into evaluating using a missional lens. It explores each model's strengths and some of the potential weaknesses. James then moves, in Chapter 6, to make some suggestions about how the models could be strengthened by learning from each other and from the missional theology he is engaging with. Chapter 7 presents some of the wisdom from these different church models and begins to sketch out some of the larger ecclesiological implications, presumably to be picked up and developed at a later date.

There is much that can be celebrated about this book and the research it is based on. It is a careful and detailed study, one that is clear about its focus on Christian witness in an increasingly post-Christian west. It is a study which is unapologetically theological, being open about its position and commitments and making bold critiques. It is firmly focused on practice, deeply committed to Christian witness and generously ecumenical.

I do have some reservations. While the missional lens chosen for the study is one which brings helpful and significant insights into practice, it can sometimes feel a bit overbearing. There is an assumption that missional theology is the way forward, and everything is evaluated based on that theology. I would have liked to have seen some critique of the missional lens from the actual practice he observed. It could have been strengthened by at least entertaining the question of whether other missiological approaches might have made better sense and

might be more appropriate in a post-Christian world. This means that some of the suggestions for the different models can feel a little heavy handed. A helpful avenue of further reflection would be James's assertion that many of the models have the resources within them to overcome their weaknesses, and more could have been made of this. The book is the product of a doctoral thesis and as a result takes a while to get going. The first three chapters survey the field and context and it would benefitted from getting into the meat of the insights a little quicker. I wonder whether this earlier discussion could have been condensed, which would have had the added bonus of allowing some expansion of the final chapter where the fascinating insights highlighted could have been developed a bit further. The final thing which struck me from reading this, which is less a criticism of the book and a more a wider comment on thinking about models, was that this felt very different from a British context. I could not imagine some of the approaches working in the UK, and the scale and funding was unfamiliar.

Overall an important contribution to a growing field particularly because of the rigorous qualitative and quantitative research that has gone into it. It provides a helpful model for a practical approach to ecclesiology and is a rich engagement with missional theology. As well as its contributions to academic theological accounts of church planting, the book will be of interest to theologically engaged practitioners and important for teaching around church planting and contemporary ecclesiology.

James Butler, Church Mission Society

Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022)

Andrew Root is a professor at a Lutheran seminary in Minnesota, and has been writing a series on practical theology in response to Charles Taylor's analysis of a secular age. This book tells three stories. These stories lightly bounce off Root's theology, but make no mistake, Root still delivers the theology.

The first story is about a church in decline. Imagine a church that has seen better days, and now has a worshipping community of 20 to 30 people, nearly all of whom are in their 70s and 80s. Sound familiar? The inspiration for this book comes from just such a church that was closed and sold to a microbrewery in a hipster urban area. As a pub the church building attracts exactly the kind of people with whom a young energetic digital age pastor of 10 years ago was unable to engage.

The second story is about how Karl Barth discovered the touchstone of his theology that became manifest in *Church Dogmatics*. When Karl Barth started ministry as a pastor in a small village in Switzerland in 1911, he had rejected the pietism of his father (who was also a pastor) as out of date in comparison with the modern theology of the German universities. As a student Barth soaked up liberal theology that lauded the achievements of the Enlightenment. He was a strong supporter of socialism, through which God would bring justice to the proletariat. But with the advent of war in 1914, the failings of modernism became apparent in the industrial scale killing on the battlefields.

Having rejected pietism, and been let down by liberal theology, Root tells of how Karl Barth found faith in God. Barth visited an old German pastor in Wüttenberg, Christoph Blumhardt,

who had inherited and developed his father Johannes' healing ministry. Way back in 1843 when he was a young pastor, Johannes had an extraordinary pastoral situation of a young woman, Gottlieb, who, it appears, was demon possessed. Over a period of two years, he visited Gottlieb and her family, praying with them, in the midst of visions of a ghost, bumps in the night that even made the neighbours complain, and Gottlieb's illness that could be cured by neither medicine nor psychologists. Eventually, Johannes asked "Are you alone?" to which he got the answer, "No" in deep male voice that was not like Gottlieb's. "Who is with you," he asked. "The Most Wicked One," came the response. Now that Johannes knew what he was dealing with, he prayed steadily for exorcism, which happened one day just before Christmas, as Gottlieb's sister proclaimed, "Jesus is Victor!"

This story lays the foundation for the theological heart of the book, which Root exposes in various themes, and he suggests could contribute to a hopeful practical ecclesiology for a secular age. Root assumes that Charles Taylor's analysis of *A Secular Age* applies as much to the modernism of the early twentieth century as it does to the twenty-first.

There is much here that I found joyfully critiques some of the contemporary cultures that we find in the Church of England. First, Root says, the church cannot know how to find God: the church has to allow itself to be found by God. Second, Root says, the church is not the star of its own story, God is. Whether it be the ancient church building of a village parish, or the building up of a congregation in a revitalisation, we sometimes get so focused on church that the focus is taken off the power of God who reveals himself, sometimes in ways that are (using Taylor's language) transcendental.

Third, the "crisis" in the title of the book is the church's preoccupation with chasing relevance. One crisis is recognising the irrelevance of the church in the (Tayloresque) "immanent frame". Another is seeking to regain it. Relevance opens doors to "resources" that the world would give the church if it trusted they would be used efficiently. I don't think Root recognises the significance of the word "resource" in relation to churches in the CofE, but he is firmly in the camp of what HeartEdge would recognise as asset-based community development (ABCD). The resolution to this crisis, Root suggests is twofold: that even in the immanent frame of society the church allows God to be God, and that this God can only be recognised through dialectic.

Here, the word, "dialectic" becomes really important, because it is both the answer to all our churchy problems but also the most difficult bit of theology to make practical. I'm not sure that Root finally delivers on it (in this book, at least). Being "dialectical" means expressing two things that are both true and opposites (or at least in tension) at the same time. I liken it to the kind of sermon that captures the vision expressed by Taylor when he describes, standing in the wide open field of the immanent frame, how we feel the tug of the wind of transcendence pulling us in both directions, first this way towards God, then towards the reality of the immanent frame. In non-academic speak, it's about heaven touching earth. It's about being in the world not of the world. It's about being grounded and supernatural. As Root says, the dialectic is the way of divine action itself: look no further than the incarnation.

There is also something for Anglicans here in our current paralysis about human sexuality. According to Root, Barth rejects both pietism (for Anglicans, read evangelicals) and liberals (read progressives) for the same reason. They are both in their own ways committed to "religious individualism". What he means is that individuals commit themselves to a "religion", making the individual the driver of religious experience. This individualism once again takes the focus off God, and turns our Christian faith into "religion" on both sides of the coin. Barth is

clearly in favour of people having religious experiences, because he was transformed by Gottlieb's story, but he is at pains to prevent Christian practice from being religious.

Root counters the busyness of the church with an appeal for the church to wait. "Only by waiting can the church of the living God serve the world" (p. 141). It refreshes my sense of what prayer and worship is about, not so much as giving ourselves to God, but simply waiting for God's next revelation of himself. I was captured by the sense that an exorcism in 1843, seventy-two years before Barth met Blumhardt, was definitive in restoring Barth's faith in a God who acts. He wasn't looking for a miracle last week, or last year (though Blumhardt's ministry seems to be the envy of any charismatic leader of today). 1843 was good enough for Barth. Are we ready to wait decades, abiding in and yearning for God, before we get our next miracle story to share in a sermon?

The third story, woven in between the Tayloresque take on Barth's formational years as a pastor, is the story Root imagines if the church in the first story wasn't sold to a microbrewery. What if the story of that church has a different ending? What if this church discovers its unique charism (what Root calls its "watchword"), celebrates the stories and gifts of her faithful worshippers, naturally incarnates ABCD and the kingdom of God starts bubbling up in their very midst? They discover they don't need to recruit a new trendy pastor, they just need to ordain the lay leader who had led their congregation all along.

Mark Collinson, Winchester School of Mission

David W. Bebbington, *The Evangelical Quadrilateral Vol 1: Characterising the British Gospel Movement and Vol 2: The Denominational Mosaic of the British Gospel Movement, (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2021).*

Some years after they split up, The Beatles issued a two-volume collection called *Past Masters* – an assemblage of singles and B-Side songs that were otherwise difficult to get hold of, as they were issued separately from their influential LP albums. This two-volume book does something similar for the dispersed scholarship of a doyen of the history of British evangelicalism, David Bebbington – now emeritus professor of history at the University of Stirling. It gathers together 32 discrete journal articles and book chapters written between the 1980s and 2020s, almost all of which were previously published beyond the covers of Bebbington's own influential "LPs", including his best-known book: *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989).

The title phrase *The Evangelical Quadrilateral* comes from Bebbington's most significant and lasting contribution to the study of evangelical Christianity: a four-fold characterisation of both the evangelical movement in general and evangelical Christians in particular. Bebbington first developed this way of describing who or what is "evangelical" in the early 1980s, bringing his idea to maturity in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*. For Bebbington, evangelicals are those "who specifically emphasize the four elements of the Bible, the cross, conversion and activism" (I:vii). While other Christians and their movements in history (or indeed the present day) might also prioritise one or more – say, the authority of Scripture or being actively missional – evangelicals are distinguished by their emphasis on these four together, and may be boundaried from other Christians by their combined scope.

In an introductory chapter to the two volumes, Bebbington offers a robust defence of the Quadrilateral from various attempts by other scholars to challenge, nuance or increase its parameters across the last three or more decades. It is a testament to the strength of the theory that it has held such explanatory power for so long. Both this Introduction and a wide selection of chapters across the two volumes reveal with admirable clarity how fields of research in the history of evangelicalism have developed from Bebbington's pioneering effort to map the evangelical landscape.

The first volume in the collection deftly threads together focused studies of themes and movements from the mid-eighteenth to the early twenty-first century, as well as much of the English-speaking world. The second volume is more clearly structured by denominational categories, with clusters of two or more chapters devoted to Anglican, Methodist and Baptist themes or individuals respectively. Later chapters are brought together in less satisfying catch-all sections that span such contrasting subjects as the Brethren, Frank Buchan's Oxford Group and the rise of Charismatic Renewal in Britain.

Bebbington's book-length studies have consistently had an eye for the ways in which evangelicalism in any period or context responds to and absorbs the changing culture surrounding it. Here, then, are articles emphasising how eighteenth-century evangelicals were shaped by the Enlightenment, their nineteenth-century successors by romanticism and their yet more recent heirs by modernism and postmodernism, which Bebbington at points elides under the alternative term "expressionism". In several chapters dated into the 2000s, Bebbington consolidates another argument first made in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*: that Charismatic Renewal within a range of evangelical denominations should be understood as a spirituality moulded by the "expressionist" culture of its times.

Elsewhere in these volumes, Bebbington offers focused studies of how single doctrinal themes such as eschatology, holiness and entire sanctification, and interests such as science and history, came to be viewed very differently in different periods of evangelical thought and culture. Likewise, chapters on the reception history of theological lodestars John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards offer rich insights on continuity and change in mainstream evangelical beliefs over several centuries.

Bebbington always writes with precision and authority. He has long attracted readers among non-academic yet interested audiences, especially contemporary evangelical believers themselves – and this collection deserves to do so too. Many of the articles and chapters here are based on extensive reading in manuscript archives and long-forgotten evangelical journals, and the insights from them are rarely dry. Yet the final chapter in Volume 1, on Evangelicals and Public Worship, 1965–2005, is especially fascinating for its source material: the author's own notebooks recording observations of a vast range of church services that he personally attended over a period of 40 years. Across this time, Bebbington tracked extensive changes in sermon styles, liturgy, use of space, visuals and technology, music, women's roles and leadership, and a host of behaviours by worshippers, especially reduced formality and more expressive prayer and sung worship. Bebbington recorded some worship contexts where such changes had been resisted. However, the evidence compiled points compellingly to Bebbington having himself lived through a distinctive era of changing evangelical culture. By narrating this history back to others who may well have lived through and forgotten it, Bebbington proves – as has his whole career – the value of history for evangelicalism. A past master indeed.

Philip Lockley, Cambridge

Michael Bräutigam, *Flourishing in Tensions: Embracing Radical Discipleship* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2022)

This book caught my attention because of the language of discipleship. This has become something of a buzzword and a catch-all term for thinking about growing and enabling faith and about learning in recent years. I was interested to see whether this gave a different perspective, particularly due to the language of flourishing, tension and radical. I confess that having read it, I struggle to identify who it was aimed at. It is a bit too deep and technical to work at a popular level, and yet I'm not sure whether it offers much in the way of new insights or developments at a more academic level. Perhaps it operates at more of a textbook level for students, and there are certainly indications that much of the discussion and reflection comes from Bräutigam's own teaching. The fact that each chapter ends with some practical reflection questions probably backs this up.

The book explores following Christ today in a society which, according to the author, trivialises following Jesus, domesticates God and distorts the gospel. In Chapter 1 Bräutigam offers a framing through psychology and the work of Daniel Kahneman. He identifies two systems of thinking. System one sees the world as predictable and coherent, offering quick solutions to problems. System two thinking is a slower system which explores the details and engages with tensions and uncertainty. Bräutigam suggests the problem with discipleship has been system one thinking when actually we need system two thinking. This all sounds well and good, but I wonder whether his somewhat uncritical imposition of this system gives a clue to the problem with the whole book. He assumes that the issues of discipleship he identifies are system one thinking, whereas what he is doing is system two thinking. However, he provides no evidence for this. In fact, throughout the book the voices he engages align well with his arguments and critical voices seem to be missing. I am led to ask the question, is this actually system one thinking posing as system two thinking, and does this therefore call the whole system into question?

The book is made up of three parts focusing on three "stages" of discipleship: Deny Yourself; Take up your Cross; Follow Me. Each section is split into three chapters. I found so much of the book to be familiar ground. It does draw together a wealth of theological voices, Bible passages and some reflections on contemporary culture and life, and there are certainly some nuggets and challenges along the way. There are some turns of phrase which got me thinking, and challenged my own faith practice. Scripture plays a key role in the book and I certainly appreciated being brought back to these passages in the context of discipleship.

My favourite chapter was actually the last, entitled "Seeing the Friend's Face", encouraging an encounter with Jesus and offering *Lectio Faciem* as a model for contemplating the face of Jesus. I found this chapter compelling with the potential to offer a new perspective, and it made me think of the importance of desire within the journey of following Jesus. I wondered whether the book would be improved by starting with this evocative image – it certainly would have taken the focus of the book away from the one following and onto the one being followed. There is a tendency within discipleship material to put the focus on human agency despite advocating for the work of Christ and the Spirit in the disciple. I did at times feel I had a list of the things I had to do as a disciple, and, despite being told that it wasn't in my own strength, it wasn't until Chapter 10 I felt I was offered a clear picture of what that might look like in practice.

The book has an interesting set up, framing discipleship as a creative tension, but I don't think the idea is really carried through in the foreground of the book and often feels like a bit of an afterthought. You can probably guess that I struggle to recommend the book. I think there are similar books which are more accessible and theological accounts of discipleship which offer more in the way of insight. That said, there are things which got me thinking, and I will be returning to Chapter 10 in the future.

James Butler, Church Mission Society

René Padilla, *What is Integral Mission?* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2021)

René Padilla, who died in 2022, has been one of the key voices encouraging an understanding of mission as holistic or integral. *Mision Integral*, as it is called in Spanish, was first introduced to Western mission through the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974. Padilla and his Latin American evangelical colleagues pushed their American and European counterparts to move beyond a binary of evangelism or social justice to see them as a whole. Integral is the word for wholemeal in Spanish and just as wholemeal flour or wholemeal rice is not described as being made up of two things, but whole, so they encouraged Christians to embrace evangelism and social justice not as two things which needed to be brought together, but as a single whole.

This book was originally published in Spanish in 2006 and has been translated into English to encourage greater engagement with integral mission. The book is clearly aimed at a church audience, encouraging conversation around mission themes. It is split up into 19 short chapters taking a short reflection from Padilla's writings and bringing them together with a poem, quote or reflection and a series of questions encouraging further exploration, often through Bible study. This meant it was a far more introductory account to integral mission than I was hoping for. Rather than going deeper into the theological and missiological themes, it takes a more practice-focused approach, exploring a range of issues and topics from the perspective of integral mission. It is aimed at evangelical groups, offering challenges to ingrained understandings of mission, and assumes readers will be confident at engaging with biblical texts in groups.

There were some real gems within the pages of the book. I particularly liked the chapters on the political nature of prayer (Chapter 9), the challenge to Christians to recognise structural injustice (Chapter 10) and the relationship between integral mission and economic justice (Chapter 14). However, at times it felt a little repetitive, a result of bringing together a series of articles rather than a book was written as one. There were parts that felt a little clumsy in the current climate, particularly the way Padilla talks about racial justice and colonialism. While his account and the challenges he makes may be helpfully stretching and challenging for those who have not thought about these things before, for those who have some sense of Black theology and postcolonial theology some of the phrasing might feel slightly awkward. Similarly I'm not sure his discussion of persuasion rather than coercion in evangelism really gets to the heart of the problem of mission's ties to colonialism. Those things said, I think this is a good book for beginning to think about integral mission, its history and the implications for mission, church and discipleship. Padilla seemed to move easily from talking about individuals, to communities and to churches demonstrating his more holistic approach to the world.

Overall I can recommend this book to those who have not really explored integral mission, particularly for groups who want to reflect together. It is not all that I was hoping for in terms of my own exploration of integral mission, but I will certainly recommend it to those wanting to think and act more holistically in mission. It provides a fine starting point for engaging with Padilla's work and his legacy of integral mission.

James Butler, Church Mission Society

Lisa Spriggins and Tim Meadowcraft, Eds., *Practicing Faith: Theology and Social Vocation in Conversation*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2022)

Practicing Faith: Theology and Social Vocation in Conversation is a deep and rich read. This is a book composed of thirteen essays tackling topics including friendship, trauma and holding hope, hatred expressed in the Psalms, food in sacred spaces, compassion, hospitality, guesting and hosting, risk and vulnerability, grief and loss, among several other wide ranging conversations within the context of theology and vocation.

The collection of essays and response articles arose from a conference, *Whakawhiti Korero*, held in 2018, which brought together thinkers and practitioners of differing areas of scholarship. Lisa Spriggins and Tim Meadowcraft, the text's editors, continued the discourse and the book "reflects a slice of that conversation" (p. xviii). What is contained in each chapter reflects the conference's original intent, as expressed in Māori, that the time spent together, ideas and conversations facilitated a "speaking together" (p. xvii).

How do therapists and practitioners integrate their own faith with their vocational work? Set in five themes exploring wellbeing, formation, hospitality, therapy and theology, the writers follow a format of conversations between social vocation and theology. This book sets out to offer multiple examples from the writers' own practice, and thoughtful, reflective discussion. Engagement with Scripture weaves through each section, helping the reader to anchor ideas and practice, and their own reflections, with the work of scholars, historians, social scientists and other academics. Examples of scriptural examination and reflections included Jonathan Rivett Robinson's engagement with Mark 7, and the possible use of humour when Jesus met the Syrophonecian woman (p. 129), Richard Neville's exploration of the incidence of emotions through the Psalms (pp. 224–226) and Sarah Penwarden's explorations of lament, depths and range of grief and reflections on Holy Saturday.

I particularly enjoyed the response after each section, as each essay is briefly responded to, engaged with, and critiqued.

A highlight was Ryan Lang's chapter "A Song in the Night: A reflection on Singing in Scripture and Social Vocation". If this were the only essay, with the corresponding response from Jonathan Rivett Robinson, it would be worth the purchase of the book, although the other essays are excellent too. What resonated for me as a reader is how Lang succeeded in fusing our understanding of singing with the mission of Jesus, how song was prevalent after the Israelites were delivered from slavery, and the relevance of our own song. Lang explores singing in suffering and brings useful insight to those who grapple with how to sing in the midst of the darkest of night, in the midst of trials. Lang brings a compelling argument, and encouragement too.

This is a book that will be helpful for practitioners, theologians and students, indeed anyone seeking to further their understanding of practical theology. In particular, counsellors seeking growth, church leaders exploring the importance of friendship in their own spiritual flourishing, counsellors working with survivors of sexual violence and those working with aged care would do well to pay attention to this book.

For anyone who wants to think about how theology and social vocation can be intertwined, enrich one another (p. 250) and be integrated (p. 253) I would recommend exploring this text. Students and scholars will find thought provoking essays, and the response pieces after each section bring an added dimension and are especially helpful as examples of generous, humble scholarly engagement.

Rosie Hopley, CMS MA student

Afua Kuma, *The Surprising African Jesus*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2022)


The Surprising African Jesus is an illuminating read, and a book I am grateful to have encountered. The purpose of the book is to bring to light the lost prayers and praises of Afua Kuma (1908–87), a rural and illiterate Ghanaian woman (p. 1), reputedly from a royal lineage (p. 4–5). Through the dogged translation work by Jon P Kirby and transcription by Joseph Kwake, the reader is immersed in a world where we see Jesus being given wondrous praise through the inspired prayers of Afua Kuma, a theologian whose work is oral, contextual and deeply embedded in its African grassroots (p. 1).

The Surprising African Jesus is well worth reading, especially if you are interested in cross-cultural ministry and want to learn from a woman enthralled by the majesty of Jesus. Afua Kuma's prayers and praises kept drawing me back to the wonder of Jesus, who he is and how he is deeply committed to making himself known. She is a pioneering African theologian whose work deserves a wider reading. Kuma's language is vibrant as she intercedes for those who go to Jesus. She does not shy away from the visceral, pointing to the all sufficiency of the blood of Jesus: "I want to find shelter in him – to bathe in the blood of Jesus and be saved by his sacred blood" (p. 111).

For anyone who wants to understand the importance of local theology emerging from people in their own tongue, customs and culture (in this case Twi, spoken in Ghana), this book is a good primer. It will give you valuable insights, an understanding into many of the local mores and customs, so ably illuminated with the footnotes and glossary terms.

Another reason this book should be read by scholars, mission partners and students is that it is a reminder of the treasures that God places in the most unassuming of vessels. Of royal blood but "not raised in a chief's court" (p. 4), Afua Kuma employs the language of royalty, using this to glorify Jesus. Speaking in the Twi language, her words point heavenward to God and hark back to Scripture, as these prayers illustrate (p. 76, p. 78):

"Jesus listens with patient ears,
He judges not us but our deeds.
Go and tell him all of your cares..."



“But he has tied his cloth to mine
and lifted the weight off my chest.
These things weighed heavily on me.
I have carried them on my back.
But he has tied his cloth to mine
And has taken them off my back.”

This is a wonderful echo of 1 Peter 5:7 “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” and illustrative of so much of Afua Kuma’s oral works.

If you are interested in reading the words of an oral theologian, deftly captured in this translated and transcribed work, I would commend this book to you. Afua Kuma’s words bring Christology to life, and are an important contribution to the African recording of praise, prayer and contextual theology. They also bring a welcome and expanded global sense of God’s *missio Dei*, since Afua Kuma’s prayers and praises paint a vivid picture of Jesus who speaks to, cares for and deeply loves his African children. Read it and be empowered and strengthened!

Rosie Hopley, CMS MA student



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Church Mission Society
Watlington Road,
Oxford, OX4 6BZ

+44 (0)1865 787400
info@churchmissionsociety.org
churchmissionsociety.org

Connect with us on



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