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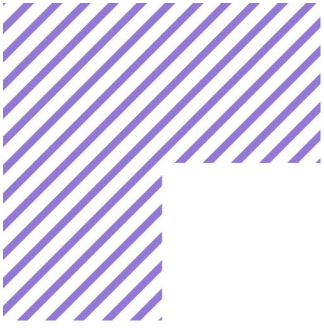
Journal of Theology and Mission

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Reflections on mission
and pioneering*

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**CHURCH
MISSION
SOCIETY**



The Editorial

Cathy Ross and James Butler

It is our pleasure to profile some of our students' work in this edition of ANVIL. One of the mantras across our courses and programmes is that everyone has a piece of the wisdom. The insights and wisdom coming from the grounded and lived experience of mission and pioneering deeply enrich our class discussions and mean that our missiological discussion can never take place in the abstract. As the lived experience of students comes together with the biblical and theological writings and reflections of scholars, new insights and possibilities emerge. Given the diverse contexts of their mission and pioneering, it is no surprise that our students are producing insightful pieces of work drawing on the questions and reflections emerging from their mission practice. While there could have been many more pieces selected, we hope that this selection will prove enjoyable reading.

The two longer pieces are shortened versions of MA dissertations, which the students kindly edited to a more readable length. Rachel writes about what a study of Ethiopian forest churches might have to offer and inspire local churches in East London. As a forest school practitioner herself, she was drawn to the spirituality of the Ethiopian forest churches and the way they cared for, nurtured and honoured the space. Their practice of biodiversity is embodied in their lives, spirituality and worship, and Rachel draws on these themes to reflect further on eco-theology and its meaning in her context. Hayley focuses in on the experience of churches on outer urban estates. As someone who grew up on an outer urban estate, and who now has over 20 years' experience of Christian community engagement in her local estate, Hayley asks what the perceptions of God and the church are among people engaging with their mission initiatives. Through a process of careful listening, she challenges the ways such estates are often stigmatised. While she does hear stories of suffering and abuse, she also finds hopeful stories about perceptions of God and church, which open up new possibilities for mission in estates. Hayley encourages a focus on presence, enabling and proclamation that is based in careful listening and is discovered in ordinary and everyday interactions and conversations.

Five shorter articles develop a range of themes explored in our different modules and programmes. Tammy reflects on chaplaincy and pioneering. She explores how the concept of "being with" resonates with both chaplaincy and pioneering. At the same time she identifies some differences that she explores in some depth, concluding that although they are both distinct vocations, there are some significant crossovers. The article "Care for the Wise" was born out of a student's experience in chaplaincy in a retirement community where the student was shocked at the poor quality of care. This sparked the idea of creating something new, which eventuated in a care-at-home business that cares for the older person holistically and takes the wider context into account. Do read it to see how the student frames it as holistic mission with an entrepreneurial flavour. David's article recounts his experience of finding an embodied spirituality in the midst of his own pioneering. Noticing how easy it is to



become focused on “keeping the show on the road”, David explores how eco-theology helped him to notice how his families’ developing rituals and rhythms could form the basis of a more embodied spirituality. It is a snapshot of his own journey, which asks helpful questions of how such an embodied spirituality might continue to develop. In doing so he and his family discover an image of “God the dancer”, which offers a challenge to offer a prophetic voice to the world.

We have been delighted to see the development of an African Christian Theology route through our programmes, pioneered by Harvey Kwiyani, and the last two short articles come from this MA programme. In his article, Gowi seeks to discover an African spirituality. Beginning by describing an “African Christianity”, Gowi highlights the significance of charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity as well as the way African music, song and dance, the oral culture and the focus on spirit all shape a uniquely African Christian spirituality. He describes a “triple heritage” of African Christianity that can be celebrated and received as a gift to global Christianity. Jess opens up similar questions around the “Africanisation of Christianity” and the “Christianisation of Africa” through the life and ministry of Agnes Okoh. Through telling Agnes Okoh’s story, she demonstrates the ways in which a focus on the spirit world and on community wellbeing shapes African Christianity. In light of this she shows the way in which Okoh’s faith in the power of the Spirit and the life found in Jesus Christ are experienced as more powerful than the powers of the indigenous world view.

To conclude this edition of ANVIL, Maddie offers us a performance piece with a wonderful poem that she wrote as an autoethnography. This is a powerful piece that explores all sorts of issues including home, relationships, expectations around gender and what might be possible. You can read it as well as listen to it.


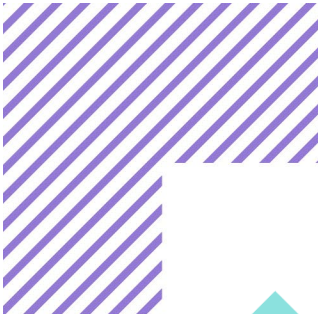
The kinds of discussion and reflection taking place across our programmes, embracing a more global perspective on Christianity, have been identified as enriching by staff and students alike. We hope that these articles in this edition of ANVIL can give a flavour of the diverse and engaging discussion taking place in our pioneering programmes.



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.

Dr Cathy Ross leads Pioneer Mission Leadership Training Oxford and is a lecturer in mission at Regent’s Park College, Oxford. Until 2016 she was the General Secretary of the International Association for Mission Studies. She has previously worked in Rwanda, Congo and Uganda with NZCMS. She has published books on global mission, women in mission, contextual mission and pioneering. Her research interests are in the areas of contextual theologies, World Christianity, feminist theologies and hospitality. Cathy is married to Steve, a GP in Oxford and they have three children and two grandchildren. She enjoys tennis, swimming, coffee, travel and watching the All Blacks.





Growing faith: Ethiopian Church Forests and how they might inspire the theology, mission and praxis of churches in East London

By Rachel Summers

Introduction

As a forest school practitioner, living and working among trees is something I really value. This is in part due to the feeling of wellbeing that being in a green space engenders, partly because being in nature is a crucial part of my spirituality, and partly because of the hope it gives me to be surrounded by wild green growing space at this time of climate emergency. Knowing this, a friend sent me a link to an article in *The Guardian* showcasing Kieran Dodds's book about Church Forests in Ethiopia,¹ which set me wondering about the links between these and the wild churchyard I was beginning to minister in in East London.

Reading more about the concept of Church Forests, I found the idea inspiring. I loved the way in which the worshipping community was deeply rooted within the land, intrinsically linked with their faith and spirituality. The way in which they cared for the land, and it for them, and this reminded me of a UK folk song: "I'll be good to the land and the land will be good to me."² Could listening to the wisdom from Ethiopia help me to uncover some things of God that were happening in our churchyards, even in urban East London?

To this end, I identified three worshipping communities in Church of England churches in East London, my own context. All were interested in rewilding their churchyard and green spaces, albeit with differing amounts of resources. I would visit each site to sit, wander and make observations. I would gather individuals and small groups for conversations, listening to their experience of the churchyard, and the relationship between the rewilding of it and their faith. I wanted to celebrate what was happening on the ground in East London, and to tie that

¹ Kieran Dodds, "Gardens of Eden: the church forests of Ethiopia – a photo essay," *The Guardian*, 8 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/08/gardens-of-eden-the-church-forests-of-ethiopia-aoe>, accessed 6 September 2023.

² "(2015) The Ballad of Hawkwood by Robin Grey," *Three Acres and a Cow*, <https://threeacresandacow.co.uk/category/music-2/>, accessed 6 September 2023.

in with something that appeared to be similar on another continent. I was keen to discover what things of faith might be growing among the wildflowers and ivy.

I was clear that I did not want to look in on an African phenomenon purely through Western eyes. To this end, I sought out Ethiopian voices speaking about Church Forests, ecology and eco-theology, and reflected what they might have to contribute to eco-theological discourse in the UK. My interviews would focus on the communities inhabiting churches in East London, listening to their experiences around the work they already do within their church grounds, and spending time in those spaces myself to listen to the silent voices of place.

Eco-theology

It is increasingly clear that for the continuation of life on Earth and our more authentic discipleship, we must develop a theology that embraces and helps us make sense of ecological issues. The risk is that we may be tempted into a hierarchical view of creation, placing us, as humans, at its head.

Although the concept of humans as stewards of God's good creation can be used in a positive way, the concept is only one short step away from the notion of a transactional relationship. For too long, Western attitudes towards ecology have grown out of a colonial mindset, where engaging with creation means stepping into a position of control and ownership, focussing on us as "exercising dominion".³ This may take benign, or even positive forms, such as the current slew of overactive bug hotel-making and tree-planting, but it still is planted in the soil of wanting to make our mark on the world.

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, unpacks the relationships between God, God's people and the land itself, arguing that they demonstrate a "triangular interdependence of creator, human creatures, and other non-human creatures. This mode of thought moves toward an equitable justice among the creatures..."⁴ There is a relationship between human life and the natural world, between God and humans, and between God and the natural world. All three of these exist interdependently of each other, with equal validity, and each affects the others.

A traditional understanding of ecology, within many Majority World contexts, is deeply rooted in a sense of connection with and of being part of the land. Daniel K. Lagat, writing from Kenya, explains that "People who appreciate the role of God in nature, and who respond by giving offerings of thanksgiving after the harvest, are easily drawn towards environmental management."⁵ He believes that in such a context, it is only a short step for the church to play a major role in unlocking the potential for environmental solutions from the people.

In this article (based on my dissertation), I am taking a deeper look through one particular eco-theological lens from the Majority World: that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), specifically considering their relationship with the land around their church buildings and monasteries. David Goodin, an American theologian with an ecology background, Ethiopian ecologist Alemayehu Wassie and Margaret Lowman, a forest canopy

³ Guy M. Richard, "The Doctrine of Creation," *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-doctrine-of-creation/>, accessed 8 February 2024.

⁴ Walter Brueggeman, "Theologies of the Land," in K. K. Yeo and Gene L. Green, *Theologies of Land: Contested Land, Spatial Justice, and Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers: 2020), <https://www.perlego.com/book/2067773/theologies-of-land-contested-land-spatial-justice-and-identity-pdf>, ch. 1, para. 8, accessed 17 August 2023.

⁵ Daniel K. Lagat, *Christian Faith and Environmental Stewardship: Theological Foundations for Creation Care* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers: 2019), <https://www.perlego.com/book/1482989/christian-faith-and-environmental-stewardship-theological-foundations-for-creation-care-pdf>, ch. 6, para. 3, accessed 20 July 2023.

ecology researcher, explain that “Remnant eastern Afromontane forests survive in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, which are currently protected by the EOTC. These ‘church forests’ (as they are known) are biodiversity preserves of critical importance for the future of Ethiopia, and also spiritual enclaves that are home to churches, monasteries, and other ecclesial lands actively managed by the EOTC clergy.”⁶ These Church Forests exist due to the theology of the EOTC, but it seems they also influence the spirituality of the members of the EOTC as those members interact with them, use them, protect them and build a relationship with them.

Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, an Ethiopian theologian, writes: “It is clear that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity understands nature in a holistic manner. Nature includes human and invisible beings, trees, waters, forests and other land features, even air and invisible space and political structures such as a country... What is more, all aspects of nature and human experience can be derived from Orthodox theology.”⁷ This theological understanding of ecology has worked out in practice into a situation where “the surroundings of many churches are home to wild animals which have almost disappeared elsewhere”.⁸

A spirituality shaped by the green spaces held as holy impacts upon those very green spaces. Goodin, Wassie and Lowman quote a study from the tropical ecologist Frans Bongers that illustrates this well:

“Church followers are very committed to develop the forests, improve their quality and help in extension of the forests. In contrast, the same people are hardly motivated to help governmental institutions in reforestation programs” (Bongers et al.: 41). This is a most significant finding. There is something with respect to their status as holy sites that motivates the people in ways that economic self-interest simply cannot.⁹

This feels like an extremely pertinent point to explore for those of us wrestling with a church community and a country who appear to be content sleepwalking into environmental disaster. Perhaps supporting our Christian community to explore their theology from the ecological grounding modelled by our siblings in Ethiopia might precipitate committed action.

Despite the many differences, there are also similarities between the churches of East London and those of Ethiopia. Both are facing a climate catastrophe of human making. The churches of Ethiopia may be oases of green in a deforested desertifying landscape; the churches of East London could also be oases of biodiversity in the desert of urban sprawl. I wondered to what extent the concrete and asphalt might already be influencing our theology. Certainly, it implies a world where humans are put in a position of control over the natural environment, where creation is valued only for what it is financially worth.

Results and analysis/discussion

Within East London, I visited three different church settings, given pseudonyms here. St John’s, the old village church in the centre of the historic village at the heart of what is now a major urban conurbation in this borough, is in many ways the civic church of the area. It has a large congregation and an even larger fringe congregation. It is set within the wealthiest part

⁶ David K. Goodin, Alemayehu Wassie and Margaret Lowman, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Forests and Economic Development: The Case of Traditional Ecological Management,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 21 (2019): 1.

⁷ Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, “Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology,” in David G. Hallman, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹ Goodin, Wassie and Lowman, 4.

of this area, although still with significant pockets of deprivation. St Paul's was built as a chapel of ease to St John's in the early Victorian era, as the residential project spread further afield right up to the forest margins. Epping Forest itself was set within specific bounds and given to the people of London in perpetuity by Queen Victoria, and this shaped the limits of the borough as residential expansion could continue no farther. St Monica's is a large, red-brick built church from the later Victorian era, surrounded by dense Victorian terrace and on the verge of being overshadowed by newer multistorey housing blocks. A few streets away there is a park, but apart from this there is little greenery to disrupt an otherwise entirely human-built landscape. It has a small- to mid-sized vibrant congregation with a large number of first and second-generation Filipinos making up the majority of those who worship there.

Wassie, researching the Church Forests in his home context of Ethiopia, outlined a variety of ways in which the green spaces around the churches and monasteries were able to act as a blessing to the community and those worshipping as part of it. I was interested to discover in which ways similar blessings might exist in the East London churches I was studying, as well as how much, and in what ways, being invested in their hyperlocal ecology had affected the theology of those in these churches.

A space for practical use

Wassie writes that "Forests serve as classrooms for the traditional church school and provide a quiet shady environment."¹⁰ Creating and nurturing the green spaces around these East London churches has filled something of a similar role. At St Monica's, I had a conversation with a mixed group of Filipino, Jamaican and Irish adults after a midweek mass. I was told that "We actually been using some of the space to have the kids involved... all the children with the wheelbarrow" [sic].¹¹ This church community were keen to utilise the space around their church to teach traditional skills around gardening and growing plants. At St John's, the space was also used for education, as an interviewee explained: "Part of my remit is to engage volunteers and to teach gardening."¹² In my observation at St Paul's, I noted that there is a log circle round a fire pit, which is "used once a month for an outdoor Sunday school focussed on creation theology, and every Friday for a forest school group that meets in the church grounds".¹³ There is a growing sense in East London that land-based skills are important for the future, yet are in danger of being forgotten. For urban churches to provide the land in which these skills can be taught and passed on is a real gift.

A space for spiritual connection

Wassie states also that "Forests create privacy and tranquillity for hermits and monks who are praying day and night".¹⁴ How might this be true in East London? As one interviewee at St Paul's says:

It doesn't have to be a beautiful day to make you love the place where the church is. When I had regular organ practice slots at the church I would stand in the tower porch on a wet Wednesday afternoon, watch and hear the rain pouring, and have the feeling that I never want to leave the place, that I could be an anchorite and live here

¹⁰ Alemayehu Wassie, "Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: Forest Conservation and Management Experience," research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission (Addis Ababa: December 2020), 24.

¹¹ "Bernice", Spring 2023.

¹² "Paul", Spring 2023.

¹³ My observations, Spring 2023.

¹⁴ Wassie, "Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," 24.

because it felt held by a strong power that could sustain you in the same way a good home does, but better.¹⁵

I love the sense this quote gives of the possibility of being held in a holy place, and that holy place giving them what they need to “pray without ceasing”.¹⁶ This theme comes through also from St Monica’s: “It’s the brightness and the care you see as you’re coming into church, and you see it in church, and when you go out of church. You’re being greeted with it each time.”¹⁷ The “hermits and monks” of East London may fit it in around their day jobs and caring responsibilities, but their heart of prayer, held within creation, is clear to see.

Wassie observes that in Ethiopia, “Forests give grace and esteem to churches and play a protective role... The majestic creation of church forests prompts the followers to fantasize about how more beautiful and graceful their creator, i.e. God, could be.”¹⁸ One of the interviewees at St Monica’s explained how, since they had been involved with the work the church had done outside, “we can say like the psalmist say, how wonderful are the fingers of your hand, and you can think about that while you walk around and see what people done and what the Lord has done [sic]”.¹⁹ In St John’s, too, “being part of a place of worship also carries a much greater seriousness than a similarly sized park would... I think of the churchyards as a way to reflect God’s love, his creation and his care for us.”²⁰ The “church” element to this green space is particularly valued as a link to the spiritual, not just for those Christians involved in its upkeep, but also for those of many faiths and none, who find it a place where they connect with something of “greater seriousness” than their daily life. A respondent from St Paul’s highlights this special nature of the churchyard:

When I go spend time in green spaces, I am seeking out the peaceful feeling of being surrounded by nature, but whereas in those other spaces I might feel like a visitor to the natural world, in the churchyard there’s a sense that people are a PART of that landscape (literally and figuratively!) rather than just passing through.²¹

She values the green space of the churchyard specifically because of the prompt it gives her to ponder those things spiritual and to make some kind of connection between her life and the wider Life of God’s kingdom.

In Ethiopia, Wassie notes, “[Church Forests] indicate the presence of churches in the area from a distance, reminding Christians passing by to bow, which signifies the deep respect they have for the church of the Almighty.”²² In East London, it feels less like these nurtured green spaces are reminding Christians passing by to bow, but more that the creation of them encourages passers-by of all faiths and none to nod an acknowledgement of something bigger than themselves, to find themselves caught up in wonder, struck by beauty.

At St Monica’s, one of the congregation had noticed that “As we’re walking down people will be stopping and looking at the garden and that by the hall and appreciating”²³ [sic]. At St Paul’s, it was noticed that “The number of people who pass and pause in the churchyard

¹⁵ “Elizabeth”, Spring 2023.

¹⁶ 1 Thess. 5:17 (ESV).

¹⁷ “Beryl”, Spring 2023.

¹⁸ Wassie, “Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,” 25.

¹⁹ “Velma”, Spring 2023.

²⁰ “Margaret”, Spring 2023.

²¹ “Phoebe”, Spring 2023.

²² Wassie, “Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,” 25.

²³ “Bernice”, Spring 2023.

(many regularly) find it a place of contemplation and perhaps prayer where they do not participate in formal prayer and worship".²⁴

A space for mission

I wondered at the ways in which nurturing these green spaces around churchyards might be seen as missional activity for the churches concerned. At St John's, a respondent explained that "Many of the volunteers who work with me are not church people. Yet their work has drawn them closer to the church and to church events... So, although I started out most interested in growing plants, I would now say that growing people is at least as important to me."²⁵ Growing plants and growing people; this feels like a clear indication of how environmental care supports two directions at once. At St Monica's they noticed how once they started nurturing their green space around the church building, this led to greater community contact: "... as we've gone by we've had other people stop and talk to it with us, and I think that's part of the growing as well, you're growing as you're coming in, and I think that's the best part."²⁶

Due to the setting of St Paul's within the forest, the link with nature has been clearer, even before the church brought some theological intentionality into that relationship. Allowing a community to be held within nature provides an opportunity for groups to grow together, to feel part of each other's lives and the life of the world around them, and this sets up echoes with being part of a wider Life, the life of God. The green oasis of St Paul's acts in a missional way even without any words or explicit human agency.

A space for biodiversity

Wassie believes that the Church Forests in Ethiopia are of great importance as "They protect the church building from strong wind, storms and soil erosion".²⁷ The Church Forests have a pivotal role to play ecologically within their area and within Ethiopia itself, acting against the adverse conditions becoming more and more prevalent in a world on the brink of a climate emergency. Are these UK green space churchyards able to provide a similar kind of protection to the communities that surround them?

Each green space I visited seemed to be a biodiverse oasis within the urban streets surrounding it, set to play a small but significant role in mitigating the worst of the climate catastrophe heading towards the communities who live there. These churchyard biodiversity hotspots protect species from localised extinction, and allow them to support other interlinked species who rely on them for their existence. They act as rainfall sinks, soaking up excess rainwater from flash floods, which have become more commonplace in recent years. They also provide essential cooling from extremes of heat, through tree canopies as well as the plants that grow densely enough to protect the soil and therefore their own and their neighbours' roots.

At St Monica's, they see this as an act of service towards God's creation: "Jesus calls us to love and to serve, and we doing this action of caring for the ground, caring for our gardens, caring for our church, caring for each other, I think that's an extension... it's a true embodiment of what we are called to do as Christians"[sic].²⁸ They are making a link between caring for each

²⁴ "John", Spring 2023.

²⁵ "Paul", Spring 2023.

²⁶ "Maeve", Spring 2023.

²⁷ Wassie, "Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," 24.

²⁸ "Bernice", Spring 2023.

other as a Christian community, and caring for the wider “each other” of the whole created order, the More-than-Human world. Just as in Ethiopia, where the Church Forests have survived because of the theological beliefs of the church community, so too in East London green spaces are coming into existence, being nurtured and protected, because of the theological beliefs of the people who make up the churches there.

A space to shape theology

In Ethiopia, Wassie notes that “The theology of Ethiopian Orthodox church in conserving forest and biodiversity is not available as such as an independent and logically structured document or scripture. Rather embodied in the miracles, lives of Christians, symbols of the teachings.”²⁹ It is the things that the Christians in Ethiopia do, the way that they live, that contain their theology. Anglican theology is also held not within a formal document of beliefs but gathered up within Anglican practices. If caring for their church grounds in an ecologically wise and sensitive way is a “spiritual practice” for the congregations I am engaging with in this research, their theology will be held within this.

At St Monica’s they seem to have a strong sense that their work on the grounds is an outworking of their faith. They believe that it is part of their call as Christians to care for God’s creation, and to show gratitude and appreciation for it. In Ethiopia, Berhane-Selassie explains, “Ethiopian Orthodox Christians interpret and practise Christianity from the perspective of how they see their environment, their lives and their relationship to God and the Bible. Their relationship with their environment stretches the tenets of Christianity to include their experiences of the physical world around them in a particularly African manner.”³⁰ The congregation of St Monica’s perhaps does similar in a “particularly Filipino manner” – I was very aware when talking to them that as first or second generation immigrants in the UK, from the Philippines, Jamaica or Ireland, their childhood experiences, or those of their parents, would have featured far more nature, and less concrete, than there was around their church at the moment. Perhaps this is a particular gifting of the church in East London – the ability to consider a particular UK context through a different cultural and experiential lens.

St Paul’s has a very different congregation, despite being just a mile down the road, and yet there is also a strong sense here that the natural world just outside the church door shapes the faith they inhabit: “There’s such a strong sense of being in nature here, perhaps because most churches aren’t actually *in* a forest, so the trees around the churchyard and the creatures there, and the wood between the churchyard and Forest Rise feel like they are God’s things and you feel like a co-creature with all that is living here.”³¹ Being caught up in this wonder, in this sense of community as one part of God’s created whole, comes directly out of this experience of worshipping within a church within a protected and cherished green space.

Conclusion

Theology

The Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez holds that a function of theology is “as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word”.³² This is very much the angle Wassie believes the Ethiopian Orthodox church is approaching theology from: “The eco-

²⁹ Wassie, “Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,” 2.

³⁰ Berhane-Selassie, “Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology,” 155.

³¹ “Susan”, Spring 2023.

³² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 11.

theology of EOTC is contemplative and focus on life rather than knowledge and thus teaches the church forests of Ethiopia have survived and exist today as a testimony of God's promises, faithfulness, full redemption and symbol of true reconciliation with God."³³

From the conversations I had within these three urban East London churches, the theology around their nature spaces was somewhat light in character. There was some explicit theological reflection around their praxis, but mostly it was implicit, rather than articulated. These people, as part of a worshipping community that nurtured their green space around the church, knew that this nurture was linked to their faith, and that their faith was being shaped by their practice. However, they knew it in their bones; it hadn't been verbalised together, preached about from the pulpit, or discussed within a Bible study or small group. Perhaps churches of East London might do well to take the Ethiopian Orthodox church as a model here, scaffolding conversations and providing opportunities to reflect on their praxis in the light of the Bible.

Mission

The three churches I studied seemed to have a clearer understanding of how their green spaces formed and nourished their mission. Clearest of all was how they highlighted the ways in which the work they had done, and the very existence of their green spaces, affected those who passed by and used them. They valued the conversations with those outside of their church community that grew out of a mutual appreciation for the nature around them, and how the work they were doing was expanding the nebulous edges of their church community. There was a depth of appreciation for the created world, which sometimes stopped short of an understanding of stepping into the *missio Dei* as that might apply outside of the purely human sphere. There is maybe some more work that these church communities could do to better notice this companionship with the More-than-Human that they are already enjoying.

Praxis

In Ethiopia, Berhane-Selassie notes, "More to the point of ecological preservation, the grounds around churches are considered holy... Monasteries have huge grounds which are kept holy; small churches often have only a small fenced-in compound immediately around them."³⁴ Their praxis is clear in the strong link between the understanding of what they do (regarding their church grounds and keeping them wild and protected) and the reasoning that propels this. The churches in East London are similar; they have a strong sense of the importance of the ways in which they cherish, protect and nurture their wild spaces, and it is obvious that this comes out of a strongly held faith and belief.

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educational and philosophical theorist, believed that at the heart of praxis was "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it".³⁵ This transformational action on the world comes, for these communities, in a direct relationship with the transformational action of the Holy Spirit, of a belief that they are being the hands of Jesus in their area, that they are working in partnership with their Creator God as they nurture their small green wild spaces.

Ethiopia and East London

The differences between these two contexts are many in number and huge in scale. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a deep and far-reaching relationship with the communities

³³ Wassie, "Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," 2.

³⁴ Berhane-Selassie, "Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology," 167.

³⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin: 1972), 52.

living in the area. This is not the case in East London now, if indeed it ever was. Therefore, the missional possibilities inherent in a Church Forest or rewilded churchyard will be different. The praxis will be different, too: a more focused group effort from the tinier worshipping communities in East London, versus a wider, more instinctive care from what may be a small group but supported by the entire wider community in Ethiopia. Unlike these churches in East London, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is clearer and more confident in the theology underpinning and growing out of their Church Forest praxis.


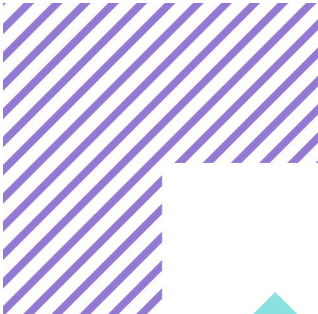
The Future Forest

Within the limitation of this study, I was surprised to find how similar the experiences and shared thoughts were among those I had conversations with. Despite the Ethiopian Church Forests being a continent away and growing out of a very different cultural context, the movement of the Spirit was taking a very similar shape, dancing a similar dance.

I would be interested to explore the ways in which the East London churches might be more intentional about delving more deeply into the theology around their churchyards, what they are doing with them and how that is shaping them. Many of the respondents valued and enjoyed the part they play in the churchyard as a practical contribution to the life of the church. I would be loath to create an impression that this is somehow worth less unless it is couched in theological language, as God surely values the work of their hands. Yet I think there is also a value in curating a space where the voices of all can be heard together, to uncover the truths about what they believe that are thus far hidden or glimpsed only in part. Perhaps taking Ethiopian Church Forests as our model might allow and support such theological questing, as we are challenged by their praxis-based theology and supported by the wider discipline of eco-theology, to develop our own indigenous one, grown from the soil of East London.



Rachel Summers is a pioneer curate based in the urban wild spaces of East London who loves playing with mud, fire and new ideas.



What are the perceptions of God and the church on an urban outer estate, and what are the implications for mission?

By Hayley Humphreys

Introduction

“We have a crisis,”¹ argued Bishop Philip North back in 2016. Church attendance is declining and nowhere is that more dramatically evident than in poor communities and on estates. More recently Bishop North outlined the stark news that “congregational decline in estates churches is four times the national average. Forty percent of applications for church closures are in the 10 percent most deprived communities.”² This is not a new phenomenon and was identified in the 1985 *Faith in the City* report. Despite this, much of the Church of England’s growth strategy and vision in recent decades has been to establish new churches in university towns by encouraging mobile middle-class Christians to relocate, reaching people like themselves.³ Estates are often stigmatised within the church and wider society. Lynsey Hanley, a journalist and writer who grew up on a council estate, describes estates as often forgotten-about corners of cities and towns that people do not travel to or through unless they have a reason to and are frequently described with negative connotations.⁴

This paper, and the research it is based on, challenges some of the assumptions and practices around estates and engages in deep listening among the often-marginalised voices within those estates. The research challenges the notion that working-class people are hard to reach and resistant to the gospel.⁵ I argue that it is through the kind of deep listening I undertake that the Church of England can build empathy and allow those voices to shape the church. Contrary to the typical portrayal of estates, I found residents who were open to God and fond

¹ Bishop Philip North, “Putting the poor first,” *Church of the poor? A call to action for churches in the UK*, 8, <http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Church-of-the-Poor-report-web.pdf>, accessed 10 October 2022.

² Al Barrett, *Finding the Treasure: Good News from the Estates* (London: SPCK, 2023), 1.

³ Natalie Williams and Paul Brown, *Invisible Divides: Class, culture and barriers to belonging in the church* (London: SPCK, 2022), 2.

⁴ Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2017), xiv, 5–7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

of the church despite some of the barriers they face. In light of this, I argue that a prophetic dialogue approach to mission gives a better lens to understanding and engaging in mission as an estate parish.

Estate parishes are those identified as having 500 or more social housing units.⁶ I am currently employed as a pioneer in a Church of England estate parish and I am no stranger to estates. I was born on an outer-urban estate and as a family we experienced some of the difficulties that many people on estates face, including relative poverty, domestic abuse and addiction. Sadly, to this day, the Church of England church on the edge of that estate does little to engage with those who live there, mainly hosting events aimed at attracting a different demographic. Instead, it was the little missional church that engaged those in the town from a working-class background. I attended this church as a child and it is where I learned about Jesus through the lives, words and actions of church staff and volunteers. For the last 20 years I have been actively engaged in mission initiatives and Christian community engagement in areas with a high proportion of social housing.

The parish and the project

The estate where I now live and work comprises over 2,000 social housing units. Though there are many challenges, it is full of some of the most wonderfully resilient, brave and resourceful people I know. Nearly two years ago we started a listening exercise to hear from local people about the hopes and dreams they have for themselves, their families and the estate. We have continued to listen and discern what God might be doing in our community and consider how we might join in. This paper is based on my dissertation, which itself was a part of this deeper listening exercise.

The church is on an outer London borough estate, which was built in the 1930s by London County Council as an overspill *estate* for the rehousing of people from decaying inner London area. The church was built at that time. The current vicar arrived just after the pandemic and the Sunday service attendance had dwindled to approximately eight people. Apart from Sundays, the building was being used by groups such as Scouts and cheerleaders, but other than special services the groups generally had little overlap or connection to the worshipping community.

As a church, our prayer became, “May every inch of the building be used to the glory of God and the groups would not simply be just hall hirers.” Since then we have built connections with key people in the community. We host a weekly coffee drop-in that is attended by the local council and various community groups, each providing staff from these services once a month: GP advice, social prescribing services, benefits advice and family support. There is a community choir in partnership with the NHS and an exercise class sponsored by Sport England.

My research involved interviewing six participants, two men and four women, all residents on the estate where the church is located. All the names in this paper are pseudonyms to protect their identity. I chose the participants as they lived near the church, engaged fairly regularly in activities held at the church but were not regular attendees at Sunday church services. Qualitative researchers Braun and Clarke acknowledge that much scholarly research is dominated by the “usual suspects” who are the educated, white, middle-class straight

⁶ Estates Ministry, “Southwark Diocese has the second highest number of estates parishes in the country. But what is an ‘estate parish?’” *The Diocese of Southwark*, 25 January 2023, <https://southwark.anglican.org/southwark-diocese-has-the-second-highest-number-of-estates-parishes-in-the-country-but-what-is-an-estates-parish/>, accessed 2 February 2023.

people.⁷ My participants are deemed to be from the “hidden population” of those whose voices are not often heard. Using an ethnographic pastoral listening approach allowed me to recognise my position as someone who already lived and worked in the estate and to be attentive to those I was interviewing.⁸

Hearing the stories

When I asked my first question to my participants in this study, I was not wholly prepared for the responses I received. I was surprised at how much my participants willingly shared with me, opening up and baring all despite only having only known me a short while. They shared some harrowing and painful stories with candour and frankness. This level of trust and rapport, built in a short time, left me feeling extremely honoured and grateful. It also made me feel a huge weight of responsibility, to hold the treasure of what they had shared and to tell their stories in a way they did them justice and honoured them.

The participants had experienced acute levels of suffering and trauma. Three themes that came up a lot were addiction, abuse and loss. Some of my participants told of their own struggles with addiction, while others talked about the impact of the addiction of loved ones on their own lives. The local NHS trust reports that there are high levels of alcohol-related admissions to the local hospital of those living on the estate. As a team we are in contact with other local people who are in recovery themselves or are concerned about a family member. On the estate, tackling violence against women is a top priority for the local police neighbourhood team and is a regular agenda item on ward police meetings. Again, I heard first-hand accounts of violence and abuse from my participants. Around loss, three of my participants had experienced the death of a close relative under the age of 60.

There are issues that regularly come up in conversations with other residents too. To explore these I have engaged with theologian David Ford’s phrase “multiple overwhelms”.⁹ He identifies how such overwhelms can come from huge events such as war, massacre, stock market collapse and health epidemics as well as more personal ones such as falling in love, the birth of a child, divorce, serious illness, finding or losing a job and bereavement.¹⁰ Feminist theologian Nicola Slee expands on Ford’s metaphor and describes the experience of being overwhelmed as “being caught up, carried along or bowled over, by some event, force or person, over which one has no control”.¹¹

During the listening phase of this project with my two colleagues, one of them remarked, “Wow, dealing with one of those issues would have been hard but all three of those things, that’s a lot.” The problem is that a lot of listening stops here. The participants’ experiences seem to confirm the assumptions about estates of struggle, difficulty and need. Rather than stopping listening once need was identified, we continued to listen. As a team we have grown and changed because of hearing from our neighbours. They shared openly and frankly, and their stories not only revealed challenges, but resilience, resourcefulness and bravery. I heard stories of care, of being supported, and I saw how people’s perceptions of God and of church were shaped by such experiences. I turn to these stories and listen for the ways they open up new possibilities for mission in estates.

⁷ Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A practical guide for beginners* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2013), 58.

⁸ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008).

⁹ David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 1997).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xix–xx.

¹¹ Nicola Slee, “A Spirituality for Multiple Overwhelms,” *Practical Theology* 10, no. 1 (2017): 21.

Perceptions of God and church

What is interesting for my research is the ways these traumatic events led the participants to view God through this lens of multiple negative overwhelmings. They described their questions.

I do have that sense of my brother's death was so unfair and if, you know, that if God exists why does bad things happen to good people? [Sarah]

If there is someone there, why is he taking my kids? Why is there disabilities and why is there cancer? [Clive]

I do believe there is a God, but I don't understand him a lot of the time and I question him. Why have you taken...? (crying) Why do things happen to good people? [Katherine]

These overwhelmings appear to lead participants to ask questions around the existence of God and how a good God can allow good people to suffer. But rather than pushing people away from God, these experiences seemed to open people up to think about God. Each participant described being open to the idea of God particularly at times of hardship or loss. Despite Mark's experience of the loss of his wife he had a positive view of God, one of being embraced and comforted.

I've always got one image of God, just a picture of just like him with his arms out, reaching for ya.

Participants longed for reassurance that lost loved ones had gone to a better place, and they were often looking for, asking and open for signs. When I asked Valarie about the role of prayer in her life, she shared about talking to a robin as if it were one of her lost loved ones.

I feel silly, if I'm honest. But I dunno, I don't know how to pray. I talk to like, there will be like a little robin or something. I am like, "Who are you? Are you grandad, are you nan?"

Sarah recalls having a spiritual experience after her brother died.

I think when my brother died that was the time when I really sort of tried a little bit and I felt like there was something. I saw him after he died and things like that and I knew that he was OK coz he smiled at me and that was the sort of only real time that I did feel quite close to God.

While these accounts are not particularly Christian, they reveal an openness to God and to the transcendent.

One strong theme that emerged from the participants was that they had experienced key people in their life who had shown them what God was like. Mark and his wife would not have called themselves Christians, but they did know the local women who did attend church. Mark and his wife would attend the church for certain events, mainly at Christmas.

Julie used to do the hair of ladies from the church, and we went to the carol service and we never used to stay for the coffee. On the way out, April [the priest] was waiting at the door and she said, "Julie I know, the ladies have told me about what you are gonna go through, and just to let you know I work for the local cancer hospital and I'll be with you all the time" and from that moment on she never left Julie. I didn't find

out till after, even if we just went there for Julie to take blood, April would be there to see her, and she was with her every day when we was there, she was there with Julie.

Mark described the importance of April's support. "She was with her all the time, and she texted her every night. She was brilliant. If you think of God, then you think of April."

Valarie also shared her experience of a Christian, Paula, who attends church who had supported her and was alongside her through various ups and downs. Paula doesn't work in an official role for the church, but she does have a supportive role in a women's centre where she views her work as her vocation, placed by God among survivors of domestic abuse and their children.

I called up Paula from the centre, she's my guardian angel, I love that lady so much... So she got me on this and that [referring to courses]. I've just got a message from her today, she's got me into counselling. But if I didn't have Paula I don't know where I'll be right now.

For Clive it was Trinny who had supported him. Trinny, like Paula, doesn't work in an official church role but does hold a role supporting parents in the community and is growing to see this as her vocation. It is not hard to understand why as Clive talks about her witness and support.

Trinny is a big one... she's been another hero for me... I see the struggle that she went through, I felt the struggle, I felt it, that's why we get on so well because we've both lost and we've both grieved and we've both been a bit similar.

Importantly here though what had made an impact on Clive was also Trinny's own struggle and her resilience and determination to carry on despite multiple overwhelms. Sarah's foster mum was a regular church goer, and Sarah identified how "she was just really caring and thoughtful".

Although many of the participants were open to God, some were indifferent to or even dismissive of God. While Sarah experienced welcome and forgiveness through her church-going parents, she admits, "It was never really the God side of it, I suppose. I never really got, you know involved myself." Although Clive grew up attending a Church of England school, he has never professed to have a faith.

When people say the word God, I always think of my childhood and going to the church and plays. That's what I think. It's not bad, but that's what I think of. It was never for me; it never was really something that screams out at ya.

It is interesting to note that these two participants who shared some indifference towards God did share stories about calling out to God at difficult times and each shared a hope for lost loved ones of a heaven or a better place that offered them comfort.

The accounts of my participants resonated with the observation of the Revd Canon Gary Jenkins, first Dean of Estates Ministry in the Diocese of Southwark, that one of the aspects of working-class culture is theism:¹² a belief, an openness to the idea of a God and creator, calling it a "warm reception to God, often distant but warm".¹³ Even those who claimed to have no

¹² Revd Canon Gary Jenkins, *National Estates Church Network (NECN), London Regional Conference 2023: The Kingdom on Estates*, session "engaging with the working class", 2 February 2023.

¹³ *Ibid.*

belief could still give examples of calling out to God in times of distress and had feelings of disappointment or anger with unanswered prayer.

Perceptions of God and experience of church

Many of the participants described a connection to church when they were growing up.

I used to go to Sunday school. We used to go Sunday school there and it was good fun. I just remember baking cookies and doing some drawing. [Cara]

I used to love going on a Sunday. I used to go to church when I was little, we always went to Christingle, Christmas Day we were in church...I felt safe in church, I loved it. [Katherine]

I used to go for pizza evenings, and I used to be in the junior choir and things like that which I enjoyed. [Sarah]

Although church also brought up negative connotations too.

When I think of church I think of itchy tights and Laura Ashley dresses. [Sarah]

In light of thinking about mission, it was interesting that half of my participants described the church as a place to get help. Sarah recalled attending various events with her children at different churches as her children were growing up.

It's always been helping us in some way. I always knew in the past that if we needed help with something that was where we could go, down to the church. You just knew you go to church if you need help.

Mark only attends church occasionally but felt involved and included.

I do coffee mornings; I help put the chairs out and things like that and then helping whatever way I can. Then I help set up for choir, I didn't think I was going to enjoy that, but it's really good, I've really enjoyed it. You can come and get involved with people and be part of it.

He experiences church as "family".

The sermons are good, and people are brilliant, it's like family, you can walk in there and you haven't been there for weeks and weeks but like you're just part of their family.

Cara also used the word family, but after initially giving a positive description of church followed up with this:

At the same time, I've had, not bitchiness but the judgemental side of it. And there are people that are in there and they are judgemental, and they still turn their nose up at me if they see me.

Sarah similarly identified negative aspects of church being family. "I think we've also said the nice side that I have found but also the, you know the there is a judgement or there can be a judgemental side."

To some degree, these findings echo with Stephen Hance's work. Hance identified four ways in which his participants viewed the church: benign indifference, fondness and appreciation,

local trumps national, and that Christians seemed embarrassed about God.¹⁴ My participants also had a fondness and appreciation for the church and only referred to church in terms of the local.

A prophetic dialogue approach to mission in estates

The experiences of transcendence and the divine heard in the stories of participants opened up new approaches to mission. Andy Weir, a missiologist and Church Army researcher, explores how urban mission is often seen through a tension between social action and evangelism.¹⁵ This approach leads to churches emphasising words or deed, either focusing on physical need and risking becoming what Pope Francis described as a “compassionate NGO”,¹⁶ or to churches focusing on spiritual need, spiritualising conversion and, as Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder point out, risk of an acceptance of the status quo with regards to the injustices in the world.¹⁷ When I started the MA course I was working as a debt advisor for a local church, and we’d give Christmas hampers to families on low income. But as I met those families at the school gates picking up my kids, I noticed they would look sheepishly away as I tried to say hello. I felt increasingly uncomfortable about the approach to mission I was engaged in. Since studying the MA, I have understood more about my discomfort for paternalistic approaches to mission and could no longer continue in that role.

I have found prophetic dialogue to be a third way, which helps move beyond the binary of words and deeds. Bevans and Schroeder describe three key missiologies of the twentieth century: participation in the mission of the triune God (*missio Dei*); liberating service of the reign of God; and proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal saviour.¹⁸ They propose a fourth understanding of mission – that of “prophetic dialogue” – which synthesises elements of all three strains. “Prophetic dialogue” is a dance of the Trinity in the world that invites all creation to participate.¹⁹ Bevans and Schroeder maintain that “it is based on the beautiful but complex rhythm of dialogue and prophecy, boldness and humility, learning and teaching, letting go and speaking out”.²⁰ Churches need to listen and engage in dialogue always aware that they have something important to share, a prophetic message. Based on the listening I have done, I propose that a prophetic dialogue approach to mission offers a good way forward for work on estates. I will discuss this based around three themes: presence, enabling and proclamation.

Presence

This research has been about listening to the voices on the estate. From the interviews it appeared that the participants had rarely been given opportunity to talk about their lives. On one occasion following an interview I received a message from a participant I’d interviewed earlier that day. It read, “Thank you for today, really therapeutic talking sometimes.” This message encouraged me and reminded me of the importance of listening and giving people space to share their stories. Catholic theologian Albert Nolan teaches that the first steps of

¹⁴ Stephen Hance, *Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us: Perceptions of the Church of England* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2021), 2.

¹⁵ Andy Weir, *Creative Tension in Urban Mission: Reflections on Missional Practice and Theory* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2015), 8.

¹⁶ Samuel Wells, Russell Rook and David Barclay, *For Good: The Church and the Future of Welfare* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2017), 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹⁸ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (New York, Orbis Books, 2004), 286–395.

¹⁹ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections of Christian Mission Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 9–10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

mission are to “listen, listen. Ask questions. Listen!”²¹ In *Prophetic Dialogue*, Bevans and Schroeder liken mission to being “visitors in someone else’s garden”.²² As we enter, we admire and see the beauty of the garden through our hosts eyes. What might be deemed as a weed to the visitor might be a beautiful wildflower to the host. The listening enables us to see through their eyes.

David Bosch argues that “God is a missionary God” who is already present and at work in the world, redeeming and reconciling all things to himself despite the church.²³ Mission is seen as a movement from God to the world and the church is an instrument of that and participates in that movement.²⁴ Bosch maintains that “to participate in Mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love towards people, since God is a fountain of sending love”.²⁵ It was this participation I heard in the stories of how people felt supported by key people.

I observed how each participant could identify a person in their life who had shown them characteristics of God. In some cases, they named it directly: “guardian angel”, “if I think of God I think of ...” or “a hero”. In other cases, they were less explicit; for example, a parent “always leaving a door open”. Samuel Wells claims the most important word in theology is “with”.²⁶ The good news of the gospel is that God is “with” us. He argues that the true predicament in life is not limitation but isolation.²⁷ Wells claims that to celebrate the gospel we should be “with people in poverty and distress even when there’s nothing we can do for them. By being with people in grief and sadness and loss even when there’s nothing to say.”²⁸ Andrew Grinnell argues that Wells’s “being with” approach doesn’t go far enough and is “passive in the face of dehumanising structures”.²⁹

Anna Ruddick’s suggestion of “missional pastoral care” offers an important next step. It is “an intentional form of missional living shaped by seven elements: being among people who are different, living locally, being available, taking practical action, long-term commitment, consistency and love”.³⁰ It is a fusion of *mission* and *pastoral care*.³¹ Ruddick coined this term after her work hearing from Eden Network team members and community members who lived alongside each other in areas of social deprivation. The team members’ ministry involved supporting and caring for people without the care being a means of simply evangelising. Ruddick argues that “Missional pastoral care is a way of life that seeks to share in the mission of God by participating in communities who have been marginalized, developing significant and mutual relationships with people with an eye on the common good.”³²

Enabling

The kind of help people identified was different from the paternalistic models of meeting need. Sarah identified above that church was a place she knew she can go to get help; however, Mark expanded on this further and talked about church in terms of his involvement, belonging and contribution. This move from receiving help to participating is important. There is a rise in the number of people accessing food banks and getting debt advice from

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

²² *Ibid.*, 33–34, 73–74.

²³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2011), 400.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015), 3, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ Andrew Grinnell, “Just Friendship: The Political and Societal Implications of the Practice of Relocation” (PhD diss, Durham University, 2019), 38.

³⁰ Anna Ruddick, *Reimagining Mission from Urban Places: Missional Pastoral Care* (London: SCM Press, 2020), 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

³² *Ibid.*, 21.

church-based social action projects. Many social action approaches are based around needs and focus on what Wells would call “working for” others. Ann Morisy argues that needs-meeting approaches can distract us from the “primary task of the Church: that of helping people to discover the scope for relationship with God through Jesus”.³³

Asset-based community development starts from a different perspective and asks what the assets and strengths of a community are and how can we find creative solutions based on these strengths. Al Barratt describes it as:

Asset-based community development, or ABCD, is an approach to community development that uses the skills and capacities of local residents, the power of local associations, and the support of local institutions, to build stronger, more sustainable communities for the future.³⁴

Barrett acknowledges that ABCD isn't explicitly Christian, but the values and principles resonate deeply with Christian theology and practice.³⁵ In his theological reflection he likens ABCD to the feeding of the 5,000 where the people are hungry, and Jesus initially responds by asking the disciples to “go and see”, to identify what resources they already had, and he then did a miracle with that.³⁶ ABCD is about discovering and celebrating what is already there, building from the inside out, starting with local people and local knowledge (instead of having professionalised services working for people) and is relationship-driven.³⁷

Proclamation

A prophetic dialogue approach reminds us that churches also have a prophetic role alongside this deep listening, presence and enabling. In my research, the participants appreciated not just the presence of others but also their care and support. Critics of missional pastoral care might argue that this is a fairly secular model of care, and ask where the gospel is, where is Jesus? My answer would be that Jesus is living within the Christian. Each participant I interviewed gave an example of a Christian accompanying them and helping them in practical ways. This can become explicit through storytelling and questioning.

Katherine commented, “I believe, but I question.” Some church traditions do not welcome questions and are not comfortable with the disappointment and grief of unanswered prayer. This could be likened to want to skip over Good Friday and Holy Saturday; to arrive at resurrection on Sunday and the celebration by bypassing the grieving, doubting and lamenting. This is why I particularly appreciate being part of the Church of England, as it journeys through the whole narrative during lent. Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, is deeply distressed and troubled and says to his disciples “my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow...”³⁸ He also questions the Father, asking if he really must go through this and if God would take the cup of suffering away.³⁹ This is an example of Jesus' humanity, and the fact that Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow, experienced human emotions of suffering and trials gives us a sense of hope and having a God in Christ who understands what it's like to experience overwhelmings.

What prophetic dialogue and the stories of participants indicate is that this prophetic element should not be seen as a separate task. While I agree that presence and enabling are

³³ Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Continuum, 2004), 23.

³⁴ Al Barrett, *Tackling Poverty in England: An Asset-Based Approach* (London: Church Urban Fund, 2013), 1.

³⁵ Al Barrett, *Asset-Based Community Development: A Theological Reflection* (London: Church Urban Fund, 2013), 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1–6.

³⁸ Mark 14:34 (NIV).

³⁹ Mark 14:36 (NIV).

not enough on their own, what the stories suggest is that through the faithfulness of Christians and the careful listening we have developed the proclamation element emerged. The gospel is less proclaimed, and more shared naturally. The gospel is “gossiped” in the midst of being present and enabling others. Picking up another theme from prophetic dialogue is the way the formal setting of the service and the liturgy also enable proclamation. The storytelling, the lament and sorrow and the space for hope and celebration resonate with my participants’ accounts. From my experience working on the estate, I have found it a place where people know how to party and celebrate. One of the beautiful and surprising things that happens in our church is the way on a Sunday people clap the prayers, the reading of Scripture and the sermon.

Prophetic dialogue has been a helpful way to illuminate what seems to be naturally happening in our community, that through listening, being present and enabling others the proclamation of the gospel has emerged. To pick up two of the metaphors used by Bevans and Schroeder, in noticing the way the garden is flourishing we find something beautiful and particular, even if it is not what we had in mind originally. Similarly, as we join in the dance of God we find ways the gospel is faithfully improvised afresh.

Afterword: a personal reflection

I have experienced being overwhelmed as I have wrestled with my past parochial approaches to mission. Overwhelmed as I have considered the use of power and “doing to” approaches to mission and evangelism. Overwhelmed by the stories and by the hardships my neighbours have experienced. Overwhelmed by my own emotional response as I noticed echoes of my own experiences while listening to theirs. At times I was aware that perhaps I’d overstepped the boundary of researcher as I teared up and cried with those who cried, and my human response seemed to trump the researcher role. It was hard to relisten to the stories and reread them time and time again. The black text on the white screen seemed to make them more harrowing, but I was also overwhelmed at the beautiful ways God seemed to be revealed through and in the stories. Additionally, during the time of the interview process our home had several attempted break-ins, one of which I interrupted. This resulted in me not being able to sleep, being hyper vigilant and anxious. Thankfully my neighbours and friends were extremely supportive during this time. I could access support and was gifted time away on retreat. This helped me reorient myself toward the One who overwhelms and refreshes my soul. Slee maintains that “God is present and at work in the overwhelming”⁴⁰ and furthermore that the “experience of being overwhelmed is an invitation to greater and fuller life”.⁴¹

I believe participation in God’s mission is standing shoulder to shoulder with others in community and inviting them to the dance and to encounter the One who saves and overwhelms with love, grace, mercy and forgiveness. The kind of mission that is required is Paul’s description of the disciples living among those in Thessalonica:

... so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.⁴²

⁴⁰ Slee, “A Spirituality for Multiple Overwhelmings,” 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² 1 Thess.2:8 (NIV).



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Chaplaincy and pioneer ministry

Tammy Oliver

What is chaplaincy?

Historically, chaplains have been understood as ministers who have been authorised by the church to “show God’s love through offering care and support, and by representing Christian values and beliefs”.¹ Chaplains often worked in connection to the local church, providing those who could not attend (for example, due to imprisonment, military service, hospitalisation or being away at boarding school or university) with pastoral care, religious services and the sacraments.

Following changes in the shape of society over the last century, the number of people identifying as Christian in the UK has declined, and it is no longer taken for granted that religion has a place in public spaces.² Responding to these changes, the nature of chaplaincy has evolved. Larger chaplaincies are often multifaith, where chaplains are expected to minister to people of any faith or none. Chaplains themselves can be lay or ordained, paid or voluntary, and can be representatives from any number of religions or religious organisations, as well as interfaith and humanists. My focus here, however, is specifically around Christian chaplaincy.

These developments have led to a variety of models of chaplaincy. The lead chaplain at my university, for example, was an Anglican priest embedded in the everyday life of the university, working with staff and students alike, while volunteer chaplains at a nearby police force only visit once a week, and work exclusively with police officers and support staff. The range of chaplaincy models and contexts has blossomed. No longer restricted to the traditional hospital/prison/military settings, chaplaincies can now be found in supermarkets, shopping centres, sports clubs, nightclubs, gig venues, casinos, ports and other workplaces, among others. These new chaplaincy roles have often emerged in response to people listening and responding to God’s action in the world, and are a vital part in bridging the gap between faith and society.

Despite this wide range of models, the key feature of most chaplaincies is their incarnational approach – being present or being with people. Just as Jesus intentionally made himself present to people where they were, chaplains venture into specific sectors of society to meet and be alongside people where they are, offering pastoral and spiritual care and support to those who need it. As Ben Ryan suggests, “chaplaincy’s greatest theological tool is its ability to

¹ The Methodist Church, *What is chaplaincy?* <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/ministries/chaplaincy/exploring-chaplaincy/what-is-chaplaincy/>

² Ben Ryan, “Theology and models of chaplaincy” in *A Christian Theology of Chaplaincy*, ed. John Caperon et al (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), 82.

encounter people.”³ This “being with” approach is also deeply Trinitarian, recognising as it does that both God and humans are relational beings.

Is chaplaincy pioneering?

Pioneer ministry is innovative and entrepreneurial. As Beth Keith suggests, a pioneer “is someone who sees future possibilities and works to bring them to reality”.⁴ In a similar vein, Victoria Slater discusses the entrepreneurial possibilities of chaplaincy, suggesting this language captures “something of the responsive and proactive nature of chaplaincy as it works collaboratively to build something on recognized value in a particular context”.⁵ This entrepreneurial spirit is also evident in the experimentation with and emergence of new models of chaplaincy, which seek to connect with people and communities unlikely to attend their local church or engage with more traditional forms of chaplaincy. Slater suggests this entrepreneurial theology implies “an openness to identify and seize opportunities offered by God, however surprising or ‘secular’ they appear to be”.⁶

Pioneer ministry is contextual and incarnational and, much like chaplaincy, looks different depending on its context. Chaplaincy and pioneering have a shared theological emphasis on listening to context and to God in that context. Operating primarily within “secular” society, both chaplaincy and pioneer ministry engage with people where they already are and create contextual opportunities for encounter with faith. Through their very positioning beyond the usual margins of the church, chaplains operate in the same kinds of spaces as pioneers.

Pioneer ministry is deeply missional—focused on discerning and joining in with the *missio Dei*—and is often holistic in approach. Indeed, the broad and holistic understanding of mission found in the “five marks of mission” often resonates with pioneers. In this sense, mission is concerned with the healing of relationships: relationships with ourselves, one another, creation and God. Similarly, chaplaincy is a missional outworking of the church that takes a holistic approach: nurturing relationships, listening deeply and offering pastoral, emotional, physical and spiritual support. This mission may be framed differently in each chaplaincy context, and is able to manifest in contextually appropriate ways in the same vein as pioneering. In a school chaplaincy, for example, there is endless scope for pioneering opportunities in response to the needs and opportunities presented by the staff and students, including before-/after-school clubs, lunch clubs, seasonal occasions, reflective spaces, choirs, mental health support, creative approaches to teaching/assemblies, space for a social enterprise and much more. In other contexts, this missional element to chaplaincy might be understood purely in terms of providing pastoral care and participating in the healing of relationships.

Pioneering is flexible and there is certainly a flexibility necessary in chaplaincy that reflects a vulnerability and willingness to walk alongside people and see things from different perspectives. Both chaplains and pioneers need to be bilingual – that is, “speaking the language both of religious ministry and the context-specific language of their setting”.⁷ Just like pioneers, chaplains need to understand the language of church and of their specific

³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴ David Goodhew, Andrew Roberts and Michael Volland, *Fresh! An Introduction to Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 137.

⁵ Victoria Slater, *Chaplaincy Ministry and the Mission of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2015), 99.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ryan, *Theology and Models of Chaplaincy*, 82.

context—workplace, school, prison, elsewhere—and its staff, students, prisoners and others. For all of these reasons, and more, chaplaincy has the potential to be very pioneering.

There are also a few distinctions between chaplaincy and pioneer ministry. A key difference is seen in how each form of ministry begins, and the expectations of these roles as they develop. Chaplains are often recruited by an institution to fill a particular role, with a set idea of what that role will entail. In contrast, a pioneer is often called to discern and respond to potential opportunities for engagement in a particular context, ideally without predetermined expectations for what will emerge. More established chaplaincy roles, especially those in more traditional contexts, are also more likely to have a particular setting with specified services to provide. In contrast, pioneers may have greater freedom to explore possibilities as they feel called, and more easily venture beyond the margins. Pioneers may also have freedom to develop appropriate structures in response to the context – for example, a missional community, a charity or social enterprise.

Another difference is in terms of power and position. Chaplains are often seen and understood as part of the institution in which they serve, and may naturally assume some valuable elements of power and privilege within the established structures. In contrast, pioneers often work from the grassroots, and often face a distinct lack of power or privilege when starting from scratch.

Another difference is in terms of missional stance. Although chaplaincy is missional in its very presence, it is likely to have less of a focus on evangelism. There are important ethical considerations regarding evangelism within ministry in all contexts; however, chaplaincy's focus on pastoral care, its position of trust, often in contexts of particular vulnerability, commonly in multifaith environments, brings the ethics of evangelism into sharper focus for chaplains. While chaplaincy commonly holds this focus on pastoral care, pioneers often have the freedom to pursue a more evangelistically missional focus, and are often working towards creating new contextual worshipping communities.

Finally, as many chaplaincies are multifaith, the lead chaplain in such contexts will need to hold space for those of any faith and none. In contrast, while a Christian pioneer minister may choose to engage with people of any faith and none, they will rarely be expected to create space for multifaith specific support.

Chaplaincy in practice

To explore chaplaincy in practice I took the opportunity to meet with an Anglican priest and chaplain at a university hospital. She described her calling to be “right in the midst of it”, “there to hold a dying woman’s hand”, “in the thick of where people are”. This sense of vocation to “being with” people was a recurring theme in our conversation. The opportunity to be “in the midst of it”, especially where issues of life and death are ever-present, creates opportunities for chaplains to serve people’s spiritual and pastoral needs as they arise. She described how those with little predisposition for religion often approach the chaplaincy team because they have a need that they feel a chaplain might be able to meet. This suggests that chaplaincy can play a vital role in providing care and bridging the gap between church and our increasingly unchurched society.

We also discussed the practice of “noticing” – the opportunity, perhaps even the responsibility, to “notice what no-one else sees”. For example, she may ask: is this patient lonely? Fearful? Are there social/spiritual/practical issues affecting their pain levels? This information can be

instrumental to a patient's overall care, so finding opportunities to explore these concerns can significantly help patients in need.

This helped me to realise that hospital chaplains have incredible opportunities to show God's love in a place where fear and hopelessness are readily found. The chaplain described her role as "one of the easiest places to join in with the *missio Dei*". David Bosch suggests that, as an attribute of God, the *missio Dei* is part of the doctrine of the Trinity,⁸ and since humans are made in the image of this Trinitarian God, we too are relational beings, ever in need of connection with others. It is in cultivating these relationships that God's love can be encountered. This highlights the importance of hospital chaplains' ministry, especially in regard to supporting a patient's relational connectivity. This focus on encounter also speaks to the incarnation, God's self-revelation through Jesus, who encountered so many in need of holistic healing.

We also discussed the story of the woman who bled for 12 years (from Luke 8) as a Scripture that resonates with hospital chaplaincy. In this story, the woman finds connection, and is shown honour and respect. She is not poked and prodded by physicians, but able to find holistic healing—physically, socially, spiritually—through one encounter. Similarly, the hospital endeavours to show honour and respect, and aims to notice a patient's whole being. While clinicians attend to their physical wellbeing, it is chaplains who are perhaps best positioned to listen and respond to a patient's spiritual, emotional and social needs, and to notice where their pain may remain. After all, pain relates not only to the body, but also to one's social and spiritual life.

Through this conversation, I observed three aspects to the gift of chaplaincy that resonated with my earlier findings. Firstly, it is clear that "being with" people is integral to the chaplain's role, and is key to their gift – "our biggest tool is just being there". Secondly, noticing. Just as Jesus noticed those who were otherwise ignored, some chaplains are able to bring the gift of noticing people, and their needs, which are at risk of being overlooked. In this way, chaplains are not only able to respond to these people and their needs, but also to communicate that they are loved and valued. Thirdly, chaplains are able to join in with the *missio Dei* in ways that seem increasingly difficult for parish church ministry.

Conclusion

Chaplaincy and pioneering are distinct callings and vocations. Nevertheless, there remain significant crossover and correlations between these two forms of ministry. If we were to draw a Venn diagram with a circle for chaplaincy and a circle for pioneering, we'd have to draw a large area of overlap in the middle! Certainly, Kristin Aune's beautiful description of chaplaincy could apply equally to both the pioneering and chaplaincy endeavour: "In this light, chaplaincy has to do with life in all its fullness wherever this may be glimpsed. Chaplaincy concerns the renewal and revitalisation of life, anticipating what could be through God's possibilities. Foretastes of the Kingdom include acts of kindness, the search for truth, the opening up of creative prospects, or the grace to endure that which will not change."⁹

Naturally, no two chaplains (or pioneers) will be the same; each will be more or less pioneering. While, in its grounding and approach, chaplaincy has the *potential* to be very

⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2011), 547.

⁹ Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities*, Research Centre: Trust, Peace and Social Relations, 38, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/chaplains-on-campus-executive-summary.pdf>.

pioneering – it is not pioneering *by default*. A chaplaincy will only ever be as pioneering as its chaplain, or chaplaincy team.

There is so much within the chaplaincy model for the wider church to celebrate, with so much that can inspire us—lay or ordained, in parish or pioneering contexts—to be a visible, credible, holistic manifestation of God’s love in society. Indeed, as Julie Hopkins argues, “the Christian faith will only be relevant if it listens to the pain, hopes and longing for salvation of those who are looking for God”.¹⁰



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¹⁰ Julie Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology* (London: SPCK, 1995), 106.



“Care for the Wise” – a missional entrepreneurship project idea by a CMS diploma student

Introduction

I attended the “Make Good” module in the second year of my Diploma in Theology, Ministry and Mission on the CMS Pioneer undergraduate programme. The module is an introduction to social and missional enterprise and its relevance in mission. It’s a residential week that enables you, with the guidance of experienced practitioners, to take an idea from conception to the initial stages of a business plan.

Society tries to anaesthetise against the many problems that exist. In her book *Who Do We Choose to Be?*,¹ Margaret Wheatley states that we need to acknowledge the pain and suffering in the world, the disparities in wealth, status and quality of life, and be prepared to serve. However, we can often feel paralysed when we stop to look at these things, and feel we are unable to make a difference. This module, in fact this whole programme, not only gives us permission to dream, but equips us to “do”. We have the creative ability and innovative ideas to solve most problems, but moving from passion to action is something we often find hard. The following is a presentation of a project that I think can solve a very real problem.

My project is called “Care of the Wise” and seeks to provide holistic care to older people in their own homes. The vision, however, is much greater than just providing a care service and is summarised in the following mission statement: *Transforming the way we view and support older people, their families and the caring profession in the UK.*

What is the problem I want to solve?

Two years ago, I started work as a chaplain in a large retirement community and care home that has a reputation as a leader in care. Despite this, I have been shocked at the poor quality of life experienced by residents. Their bodily needs are met but little attention is given to their mental and spiritual wellbeing. It is also evident that the training for staff who care for those living with dementia focuses on reacting to difficulties rather than the wellbeing of the residents. Through my work I have found it possible to tap into the spiritual side of those with

¹ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2023)

advanced dementia and see the beauty within. I believe that deep wisdom resides in these people that can be accessed through holistic care.

In addition, I have seen the inequalities present in the working conditions of care staff in care homes. Members of the executive team earn large salaries and work office hours whereas the care staff work long shifts at antisocial hours, many of them earning less than the “real living wage”.² There appears to be few prospects for career progression, and it is recognised that professional carers suffer from a lack of status and recognition.³

It is widely and regularly reported that there is a crisis in social care provision in the UK. The situation is likely to deteriorate even further as the number of over-85s is predicted to treble in the next 30 years.⁴

There is also an overall lack of practical and emotional support for families and unpaid carers in the UK; it has been reported that unpaid carers are some of the most isolated and loneliest people in Britain.⁵

Those who work in the caring profession are among the lowest paid, many not even receiving the “real living wage”, with poor employment conditions and few prospects for career progression. Care professionals generally suffer from a lack of status and recognition in this country.

In contrast to many African and Asian communities, Western society has come to see older people as a “problem” rather than an “asset”. Our solution to the “problem” seems to be to hand older people over to residential care homes, where they are separated from their families, communities and younger generations, and become “unseen” by much of the population. I think our society as a whole is poorer for losing the voice of our older people (the wise) in our communities.

My response

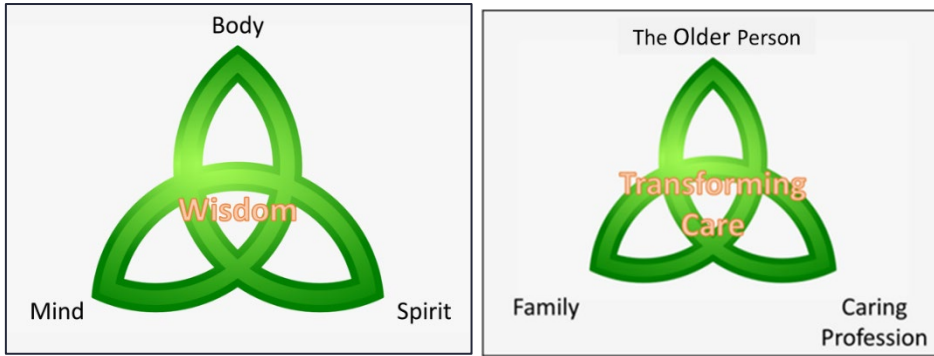
My idea is to set up an innovative care-at-home business that not only approaches the care of the older person in a holistic way – body, mind and spirit – but also provides support to all those intimately connected to the older person – their families, friends and care professionals. When thinking about the idea, I was struck by the “three-ness” of the holistic idea; it reminded me of the Trinity and I sketched the following diagrams based on the Celtic symbol of the Trinity:

² “What is the real Living Wage?” *Living Wage Foundation*, <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>.

³ “Adult Social Care: Ninth Report of Session 2016–17,” *House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee* (House of Commons, 27 March 2017), 37, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/1103/1103.pdf>, accessed 30 January 2022.

⁴ “Challenges of an Ageing Population – Age UK report,” *Age UK*, 22 April 2013, <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/archive/vision-and-imagination-critical-to-meet-challenges-of-ageing-population/>, accessed 30 January 2022.

⁵ Carers UK, “Alarming Numbers of People Feel Isolated and Lonely as a Result of Caring for their Loved Ones – Carers UK,” *CarersUK.Org*, 2015, <https://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/press-release-rss/4702-alarming-numbers-of-people-feel-isolated-and-lonely-as-a-result-of-caring-for-their-loved-ones>, accessed 30 January 2022 (no longer available).



The aim of the service would be to enable the older person to stay in their own home for as long as possible, to the benefit of all (the older person, their family and carers, their community and wider society), but then to ease the transition to a care home if necessary.

The care-at-home service would have the following innovative features:

- ◆ Bespoke solution for each individual and their family.
- ◆ Care to be provided by professionals specially selected and trained in an innovative approach to dementia care, the “Understanding Dementia” approach,⁶ as well as pastoral and spiritual care.
- ◆ Training to be provided to the family/unpaid carers.
- ◆ Practical, emotional and spiritual support for the family – providing respite, advice, signposting to support and community networks.
- ◆ The older elderly person and their family would be encouraged to participate in and contribute to all-age community events.
- ◆ Professional carers to receive fair pay and employment contracts, equal pay for all employees (carers and managers), high quality specialised and ongoing training, opportunities for career progression.

What will success look like for my project?

How often do we really ask this question? And what is “success” anyway? In capitalist terms success is often measured as profit; in church terms it’s often “bums on seats”. However, there are other ways to think about success. If I set up a community café to address loneliness, how would I know if it was successful? Would it be people smiling, laughing, chatting together and coming back? When we really think about the goals of our project, we can easily start to think about what success might look like.

To know what success looks like, we must first ask what impact we want to make.

My project seeks to impact on four sets of people:

Firstly, the older person themselves. I would seek to see a greater wellbeing in body, mind and spirit – less stress, calmer, happier, improved mental and spiritual health. For them to

⁶ Shirley Pearce, “About Understanding Dementia,” *Understanding Dementia*, July 2021, <https://understandingdementia.co.uk/credits/>, accessed 30 January 2022.

experience improved relationships with family and community, and consequentially an improved quality of life. That they would be encouraged to recognise and exercise their gifts.

And in terms of care that they would be to stay at home for longer, and have a less stressful transition to care home (if that becomes necessary).

The second set is their families/unpaid carers. It would be my intention for this group to feel supported through training and practical help; to experience improved relationship with their loved one, and, with help, find “the beauty within”; in their position of “unpaid carer” that they would have improved mental and spiritual health, less anxiety and stress, and have an improved quality of life through connecting with their friends and community, expanding social life.

Thirdly, the professional carers. This group would undergo a rigorous selection process to find those with a strong vocation and commitment to the project’s mission statement. They would experience a high employee satisfaction and feel that they are contributing to the transformation of the care sector. This would, in part, be achieved by improved pay and employment conditions, ongoing specialist training in understanding dementia and pastoral and spiritual care, as well as active and ongoing professional development and support.

The project would also aim to impact the wider sector, and society in general. Older people will be more visible in their communities: a growing awareness of the wisdom held by our older people, as well as interest from others wanting to replicate the business model.

This would also include an aim to be active in appealing to local and government to make change to policy to improve the care of older people, the support of their families, and raise the status of those in the caring professions.

How will I measure my impact?

In their book *Measuring and Improving Social Impacts*, Marc Epstein and Kristi Yuthas stress the importance of measuring impact, not only to provide proof for stakeholders, but also to confirm the beliefs of those running the project that it is making a positive difference.⁷ They describe three approaches to monitoring and evaluation of effective organisations: “While formative evaluation is recommended for improving an approach, and summative evaluation for validating it, developmental evaluation is used for creating innovative approaches to social problems.”⁸ This makes it an ideal approach for my project that seeks to create a new service but wishes to refine the approach as strengths and weaknesses are uncovered.

From the outset, it will be made clear to everyone involved that this project is a prototype for a new model of caring for older people, and that development evaluation will be necessary throughout.

A preliminary review of research on evaluating the effectiveness of similar projects appears to indicate that the most common type of evaluation tools are questionnaires and semi-structured interviews of the various parties involved, both before and at regular intervals (3–6 months) throughout the evaluation period.⁹ My proposal involves deeper thought into what it means to flourish as the older person, the family member and the caring professional, in

⁷ Marc J. Epstein and Kristi Yuthas, *Measuring and Improving Social Impacts: A Guide for Nonprofits, Companies and Impact Investors* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2017), <https://www.perlego.com/book/1548574/measuring-and-improving-social-impacts-pdf>, ch. 7, accessed 30 January 2022.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 7.

⁹ Rhonda Riachi, “Person-centred communication in dementia care: a qualitative study of the use of the SPECAL® method by care workers in the UK,” *Journal of Social Work Practice* 32, no. 3 (2018), 303–21.

addition to thinking about the impact the project might have on the sector and society in general.

Who will I collaborate with?

One of the things we learned on the Make Good module is it is better to collaborate than not. There are a few reasons why this is a good idea, most of which are about sharing. There are often many like-minded projects, or at least projects in the same arena, in this case “care of older people”, who share very similar goals and objective, and invariably seek the same impact. Through collaborating with these organisations, we can share resources, people and knowledge, which inevitably leads to more innovation, efficient processes, increased success and improved communication.

For this project my main partner for this project will be Shirley Pearce of the Understanding Dementia charity. Shirley has developed an innovative training method for professional carers and families of people living with dementia that focuses on the person’s feelings and wellbeing. Trainees report improved client outcomes, reduced behavioural issues and increased job satisfaction.¹⁰

As this project is a prototype for transforming the way we care for older people, it is important that links with several research institutions are fostered before the project begins (e.g. UK Dementia Research Institute, Dementia UK, Australian National Ageing Research Institute).

Is my project mission or enterprise, or can it be both?

Mission, according to Christopher Wright in *The Mission of God*, may be defined as follows: “Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.”¹¹

So, what is God’s mission? God’s mission is often summarised in the key biblical commands that are called the Creation Mandate, the Great Commandment, the Holistic Commitment and the Great Commission.¹² Johnson argues that these four commands relate our mission as God’s people to our everyday working lives as follows:

1. The Creation/Stewardship mandate (Gen 1:28–30; 2:5, 19–20). In the beginning God made humans to work and care for all creation in partnership with him. Work is therefore a form and vehicle of mission.
2. The Great Commandment (Matt 22:37–40). “God mandated, allowed and privileged us to love our neighbours through our work by providing the products, services, encouragement and support they need to live life, even abundant life.”¹³

¹⁰ Shirley Pearce, “Turning a crisis into an opportunity: taking dementia training online,” *The Journal of Dementia Care*, 31, no. 6 (2023), 23–24.

¹¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking The Bible’s Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2020), Introduction, <https://www.perlego.com/book/1470298/the-mission-of-god-pdf>, accessed 30 January 2022.

¹² Richard Higginson, “Mission and Entrepreneurship,” *ANVIL* 33, no.1 (2017), 17, <https://churchmissionsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Church-Mission-Society-Anvil-Volume-33-Issue-1-Apr-2017.pdf>; C. Neal Johnson, *Business as Mission: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 155.

¹³ Johnson, *Business as Mission*, 155.

3. The Holistic Commitment (Matt. 25:31–46). “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (v. 40b). Jesus is calling us to “love people holistically in their real needs”.¹⁴
4. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; Luke 24:47–48; John 15:26–27). We are called “to minister holistically to hurting people in the name and love of Jesus, bringing them the gospel by word and deed”.¹⁵

Johnson argues that in today’s world where the marketplace affects virtually every person in the world, mission initiatives that are carried out through the business sphere perhaps have “the highest potential for effecting sustainable, transformational, holistic kingdom impact to a hurting world”.¹⁶

Business by its very nature relies on enterprise. “Enterprise is the mainspring of business”¹⁷ according to Richard Higginson in his book *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy*. He goes on to say that “The global economy never stands still... it is by undertaking new ventures, trying out new products, services and processes, and refining what currently exists in search of something better, that progress is made”.¹⁸

Firstly, my project seeks to transform the way our society sees older people – from a “problem” to seeing them with “new eyes” as valuable assets to society.

Secondly, my project seeks to challenge the notion that older people need to be sent to residential care homes at the first sign of dementia or physical frailty. In general, it has been shown that the wellbeing of older people is much greater if they can stay in their own homes for as long as possible.¹⁹

Thirdly, my project will “attempt to re-imagine the practice of business”²⁰ by challenging the concept that financial reward is the only incentive for good performance and that managerial roles should attract higher status and pay. It is the intention that all employees and owners of the business will be paid the same hourly rate, whatever their role, so that vocation and service are prioritised over financial performance as the main drivers of the business.

Fourthly, “Care for the Wise” seeks to be a true platform for holistic mission in line with other businesses run by “Business as Mission” (BAM) entrepreneurs, as described by the Lausanne Committee.²¹

Johnson describes holistic mission as “showing the love of Jesus to people in need by ministering to each of them as a whole human being and trying to address all of their needs

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; NRSV.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 156

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ Richard Higginson, *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* (IVP, 2012), ch. 1, <https://www.perlego.com/book/1470677/faith-hope-the-global-economy-pdf>, accessed 30 January 2022.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Briony Dow and Anita Goh, “PITCH Perfect for Home Care Workers,” *Australian Journal Of Dementia Care* 8, no. 4 (2019), 12–13, <https://www.anandaagedcare.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Issue-44-Aug-Sep-2019-1.pdf>, accessed 30 January 2022.

²⁰ Mark Sampson, “The Promise (and Peril) of Missional Entrepreneurship,” *ANVIL* 33, no. 1 (2017), 5, <https://churchmissionsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Church-Mission-Society-Anvil-Volume-33-Issue-1-Apr-2017.pdf>.

²¹ Mats Tunehag, Wayne McGee and Josie Plummer, “Business As Mission: Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 59,” in *2004 Forum For World Evangelization* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2004), pt. 1, sect. 1, https://www.lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/LOP59_IG30.pdf, accessed 30 January 2022.

and pain”.²² This means meeting their “spiritual needs for eternal wellbeing... their emotional need for inner well-being... their physical needs for outer well-being”. My project aims to not only provide holistic care to older people but also their families and their professional carers so that everyone is involved in building and receiving from a “Kingdom” community.

Finally, “Care of the Wise” seeks to contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom in each of the following main areas identified by Higginson and Robertshaw in *A Voice to be Heard*:²³

1. Making the World a Better Place: by improving the quality of life for older people, their families and carers in the UK.
2. Embodying Christian Values: by modelling an equitable way of doing business where the contributions of every employee are equally valued.
3. Witnessing by Word: by demonstrating the importance of spiritual care.
4. Charitable Giving: by putting any profits back into the business to fund research and training for the benefit of society at large.



To conclude, in an *ANVIL* article, Shannon Hopkins writes: “At the root of missional entrepreneurship is the belief that another world is possible. In the Lord’s prayer, when Jesus prays ‘Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven,’ (Matt. 6:10) Jesus is not referencing the afterlife but is offering a vision of the transformation of the earth.”²⁴

“Care of the Wise” is an attempt to bring transformation, not only the way we care for older people, but how society sees their intrinsic value as our “wise ones”.

²² Johnson, *Business as Mission*, 41–42.

²³ Richard Higginson and Kina Robertshaw, *A Voice to Be Heard* (IVP, 2017), ch. 6, <https://www.perlego.com/book/1470412/a-voice-to-be-heard-pdf>, accessed 30 January 2022.

²⁴ Shannon Hopkins, “Experimenting at the Crossroads of Business, Church and Culture,” *ANVIL* 33, no. 1 (2017), 14, <https://churchmissionsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Church-Mission-Society-Anvil-Volume-33-Issue-1-Apr-2017.pdf>.



We become what we behold: finding an embodied spirituality in the midst of pioneering

David Harrigan

Over the last few years, I have been thinking about a rule of life. The idea was birthed in the first year of my degree with CMS while studying the Mission Spirituality module. I became aware during that module of how praxis and theology go together and found that what you believe in determines what you do. “We always become what we behold; the presence that we practice matters.”¹ I was, at the time, an ordinand, and I wanted to look at how rhythm of life lived out can impact and can affect those around us and the way we care for creation.

As my Christian faith has matured, I have become aware that I have not questioned my praxis theologically. Instead, I spent time trying to “keep the show on the road” and simply go through the motions. I realised my faith needed to be embodied, it needed to be considerate of everything around me, “others”, the “natural world”. So rather than an embedded “traditional” spirituality that feels like it has stopped asking the pertinent questions, I wanted a spirituality that is deeply embedded in a practice that thinks about mission, justice, others and caring for creation.

I have also, through studying the Justice and Environment module with CMS, realised how our urban lifestyle, and the modern problem of individual autonomy, has allowed us to become disconnected from creation and the land. Lifelong creation care campaigner, and author, Wendell Berry states:

The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.²

We learned about eco-theology and an eco-spirituality, and discovered this theology is foundational for how we view the whole of creation, the whole of life, and how it informs how we should “be” and “live”. It is a much more rounded and holistic vision than I have ever encountered before. It is about seeing how we are connected to what is around us and how we play a part in the world’s ecosystem – acknowledging what we do and how we live matters. During one of the lectures for this module we were encouraged to look at simple

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity And Your Transformation* (London: SPCK, 2016).

² Wendell Berry, *The Great Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint LLC: 2015).

rules of life to think how the way we live could affect our connection with creation. It got me thinking about my own household, and I started reflecting on our own family rituals and rhythms. We already have what we call “habits of the house” and so I set upon reflecting on how they relate to an eco-theology.

Over the years my role within the church has changed, and as I have taken on more responsibility it has become evident that my spirituality was not being sustained through church services. In response, as a family, we created a household spiritual rhythm, something we could all embody. We wanted it to be something we experienced, not simply head knowledge but a lived faith; not simply Christian faith but the lived experience of Christian faith. We called them “habits” to avoid any Christian jargon our children wouldn’t understand and so they could be accessible for people outside the Christian faith to engage with. We wanted to create something that was unique to us as a family and contextually appropriate for where we live.

➤ **Monday – Eating together and encouragement**

A time of eating together, informed by the importance of “the table”, and the importance of food, biblically, spiritually, physically and ecologically. At the shared table we used the time to encourage each other and laugh together. The table was an “event”.

➤ **Wednesday – Non-tech evening**

This is a time of Sabbath from information overload. It was a space to find a new way of living and to do so you have to remove some of the old ways first.

➤ **Friday – “Creative” Friday**

Creativity is important to me for my own wellbeing, but also important for us to allow our children to be expressive outside of their formal education. We use this mainly around prayer so our children can understand that praxis more than just words offering our list of requests to God.

➤ **Sunday – Family walk**

Each Sunday we take a walk together and go wherever we feel led. This could be walking to church or around the block, but we often walk around our local park.

In the light of this module, I have come to see that our habits are interlinked with an intentionality informed by living a life of co-creation, although I did not previously have the language for it. I realised through this module that eco-theology is not just about the environment but is something that is integrated holistically into our theology and praxis.

Creating the dancer

All our habits feel as though they are an experience of environmental praxis “an environmental practice is... a behaviour or experience that inculcates attitudes and perspectives that enhance one’s awareness and appreciation of non-human nature”.³Through our habits we have connected with the environment in some way: eating together and thinking about where food comes from and what is enough when we eat; non-tech evenings and turning off all electrical appliances giving ourselves a Sabbath from technology; creatively praying for the needs of the world; and Sunday being connected with creation as we walk, seeing the forest, animals and how the seasons change.

³ Sarah Clarke, lecture on Sabbath theology, 19 March 2020.

We formed our habits before the module, and so I wanted to reflect on them and introduce practice that can be more intentionally integrated, more holistic with thinking about how we connect with creation. For our creative Fridays we wanted to think about God as the participator, using the idea of “perichoresis of trinity” – God the dancer, weaving through our world. So, the idea came to us to create a dancer thinking about how we connect with creation.

Perichoresis is a Greek word which is formed from two parts: *peri*, which means “around”, and *chorein*, which means “to give way”. These very ideas are what we wanted to look for and learn about as we went through the processes of creating a figure from elements of creation. We discussed as we walked through the local landscape about where we believe God would be and we wanted to get out of the way to let God speak through her creation.

This led us to create a picture of God as dancer using elements of “nature” that we discovered from our weekly walks. As we wandered, we allowed creation to speak to us. We realised that the energy we were feeling was not through creation and the plants but our relationship with them and the Creator who made them. “The energy in the universe is not in the planets, or in the protons or neutrons, but in the relationship between them.”⁴ We didn't want to harm creation by taking what we wanted but waited to find things we felt were needed. For example, we used bark from a fallen tree for the dancer's tutu; we used shells from a walk along the beach and pine cones that had fallen from the tree, creating a blanket on the forest floor. As we drew all these elements together, we created what we think is a wonderful mural of “God the dancer”.

Moving forward

We continue to use our “habits” as a form of spirituality and continue to think how we can be more intentional about reintegrating with the story of creation. We still have a long way to go with our spiritual discipline and perhaps in the future it might move and change as we move and change. But it has helped us to let go and find a new way of being and caring ecologically, as well as enculturating ourselves where we are. This process for Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder is “persons who want to be agents of inculturation need to practice a spirituality based on the discipline of ‘letting go’ and ‘speaking out.’ This is a spirituality born of the practice of prophetic dialogue.”⁵ I am hoping our dancer will be to us this prophetic voice caring for creation and we will use our lives to speak this prophetic voice into the world through our praxis and embodied lives.

I see now how vital the creative action of our “habits” is in connecting with God. Even though any metaphor we use will take away something of who God is, it is a way of creating something



⁴ Rohr, *The Divine Dance*.

⁵ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections of Christian Mission Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011).

that connects us back with God, the creator of all things. “For in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.”⁶

I hope the habits are touching points for not only the sustainability of my own spiritual growth, but my family too. I hope our house will be a place to connect with ideas from creation care so we can use our lives/voices to speak prophetically into the community around us to reveal God the dancer. I pray it brings with it justice and shalom for the cosmic temple.



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⁶ Col. 1:16 (NRSV).



Spirit-oriented, enthusiastic and charismatic: discovering an African spirituality

Gowi Odera

Introduction

A truly African Christian must be spirit-oriented, enthusiastic and charismatic. If this essay were to be written 200 years ago, this would have been considered an absurdity. The prevailing thinking then in Christendom had not imagined what we know today of the astronomical growth, expansion and establishment of the Christian faith in Africa. Today, almost 700 million Christians are domiciled in Africa. In 1900, there were only 9 million Christians in Africa. Thus, Africa now has the largest population of Christians in the world, surpassing Latin America at 612 million and projected to almost triple those in North America by 2035. In addition, by 2050, it is projected that Africa will have more Christians than both Latin America and Asia combined.¹ For the purposes of this essay, I will attempt a brief descriptive definition of African Christianity and the African Christian. I will also canvas a few forms and expressions of African Christianity. Lastly I will identify some factors that connect African Pentecostalism to the spirits of African traditional religions.

What is African Christianity?

To speak about Christianity in Africa, we need to look to history and go back to the first 1,000 years of Christianity. Right from the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts, we see Africans from Egypt and Libya present at the onset of the first church in Jerusalem. The Ethiopian eunuch's conversion and baptism in Acts 8 tells more of the subsequent spread of the gospel into the continent. Simeon also known as Niger and Lucius of Cyrene were African leaders of the mission-sending church in Antioch (Acts 13).

Most telling of African influence in the early days of the church is in Acts 18. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, introduces Apollos, who was a native of Alexandria, saying:

He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures... instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus

¹ "Status of Global Christianity, 2022, in the Context of 1900–2050," *Centre for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary*, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2022/01/Status-of-Global-Christianity-2022.pdf>, accessed 22 September 2022.

accurately... he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.²

There is historical evidence in the New Testament of an already existing and established worshipping community of Christians in Africa. This suggests an indelible footprint of African Christianity on the church then and now. In the book *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, Thomas Oden delves into more historical evidence of Africa's influence on Christendom in the patristic era up to the fifth century. He lists evidence of seven ways Africa shaped the Christian mind.³

After considering the historical context of this definition of African Christianity and the African Christian, we can now attempt to define the "spirit-oriented" African Christian. To do this, one will need to appreciate the African world view that has significantly shaped the African Christian. The famous aphorism by the venerated African theologian John Mbiti that "the African is notoriously religious"⁴ helps to unpack this definition. By "notoriously religious", Mbiti's thesis suggests that the African is spiritual and in essence his (or her) world view is seen through the lens of the supernatural. For the African, the continuum of life not only exists in the present but also after death; an individual continues to exist as "the living dead". Death is a process that graduates one from one form of existence to another.⁵ The living African navigates between the now and also those who are departed into the spirit world. According to Mbiti, in the African's world view, the living dead are spirits that exist in the present world but have lost their humanness. "Man is ontologically destined to lose his humanness but gain his full 'spiritness'."⁶ This world view, Mbiti suggests, is enculturated into the African Christian's present expressions of beliefs and worship. This furthermore orients the African Christian towards the spiritual, thus described to be spirit-oriented.

If we are to be a bit more vivid in expounding on being spirit-oriented, we need to look at one Prophet Samuel Redebe.⁷ Though not a Christian, he has all the allusions of it. Take a traditional African religion temple in pre-1900 and fast forward it to 2024. Give it a modern building, a state-of-the-art sound and public address system with a microphone; add technology with high-speed internet and the Old Testament, and you will get The Revelation Church of God of Prophet Samuel Radebe. His spirituality, he says, is of his great ancestors who were there before the advent of the Western missionary enterprise on the African continent. "We were not a nation that did not know God. We knew and worshipped God in our own African context." He believes he is a descendant of the line of African prophets of his ancestors. This form of spirituality is indicative of the average African.

There is a contrary view of African Christian spirituality that challenges Mbiti's thesis. In an article, "Africa's Battle for Biblical Christianity," Byang Kato dismisses my first definition of African spirituality. In fact, he is opposed to it, arguing that it is "mixing paganism with a smattering of Christianity".⁸ He sees this as an agenda of liberal theology. He outrightly calls it syncretism. In the end, he pushes for contextualisation where the universal truths of Christianity (and spirituality) are translated into an African context. He defines African Christianity more as a biblical and universal Christianity, expressed in the various existent

² Acts 18:24–25, 27–28 (NIV).

³ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 42–61.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷ "Church Scandals | In conversation with Prophet Samuel Radebe of the Revelation Church of God," SABC News, YouTube, 13 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr24GiLX73c>, accessed 2 July 2022.

⁸ Byang Kato, "Africa's Battle for Biblical Christianity," *Moody Monthly* (November 1974), 53–56.

African languages, symbolism and imagery.⁹ All in all, one thing is not lost in the definitions and contrary positions – African Christianity has a spiritual vibe about it that informs the African experience of God. Both definitions call for a spirituality that is beyond a concept or a philosophy. For both of them, African spirituality is a lifestyle.

The African, charismatic and Pentecostal

If one wants to appreciate or understand the charismatic nature of African Christianity, and how it has evolved over the past decades, it is worth noting some of the influences from the African Independent Churches (AICs). The translation of scriptures into the local African languages by the Western missionaries “had an effect on the literacy, self-esteem, and religious self-determination in modern Africa”¹⁰ observed best among the AICs. This has resulted in giving the African the freedom to express themselves more freely in a language of their own. It has also taken the forms of the respective cultures that the biblical texts have been translated into. Over time, even the export of the African Church to the rest of the world is distinctly spirit oriented, enthusiastic and charismatic. In making a case for African spirituality and its contribution to global missions in the West, Harvey Kwiyani explains that “an African spirituality, because of its understanding of the reality of the spirit world, must be intentional about the spiritual habits and practices of both the individual and the community. Since the Holy Spirit is at work in the individual member’s life as well as that of the community, the habits that increase spiritual vitality will usually be encouraged. Prayer is the most visible of these.”¹¹

The charismatic nature of the African Christian is mainly characterised by fervent and intense prayer because this is how he or she engages with the spiritual realm. This is evident all over the continent. It is not uncommon for churches to have overnight prayer vigils for their congregants; in my country, Kenya, the vigils are known as *kesha*.¹² Kwiyani notes that on the continent, they attract very large numbers and among the African diaspora in the West, the majority African immigrant churches are known for their prayer meetings.¹³ At the local missionary-initiated church in my village in western Kenya, during the regular Sunday church services, the prayers are guided by a prayer book. However, when they have the *keshas* (at least once a month), the church comes alive with spontaneous public prayer. The prayers are very loud, audible and collective, not guided by the prayer book. They are rarely led by any one individual; it becomes almost a free-for-all scenario, where one audibly bears their soul to God in prayer. The prayers are peppered with intermittent songs acknowledging God’s sovereignty and the congregant’s devotion to the Lord. It is all spirit-led.

The African Christian’s charisma is also informed by their allure to the spirit and the works of the spirit. There is a connection between the African world view of the spirit world and the works of the Holy Spirit. As noted earlier in this essay, this world view is seen through the lens of the supernatural. For the African, though living in the material or physical world, the continuum of life not only exists in the present but also after death; an individual continues to exist as “the living dead”. The living African navigates between the now and also those who are departed into the spirit world. When the work of the Holy Spirit is introduced, this profoundly resonates with the African’s world view.

⁹ Byang H. Kato, “The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975), 1216–1223, <https://lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/1216.pdf>, accessed 13 September 2022.

¹⁰ Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 13.

¹¹ Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 161.

¹² Colloquial Kiswahili language for “overnight vigil”.

¹³ Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 162.

The allure of the spirit and the works of the Spirit are indicative, with many attracted to the message of signs, miracles and deliverance informed by the present realities of the African way of life. These physical manifestations of the supernatural endear the African's Christian faith expression in the almighty. Kyama Mugambi made an interesting observation of the Newer Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (NPCC) in Kenya on how the supernatural pervades the existing structures confounding even the erudite scholar.

African Pentecostalism's pneumatic approach to ministry thrives within these diffuse environments characterized by spontaneity. The vivacious oral liturgy provides a worship environment where miracles thrive under the Holy Spirit's impulse. The nature of these communities in Africa creates the impression among some scholars that this unstructured environment pervades aspects of Pentecostal Christianity.¹⁴

To a great extent, this is true where you find the various faith communities more aligned to its leader under the leadership of the Holy Spirit as opposed to the framework of the seemingly tangible systems that established them in the first place. All in all, the charisma of the African Christian is more of an expression of their world view informed and trying to make sense of their present realities.

Forms and expressions of African spirituality in everyday life

To expound more on the opening statement in this essay, enthusiastic worship and celebration captures the endearing elements of an African's Christianity. The most evident element of this enthusiasm is expressed in its orality and in the use of music, song and dance. Robert Hood makes this observation of African spirituality:

God as supreme deity is acknowledged, even if the acknowledgement is not shaped into words. It may occur in dance or gestures, in sayings, greetings and the praise of names at such ceremonies. God's sovereignty may be expressed in people's names, at shrines, in reciting creation legends or idioms recalling God's attributes... That is the dynamics of everyday culture as well as articulated concepts testify to the varied relationships between God and spirits.¹⁵

The heritage of Africa is passed on from one generation to another in story form. The orality of the African is also part of their spirituality. For instance, among my people group, the Luo, naming of children is a celebrated thing. Names tell a story of the bearer of the name. The name would also tell of the circumstances around their birth: the time, season, family experience, local, national or even global situation, just to mention a few. My daughter is named "Akwe". Akwe, in Dholuo,¹⁶ is translated as "I am at peace". For the average Luo, this would suggest a narrative around the parent's declaration of their state of being with God – that they are at peace with the Almighty. As observed earlier by Hood, this is how the African Christian enthusiastically integrates their spirituality in their everyday life.

Music, song and dance is another form in which the African enthusiastically expresses themselves and can also be observed in their spirituality. In as much as this can be observed in other regions of the world, the uniqueness of Africa's music can be described as having a strong rhythmic element to it. The accented rhythm in the music gives the music a unique element of vibrance.

¹⁴ Kyama M. Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 227.

¹⁵ Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?*, 197.

¹⁶ Dholuo is the language spoken by the Luo people of Western Kenya.

Music, song and dance was and is used in the African's life at most social gatherings, rites of passage and ceremonies, from songs of celebration to songs of mourning. The songs were used to pacify a crying baby or even to convey a message. The songs are part and parcel of the oral tradition acting as a repository of knowledge, passing down folklore, insights and stories for generations to sing long after.¹⁷

The African drum, common in almost every people group on the continent, is at the heart of this vibrancy and enthusiasm. The drum comes in different shapes and sizes around Africa. The *Sakara* in Yoruba, *Isikuti* in Luhya, *Moropa* in Sotho, among a myriad of other names, play different functions for various African peoples. From centuries back and evolving to modern-day expressions, the syncopated rhythms of the drum mimic the human heartbeat cadence, making music,¹⁸ and giving life and enthusiasm to the rich spiritual experience of the African. Unlike Western hymns written to the accompaniment of instrumentation like the violin, piano or the organ, the African songs' cadence is derived from the beat or rhythm of the drum.

For the African Christian, one enthusiastically expresses themselves in sung worship and dance. The incorporation of modern instrumentation has not only added but accentuated these forms of worship in different African genres of music: from Taarab and Bongo Flava in East Africa, Kwaito and Amapiano in Southern Africa, to the rhythmic beats and harmonies of Lingala music and Kupe Dekale in Central Africa; from the easy Highlife beat to Afrobeat and Afro Soul of West Africa. All these are enthusiastically fused into the African Christian's hymnology and dance to bring out a uniquely vibrant spiritual experience for the average Christian from the continent.

Preaching, teaching and testimonials in spoken and sung worship reveal the orality of spirit-oriented African Christian faith expression and capture the essence of the African's Christians' enthusiasm.

A triple heritage

To appreciate what African Christianity truly is, using the descriptive words informing this essay – “spirit oriented”, “enthusiastic” and “charismatic” – it would be useful to connect the dots with what I am more and more being persuaded are the roots of where all this came from.

It is suggested that present-day African spirituality has a triple heritage of African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. “This syncretic proclivity can be interpreted positively as a healthy form of religious coexistence and tolerance...”¹⁹ by which the rest of the world can learn a thing or two from Africa. This form of spirituality is rich of which I am partly persuaded, whereas Orobator is fully persuaded that “... the unique spirit of hospitality and tolerance that imbues African spirituality can be a resource for global Christianity”.²⁰

Orobator is forcing us to answer the question of why we believe what we believe as Africans and how this has been informed by this triple heritage. The African spirituality is more of a way of life that is “different from an organized religion of creeds, doctrines and dogmas”.²¹ The Pentecostal persuasion in me wrestles with this assertion because of the heavy Western

¹⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 67.

¹⁸ “Do You Speak Djembe? | Doug Manuel | TEDx Hollywood,” TEDx Talks, *YouTube*, 4 November 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uB9xzYLIDU>, accessed 2 August 2022.

¹⁹ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist* (Maryknoll: NY, Orbis Books, 2018), 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

influences that demonise the African Traditional Religion. This compelling evidence that both Christianity and Islam thrive on the foundation of African Traditional Religion has complicated things. I ask, what was the belief system of the African before the Pentecost of Acts 2? These questions allow us to appreciate the Apostle Paul's convictions. "For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."²²

Could the exponential growth and spread of Christianity have to do with this triple heritage? Could the rapid growth of African Pentecostalism all over sub-Saharan Africa have been informed by African Traditional Religion catalysed by the Holy Spirit? These questions remain part of parcel of the deconstruction of my faith formation.

To what degree religion continues to work for Africans will be measured by how we honour a genuine quest for meaning truth, and mystery sustained by our plural religious identities.²³



These words by Orobator will continue to haunt me as I wrestle with the reality that my spirituality, and that of many modern African Christians, may have been in denial. We may have been in denial that we are indeed products of multiple religious identities and are yet to deal with the implications of this.



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²² Rom. 1:20.

²³ Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 167.



Exploring the “Africanisation” of Christianity and the “Christianisation” of Africa through the life and ministry of Agnes Okoh

Jessica Swift

Introduction

Agnes Okoh was the founder of Christ Holy Church, an African Independent Church established in 1947 in Eastern Nigeria. Okoh was an exemplary, gifted leader, whose strong sense of calling and supernatural gifts set her apart. She was even more distinctive in that she was a female founder. As Israel Olofinjana highlights:

The patriarchal nature of Nigerian society meant that men dominated the scene; therefore male leadership was a characteristic of Prayer House leadership. However, there were some exceptional women who became leaders of these Prayer Houses.¹

Okoh experienced struggle and success throughout her life. Her priorities and values regarding the Bible, faithfulness and the community are demonstrated throughout her ministry and secured in the succession of her leadership:

She imprinted the fear of God, dependence on God, ecclesial we-feeling, the priority of preaching the gospel, and the need to be responsible to the followers, on the hearts of those she trained.²

Okoh’s relationship with the spirit-world, her approach to the Bible, and her commitment to the wellbeing of the community all illustrate some key factors that developed the “Africanisation” of Christianity and the “Christianisation” of Africa. Nimi Wariboko sets out Okoh as one of the leaders shaping Christianity in Africa in the 20th century:

The competence of African evangelists in translating the message of the gospel into local idioms and worldviews, correlating existential problems to the resources of the Christian faith, brought about remarkable success. In this vein, the names of Garrick

¹ Israel O. Olofinjana, *20 Pentecostal Pioneers in Nigeria: Their Lives, Their Legacies, Volume 1* (Xlibris, 2011), 64.

² Thomas Oduro, “Okoh, Agnes,” *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, 2007, <https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/okoh-agnes/>, accessed 4 April 2023.

Braide, William Wadé Harris, Simon Kimbangu, Sampson Oppong, Joseph Babalola, Walter Matita, and Agnes Okoh, in the 20th century, stand out.³

The life and work of Agnes Okoh

Okoh was born in 1905 in Ndoni. She was the only surviving child of 13 children born to Onumba Emordi and Ntonefu. Although her parents were not Christian, she occasionally went to the Roman Catholic church. In 1924, she married James Okoh, a Ghanaian immigrant sailor. They had two children. Her husband died in 1930, and by 1938 her daughter had also died. This started a period of suffering and ill-health in which Okoh struggled with debilitating migraines. She sought relief in many places, but found healing in a Prayer House where she met Prophetess Ozoemena. Okoh stayed in the Prayer House receiving prayer and counsel; she was completely healed in two weeks. This event was the beginning of her conversion to Christianity and the start of a vocation to evangelism and healing ministry. The circumstances and qualities of Okoh's conversion would be markers that would shape her entire ministry: healing, strength, compassion and faith.

In 1943, Okoh heard a voice say: “Matthew 10.” A friend suggested this was a reference to the Bible; since both were illiterate, they had to find someone else who could read it to them. “They both sought for someone else who could read Matthew 10 to them and a young boy came to their rescue and read Matthew 10 in Igbo language to both women.”⁴ The opening of this Biblical chapter starts: “Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and illness.”⁵ Okoh received this as a call on her life, and followed in the same footsteps as the 12. Under Prophetess Ozoemena's tutelage, Okoh was encouraged not to rush ahead of God, but to wait prayerfully. It wasn't until 1946 when Okoh felt like God was leading her to take up her vocation to “proclaim the gospel”. On 15 December 1947, Prophetess Ozoemena commissioned and released Okoh. What followed was a period of prayer and fasting asking for direction and empowerment, whereby Okoh was given a dream. This dream was of John 10:10: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”⁶ This became the theme for her ministry.

When Okoh took up her calling, she was an itinerant minister. Her practice was to seek the permission of the elders before commencing her preaching in any town or village. Once it was granted, she would stay until she felt the Holy Spirit prompt her to move to the next place. Although she had a headquarters at Onitsha (the headquarters of Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the region since 1854) that she came back to, she spent many years moving from place to place. Okoh's ministry was shaped by “word and deed”, she both preached and prayed for healing.

She ended her public preaching by praying with people. People flocked to her with their problems and through her gift of healing many people were healed. Agnes also encouraged people through prophecy and visions.⁷

There is something both pragmatic and obvious about a religious expression that actually helps people. As captured by Laura Premack in *Spirit on the Move*, “a religion is only

³ Nimi Wariboko, “Pentecostalism in Africa,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 26 October 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-120>, accessed 6 April 2023.

⁴ Olofinjana, *20 Pentecostal Pioneers in Nigeria*, 66.

⁵ Matt. 10:1 (NIV).

⁶ John 10:10 (NIV).

⁷ Olofinjana, *20 Pentecostal Pioneers in Nigeria*, 68.

worthwhile if it provides material results: health, money, children”.⁸ Therefore, the strength and authority of Okoh was validated in that people were healed and restored.

As more and more people were receiving Okoh’s ministry, she began looking for places to establish Prayer Houses. She asked some local elders to give her portions of the “evil forests” (*ajaw-awfia* or *ajo oshia*). “Evil forests” in Igbo culture and religion were places where people that did not receive a proper burial were thrown and therefore these places were considered cursed.⁹ Okoh was cunning because not only did she need space to establish a Prayer House but also it was an opportunity to demonstrate the omnipotence of God. She moved in to the “evil forest”, did not suffer any harm and built a productive commune.

In recognition of her ability to overcome evil forest, turning it into a useful venture, she was called, “*Odozi Obodo*” which literally means “town repairer” or “nation builder” Agnes Okoh has since been called and known by this name.”¹⁰

Africanisation of Christianity

There are two attributes of Okoh’s ministry that illustrate the “Africanisation” of Christianity: her engagement with the spirit world and demonstration of spiritual authority, and her philanthropy, which exposed her priority for everyone’s wellbeing being tied up in community wellbeing.

Christ Holy Church, as all the African Independent Churches, in themselves are expressions of the “Africanisation” of Christianity. They are indigenous in their formation, their leadership and cultural expression. As Wariboko summarises when concluding the history of Christ Holy Church International:

Pentecostalism has helped to make Christianity an African religion. African Pentecostals, like the rest of African Christians, have appropriated the gospel; adapted the faith to their cultural sensibilities, concerns, and agendas; nudged its worldview to properly align with their indigenous maps of the universe; and contextualized its practices. Christianity is a translated religion in Africa.¹¹

The key facet of this contextualisation and interpretation of African Christianity is the relationship with the spirit world. The understanding and experience that the spirit world and the physical world are inextricably interwoven, where each is influencing and informing the other, is a baseline African world view. African Christianity brings an experiential doctrine and theology of pneumatic charism shaped by this worldview. Okoh and other founders between 1900 and 1960 as indigenous evangelists are a part of the wave of prophetic figures who emerged “at the heels of the missionaries, engaging the indigenous worldview with charismatic elements of the Christian canon and symbols”.¹²

Attention and priority are given to being filled with God’s Spirit. This not only gives focus to the experiential expression of faith, but opens the spiritual experience to be available to everyone.

The role of the priestly class is challenged; individuals can approach God directly without going through licensed clergy. In turn, the Holy Spirit may speak directly to

⁸ Laura Premack, “Bless Us with Children: Pregnancy, Prosperity, and Pragmatism in Nigeria’s Christ Apostolic Church,” in *Spirit on the Move: Black Women and Pentecostalism in Africa and the Diaspora*, eds. Elizabeth A. Pritchard and Judith Casselberry (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 194.

⁹ Olofinjana, *20 Pentecostal Pioneers in Nigeria*, 69.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Wariboko, “Pentecostalism in Africa”.

¹² Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2008), p. 23.

believers, unmediated by a priest or pastor, with religious experience valued over tradition.¹³

Okoh’s sense of calling in its origin was based in Matt.10, where the Christian call includes driving out spirits and healing. As is exemplified in Okoh’s vocation, engagement with the spirit world is the Christian calling.

Numerous theologians comment on the democratisation of Christianity within African Independent Churches and subsequently Pentecostalism. Faith is primarily experiential and participation universally available because the Holy Spirit is omnipresent. As Ogbu Kalu summarises in describing the Pentecostal movement, “scholars have argued that instead of lacking a theology, the movement is defined by its theology that privileges a personal spiritual encounter with God”.¹⁴ By the same token, leadership is exercised by anyone who demonstrates spiritual authority, namely in the expression of supernatural gifts, like those of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy and speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 12). Okoh was an illiterate widow; her authority came from her strong sense of calling and how this was backed up with gifts of healing and prophecy.

There is a pragmatism as well as a valuing of community wellbeing demonstrated in the Africanisation of Christianity. Kalu notes that in Africa, among three listed characteristics of revivals, the third is:

an effort to reshape the interior of a prevalent religious tradition by redirecting the core message to deeply felt needs within the community and thereby provide an answer to socioeconomic, political needs and restore moral order by appealing to supernatural intervention and anchor.¹⁵

Faith must be the lived experience of the “proof is in the pudding” – does faith in Christ bring healing, solve problems, indeed make life better? And is it true for the whole community? Okoh was as much known for her philanthropy as anything else expressed in her leadership. Hand in hand with evangelism was the engagement with the real needs and problems of the community, both natural and supernatural. As well as a healing ministry, Okoh helped establish farming communes, and built roads, schools, and maternity clinics.¹⁶ Everyone’s wellbeing and health was tied up in the community’s wellbeing and health. The “new life” preached from John 10:10 was caught up with the “*Odozi Obodo*”.

Christianisation of Africa

Similarly, the “Christianisation” of Africa is seen within the spirit world view and experienced in the community. This is illustrated in Okoh’s complete faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, and how the life received in Jesus is restorative and affirming.

Like other founders, Okoh “recognised the powers of the indigenous worldview but confronted these with the power of Christ”.¹⁷ For her it was exemplified when she approached village elders over the evil forests. “Agnes Okoh was noted for her disregard of traditional beliefs that were inimical to the spread of the gospel and to development of human

¹³ Donald E. Miller, “Introduction: Pentecostalism as a Global Phenomenon,” in *Spirit and Power: The Growth and Global Impact of Pentecostalism*, eds. Donald E. Miller, Kimon H. Sargeant and Richard Flory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.

¹⁴ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁶ Olofinjana, *20 Pentecostal Pioneers in Nigeria*, 70.

¹⁷ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 36.

potential.”¹⁸ This is the Christianisation of Africa in that there is the recognition of the power and influence of the spirit world, and this is then seen through the lens of the Christian world view where Christ has conquered all (Rom. 6:9). Allan Heaton Anderson describes this as continuity and discontinuity that accounts for the growth of Pentecostalism in Africa –

scholarly studies about the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism in different regions worldwide have not explored thoroughly what I consider to be a principle [sic] reason for its popularity – the extent to which Pentecostalism, through its experiences of the Spirit, often unconsciously taps into deep-seated religious and cultural beliefs. Pentecostalism draws from these ancient sources in continuity with them, while simultaneously confronting them in discontinuity. In doing so, it uses a biblical rationale for its beliefs and practices.¹⁹

The emergence of African Independent Churches was fuelled by and occurred during national journeys to independence. Okoh’s original preaching was borne from the inspiration of John 10:10, the new life Christians are given in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The theme of her message and the basis of the ministry she led was new life in Jesus, giving emphasis to repentance, righteousness and holiness.²⁰ Identity and status given in Christ provided a foundation for regaining African pride and restoring human and cultural dignity. Churches like Christ Holy Church:

were seen as committed to taking seriously and honouring indigenous life and cultures in communicating the gospel. This signals the heightened sense of pride in race, nation or tribe on the basis of which these churches sought to purge themselves of foreign influences.²¹

Okoh’s own journey of leadership and prominence mirrored this experience of regaining dignity and status in Christ.



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¹⁸ Oduro, “Okoh, Agnes”.

¹⁹ Allan Heaton Anderson, *Spirit-Filled world: Religious Dis/Continuity in African Pentecostalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3.

²⁰ Oduro, “Okoh, Agnes”.

²¹ John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches – A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva : WCC Publications, 1998), 32.



Autoethnography presentation

Maddie Thorp

I'm three years old and in the hospital
Holding my brother
The warm yellow light of the lamp is highlighting us
On the armchair of this room
As I look down at this baby sleeping in my arms
We are equal and there is nothing different about us
Made of the same flesh and genes

I'm five years old and at the kitchen table
My brother is nearly two
I sit teaching him what I learnt at school
Just an infant, he doesn't understand the letters I do
But it's okay because he'll learn
And I'll keep teaching him until he can spell our names the same way I can
Because there is nothing I can do he won't be able to
We are made of the same flesh and genes

I'm nine years old, my brother is six
We both play the same sports and fight the same fights
We are equal and there is nothing different about us
Made of the same flesh and genes
We talk in unison, and I teach him how to play the games us older children are playing
I teach him how to dodge the ball better
How to throw the ball better
And he teaches me patience

I'm fourteen years old and at my karate class
My brother is eleven and one of the seven boys I'm trying to teach
They've all started getting taller than me now
But they still listen when I speak

I'm eighteen now
And the boys I teach now spread across ages
I teach a seven-year-old how he should curl his tiny fingers to make a fist and his first instinct
is to try it on his twin

I teach a fourteen-year-old his next kata
I teach the nineteen-year-old what it's like to fight someone smaller, quicker
Someone who can duck the punches and kicks and get him to the floor before he's even
blinked
The adults listen in as I share what I've been doing for the last ten years
They've only just started and want to know more and don't mind that it's coming from me
Even my fifteen-year-old brother listens when his sister teaches
Because we are equal, there's nothing I can do that he can't
We're made of the same flesh and genes

On the weekends I'm at church
My friends invited me, and I found God or really he found me
And this messed up eighteen-year-old knows
That God sees her and knows her
That God created her
And gave her gifts and words to do all these wonderful things
And I sing, and I teach, and I learn, and we engage together and it's good
And still, there is nothing here I can't do that my brother could
Because we are made of the same flesh and genes

I'm nineteen and at university
Trying out churches my youth workers helped me find
But they don't feel like home, and I don't really understand why
The congregation doesn't feel right, my voice isn't always heard
When I'm asked what I think the pastor sometimes shrinks
And tells me we'll speak over coffee when it's quieter and we can both think

I'm twenty-three and working in ministry
The pastor of my friend's church that I've visited a few times
Invites me for coffee "so we can talk theology"
We meet in the city that is the centre of the Anglican community
Go into a small bar that's recently been done up
I came here with my parents six years ago
As I sought to learn more and grow,
I'm still here, seeking to learn more and grow
The green walls are new but the sticky arms of the chair I'm on aren't
The paintings around us feature people whose eyes never leave us
Lying in wait and I think of the Hebrew of Genesis
Qavah lying in wait, like the waters at the beginning
Waiting to teem with life

But it's not a fair comparison when the words spoken
For thirty excruciating minutes
Are not teeming with life, but make some God-given part of me shrivel and die

And it's like time has slowed
Whilst I listen to the words
Unravelling twenty-three years of life and encouragement and nurture

But God has called me to teach I try to speak

The words feel clunky in my mouth in a way they've never felt clunky before
I'm stuck in the chair and can't move my feet
My mind goes back to all the words of affirmation
That these words "spoken in love" are sledgehammering down
And it's like the words of affirmation are now covered in a shroud
I can't remember a single good thing anyone has ever said
And I'm terrified that I've made God angry and mad
That I ever had the gall to think
That my brother and I were the same, there was nothing he could do that I couldn't
"We may be made of the same flesh and genes
But it is not permitted for a woman to teach"

I'm twenty-four and sat on my living room floor
Trying to find it in me to forgive this man
Who reads the Bible differently and is convicted differently than I am
And I pray for his daughters
Who won't grow up with parents or a church that tells her she can do anything her brothers
can
Because they are not the same
They may have the same flesh and genes
But the X signifies a cross unpermitted to speak
Whilst the Y of her brothers signifies, he may, always, preach.



Maddie Thorp is a youth ministry coordinator near Southampton and is currently undertaking the pioneer MA in Theology, Ministry and Mission.



Anvil Book Reviews

Mekdes Haddis, *A Just Mission: Laying Down Power and Embracing Mutuality*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2022)

Mekdes Haddis is Ethiopian and has been living in the USA since she went there to study at college. She now lives with her family in South Carolina. Her book really is about what the title states and is a searing critique of Western missions. Her goal is to move mission from a transactional relationship to one of relational mutuality that is engaged with by everyone in the global church, not just Westerners.

She offers a powerful judgement on white Saviourism, which she sees as a great threat to the gospel. She debunks the idea of Africa as the “white man’s graveyard”, a 19th century concept but still quoted as recently as 2017. She counters this with a powerful rewriting of this narrative, “Colonialism is known at the ‘black man’s graveyard.’ After white people stepped foot on the beautiful continent of Africa, death and desolation followed.” (p 25). She demonstrates how often mission has been harmful and destructive in the way it has been carried out from the West to the rest. She claims that our faith must be divorced from imperialism, that we must stop creating dependency and become genuine disciples. She links this discipleship beautifully to the necessity of seeing how God has already revealed Godself in local cultures and that this is the beginning of a journey towards mutuality and serving together.

Perhaps her most hard-hitting chapter is her analysis of short-term mission. She claims that estimates put two million people on short term mission trips every year and spend about four billion dollars – the same as Haiti’s budget for the country! She challenges the very premise of short-term mission and believes that it benefits the goers much more than the receivers. She wonders why so many people are willing to travel on these trips overseas but are strangely reluctant to get involved with people from some of these countries who are just down the road. There may well be immigrant communities from those countries and yet no effort is made to learn from them before visiting those same countries. She offers some helpful questions and concludes with some best practice suggestions to ensure best practice in short-term mission.

I found her emphasis on discipleship as being filled with the Holy Spirit to witness and being prepared to suffer a helpful corrective to much of our institutionalised mission engagement. This is a theme that keeps recurring and is something that the West can learn from the Majority World church – a focus on the infilling of the Spirit, an expectation that discipleship

may incur suffering and hardship, and the importance of prayer. She reminds us that there are disenfranchised people all around us and that mission can happen at home.

This is a book that is not afraid to face the tough issues – race, justice, money, power, the danger of dogmatic theology and how these issues have distorted the practice of mission in the hands of the West. I heartily recommend this book – it is not easy reading for anyone but it unmaskes so much of our hubris around mission: the vested interests, where the power lies, the focus on money, metrics and strategies and especially how we in the West have so often made mission into a transaction rather than a relationship of mutuality, imbued with the Holy Spirit, and lived out in a discipleship that calls us to a life of witness and suffering.

Cathy Ross, CMS

Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2023)

Luke Bretherton is on top form in this book. While the idea of a primer might lead you to expect a shorter volume, don't let the fact it runs to over 350 pages put you off. It does get a bit technical in places, but the vision it paints for ethics and human flourishing is bold and persuasive. I found myself very much drawn to the account, and agreeing with so much of what is written. Rather than beginning with exploring different approaches, Bretherton carefully articulates a particular approach to Christian ethics and living well, albeit one that draws on a wealth of different accounts, sources and approaches.

I was particularly taken with the close listening encouraged in Part I, which offered an integrated account of listening to creaturely life, Scripture, strangers, cries for liberation and ancestors. The chapter on Scripture is particularly helpful, reflecting on how to take the Bible seriously as the word of God and as an authority for faith, without having to subscribe to a doctrine of inerrancy or literalist readings of the Bible. In fact Bretherton suggests that to do this is actually a less faithful engagement with Scripture. Listening to this variety of voices enables the world to be described well and provides a good starting point to discerning and judging well. This is where Part II comes in, looking at acting well and exploring moral agency. This is a more technical section, and some will feel it is rather dense in its writing, but its brilliance is in the way it is able to draw from a multitude of sources without getting bogged down or side-tracked. Many will want more on each of the topics dealt with in Part II, but with each chapter ending with suggested readings there are plenty of opportunities to explore these themes further. Many of them are also explored in more depth in Bretherton's other works, particularly *Christ and the Common Life*.

Part III, entitled "living well with others", seeks to draw out some of the fruit of the process so far, to explore the common life. Bretherton is clear that ethics is not just about individual action, but about living life together, and for this reason in the last three chapters he looks at social, economic and political life. Again, there is much here which is rich, informative and based in a wealth of wisdom and experience. However, I couldn't help feel that it remained a somewhat big picture. Perhaps this is the nature of ethics needing to take place in a context, and be worked out in a particular place with particular people, but at times I felt that the church he talked about felt a bit distant from gritty everyday life. I think there might have been ways to draw more clearly on the kinds of voices Bretherton drew attention to in Part I to land it more clearly in everyday life. The chapters seemed to move towards the church being a contrast community and I wondered whether a clearer sense of church as people scattered through the world and engaging in the messiness of life, work, relationships and

politics could feature more centrally in the account. That said, overall I found it compelling, speaking both to the ways in which I think about the Christian life and the way I live as a Christian.

I also think it is a rich text for thinking about mission and pioneering. While Bretherton's lens is Christian ethics, his vision for living well through attentive listening, moral formation and exploring a common life is a rich source of inspiration for missiology and for pioneering. I think the invitation, and indeed challenge, to make the connection to living well and the common life is one that is underexplored in missiology. As Christians our approaches to economics and politics can often be too simplistic and end up maintaining the status quo rather than engaging in complex ways to challenge and change. For this reason, I think pioneers and mission workers will benefit greatly from following Bretherton's thinking and challenge, particularly given the clear starting point of attentive listening.

James Butler, CMS

Stanley H. Skreslet, *Constructing Mission History: Missionary Initiative and Indigenous Agency in the Making of World Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023)

Missionaries. Are they saints of God? Or agents of colonisation? Stanley Skreslet begins *Constructing Mission History* with two common understandings of mission history. One places foreign missionaries at the heart of the story as heroes of God's expanding empire. A second understanding emphasises the colonial aspect of modern missions, implicating missionaries as agents of empire in the destruction of cultures.

Uneasy with the way that both understandings centre on the missionary, Skreslet outlines a third approach. *Constructing Mission History* argues that speech-act theory offers a fresh account of mission history that respects indigenous agency and the complexity of interactions across cultures.

Speech-act theory, developed by J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle, treats language as an action. It analyses what is said (locution), as well as the intentions (illocution) of those who communicate and the consequences (perlocution) of what is communicated. Applying speech-act theory to mission allows Skreslet to recognise multiple sources of agency. He looks for surprises, including unanticipated consequences and how political, social and economic forces shape the entangling of cultures.

Having introduced speech-act theory, Skreslet develops the implications over seven chapters. Three chapters explore illocutionary intentions. Missionary motivations are grouped in chapters on salvation, knowledge-sharing and benevolence. Of particular interest is how Skreslet works with Aquinas' writing on charity and sketches a Catholic missiology of social concern. A question for further research is whether these historic motivations will provide adequate resources for the contemporary challenges of climate change and global injustice.

Four chapters explore perlocution, the performance of mission in history. A chapter on power encounters explores the political forces within which missionary activity is always unavoidably entangled. A chapter titled "Constructing Christianopolis" analyses the nature and shape of intentional Christian communities in America, Africa and Asia. A chapter on vernacular Christianities charts the impact of translating not only Scripture but also art, artefacts and architecture. A chapter on subversive witnessing considers how missionaries and indigenous

communities creatively drew on Christianity to resist imperialism. Of topical interest is a close reading of the Christianities that emerged in the United States as enslaved people exercised agency as they responded to Christ.

Constructing Mission History offers significant resources for church leaders, mission partners and those interested in fresh expressions, pioneering and cross-cultural ministry. First, it affirms the value of archives and the potential of archival research to uncover ethnographic data that can be illuminated by multiple academic fields, including material cultures, the sociology of religion and the history of science and medicine. Indeed, the book is of value for the footnotes alone.

Second, locating mission as action provides ways for the past to enrich the future. In Aotearoa New Zealand, a Māori proverb, “Ka mua, ka muri”, affirms the wisdom of looking back to move forward. *Constructing Mission History* provides new ways to look back and, in so doing, offers wisdom to those sharing in God’s unfolding mission. What can those who pioneer in fresh expressions learn from historic mission performance patterns in areas like the vernacularisation of Christianity, particularly when the most dynamic outputs emerge not from those sent but from those embedded in local cultures? How will the church today respond to what Skreslet calls the “uneven impacts” of mission in which external cultural shifts are more influential than the work of individuals? These questions demonstrate the possibilities emerging from Skreslet’s argument that mission is a verb, a set of past performances able to inform those willing to act forward.

Steve Taylor, Director AngelWings Ltd, New Zealand

Ash Barker, *No Wastelands: How to Grow Seedbeds of Shalom in Your Neighbourhood*, (Birmingham: Seedbeds Communications, 2023)

Ash and Anj Barker have done several cycles of a decade or more living in urban neighbourhoods where there are multiple issues of deprivation. The latest is Winson Green in Birmingham. I have taken groups of pioneer students to visit them over the last seven years and they always come away challenged and inspired. The reason is simple – they are living out the gospel in their neighbourhood in ways that are bringing visible change, visible good. Ash’s word for that is shalom – life flourishing in a place.

In *No Wastelands* Ash distils the wisdom of that experience, practice and theology into one accessible volume. It’s a mix of inspiring stories, gritty honesty, practical ideas, advice and frameworks, spiritual practices, theology and missiology. It combines into an amazing handbook to guide anyone wanting to follow in this direction.

The book is structured in five sections around the notion of seedbeds – beating the weeds, sowing seeds of shalom, the soil we need, sustainable roots and branches ready for fruit, and work with the seasons. Each chapter has some questions for reflection and each section has some suggestions for practices to try. This creates a good frame for the book. It is rich and deep and runs to 400 pages. There is a lot here.

There has been a push in mission circles, inspired by Sam Wells, to focus on “with” in the last few years, i.e. to see mission as with a community rather than something done to or for them. Ash pushes this on a step, suggesting that transformation really happens when it is “by” local people. Ash’s passion for enabling innovative leaders and changemakers from inside those neighbourhoods shines through so that community transformation is led by them. That’s the

thing that has grabbed me personally the most. This is drawn from Ash's experience and nous about community development and organising, which is refreshing and I think could help a lot more ministers and pioneers.

The church (I can certainly say this for the Church of England anyway) has not found it easy to inculcate the gospel in neighbourhoods with people experiencing poverty. But there seems to be a renewed concern and stirring and hopefully investment in this direction. The book is perhaps timely in the UK. It is ideal for anyone who is ministering or senses a call to work in neighbourhoods with people experiencing poverty. It should inspire you, but also be a handbook that will get very worn at the edges. I will be coming back to this again and again and passing it on to others.

Jonny Baker, CMS

Jose Mario Francisco SJ and Jayeel Cornelio, *People's Christianity: Theological Sense and Sociological Significance*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2022)

This interesting read from two Catholic scholars is a useful addition to the library of any theological or Bible college. The main stimulus for writing comes from Pope Francis' exhortation that pastors must "smell the sheep", that is, they must get up close and personal, discovering how Christians actually live out their faith.

Part one, "smelling the sheep," is divided into two chapters. Chapter one discusses the authenticity of the popular. That is, that lived religion is still an authentic experience of Christianity, even if it contains elements that religious authorities disapprove of. The authors are at pains to point out that there is no hard and fast distinction between institutional and lived religion, but rather a continuum, for institutional religion is practiced by people. They also outline their four key themes: worship, liberation, agency in tradition and the ability of the faithful to discern the things of God (p. 19). Chapter two explores the diversity of lived Christianity, which begs the question are there "correct" and "incorrect" expressions of faith, and if so, how are they distinguished? Another key point is that lived religion is primarily communal. The authors argue for four elements of lived Christianity: authenticity, the location of the sacred, the presence and meditation of sacred power, and practical rationality (p. 34).

Part two concentrates on reading between the lines, discussing lived Christianity as worship and promotion of liberation. The chapter on worship begins with a discussion of the Vatican's "Directory on popular piety and the liturgy," a strategic document which seeks to control and regulate lived Christianity. In the authors' view, it does so with limited success. The chapter also explores the controversy over Chinese rituals related to veneration of ancestors. It discusses whether these are compatible with Christianity. The chapter on liberation concerns two streams of thought: the Spanish-language writings, primarily from South America, and the specifically Argentinian theology of the people. The interrelation of these two streams is explored and the question of who exactly performs liberation theology is discussed.

Part three is devoted to "sensing the people's faith," combining theological reflections with ethnographic interpretations of observed lived religion. Chapter five gives the theoretical framework, arguing that lived Christianity has always had a place within Christian tradition because it is the manifestation of divine self-disclosure. The faithful are actively working out the nature and purpose of this revelation. Chapter six then gives a practical outworking through discussion of devotion to Mary across different times and places. The authors argue

this demonstrates the Holy Spirit disclosing the nature of God to the faithful. Chapter seven rounds off the discussion through an exploration of *sensus fidei*, referring both to the sense for the faith and the sense of the faith. The authors concentrate on a 2014 document, *Sensus Fidei in the life of the church*. This is a liminal and marginal activity, where those who live faith on the edge have much to contribute.

Part four focuses on “journeying with the sheep.” Chapter eight draws together theology and sociology, arguing for symbiosis not dissonance. The authors’ shift to “living religion,” is particularly interesting, as is their argument that sociology is a form of theology because everyone operates from a worldview. Their exploration of pastoral sociology and public theology are both very stimulating. The final chapter draws the threads together, arguing for dynamism and creativity as we all travel together. They conclude that the people of God need courage, but also to love and serve on another, to imbue the Christian life with hope.

People’s Christianity is an engaging read. The book was more technical and academic than I was expecting but it was, for me personally, an easy read.

Tom Wilson, Leicester

Olivia Jackson, *Uncertain: A collective Memoir of Deconstructing Faith* (London: SCM, 2023)

This book is a detailed account of the stories of “deconstruction” of faith. Like the author of the book, I’m not so keen on the language of deconstruction, but it does seem to be the term most commonly used to describe the increasingly common and widespread experience. Broadly stated, this is a process of finding an increasing dissonance between what they have been taught and encouraged to believe in church, and their experience of life and the world. For some this is a crisis, for others a gradual process. The book describes this as “intentional examination of one’s core faith and beliefs, leading to a profound change in, or even loss of, that faith” (p xvi). Jackson wrote the book based on 400 people completing a questionnaire with a further 140 follow-up interviews with people across from around the world.

The book is split into three parts. The first part has 19 short chapters telling the stories of people’s experiences of the churches they were part of and the broadly evangelical faith they were encouraged to embrace. The second part has six longer chapters which go into more depth about people’s experience of broadly evangelical teaching and doctrine that they have found harmful, difficult and have “deconstructed”. Part three contains three chapters and looks at where people have gone next. For some this has meant finding freedom in leaving the Christian faith behind. For others they have found God in different places, traditions and religions.

The book is written as more of a memoir, reporting people’s experience and the ways in which they have made sense of it, rather than trying to draw out any larger theological learning. Although, early on, Jackson is careful to state that she knows people have positive experiences of evangelicalism (some would challenge her broad definition of evangelicalism), she does, in places, end up talking in generalities and a few times makes sweeping statements about “the church”. The book is definitely at its strongest when sharing people’s accounts and telling their stories.

Approaching this as someone interested in how faith is lived, how church and mission are changing, and the theological wisdom that is emerging from such experiences, I would love

to have dived more deeply into the theology emerging. If this had been a practical theology text, the accounts shared would have given ample opportunities to explore the nature of God, salvation, church and the work of the Spirit that people were discovering. This is where I often found thoughts going; however, they are not in this book. It seemed to me it was primarily written for people going through similar experiences, and Jackson's commentary often opened up these kinds of reflection. This meant that there were a number of times when the discussion felt a little heavy-handed and a little more precision might have helped the points to land more clearly, but these criticisms are perhaps to miss the point of the book. Jackson is giving a raw account of the experience of deconstruction, and is more focused on telling the story than analysing it.

I'm sure that those who have experienced something similar will find comfort in being able to hear similar stories, and discover their experience is shared. There is no judgement and there is wisdom here about ways ahead. This book is also a gift to churches and church leaders if they are willing to listen. For some the tone will be too harsh and difficult to hear. There will be a tendency to be defensive, or to distance themselves from the accounts of harmful teaching. However, I think that for those who are willing to pause and listen, it is a gift, telling the stories of people who found their faith no longer fitted with their experience; people who had been committed to church and to God, yet in the process of deconstruction ended up feeling abused, or no longer able to stay in church. It shows how things that might have been intended for good have been warped and misshapen, and it brings into the light ways of leading and being which have always been toxic and need to be named as such. I would encourage people to listen carefully to these stories, not because they are "right" necessarily, but because they are a witness to, and against, churches and leaders which deserve to be taken seriously.

James Butler, CMS

Elizabeth Phillips, *Apocalyptic Theopolitics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022)

Apocalyptic Theopolitics is a selective collection of academic essays and sermons by Elizabeth Phillips, the public engagement fellow for the Woolf Institute in Cambridge. This book comprises 14 chapters organised into four major parts. Each part encompasses the author's scholarly analysis of specific subject matters, alongside corresponding sermon(s) delivered on various occasions. Within this slim volume lies a dense yet profound exploration of the intersection between eschatology, Christian ethics and political theology.

In part I, Phillips offers a compact survey of the notions of eschatology and the apocalyptic in Scripture, Augustine, Aquinas, early liberation theologies, millennialism and postmillennialism. While acknowledging the value of the historical turn in Reinhold Niebuhr's eschatology, Phillips argues that the shift away from the apocalyptic is a misguided one. Despite the dangerous employment of apocalyptic rhetoric and ideology in some sociopolitical movements, Christian Zionism for example, such usage bears "no direct relationship to the overarching contents and functions of apocalyptic texts, nor necessitate[s] any connection whatsoever with them" (p. 19). Therefore, to reject the apocalyptic as dangerous because of some erroneous use of the apocalyptic is a syllogistic fallacy. One of the central objectives of this book is to reclaim the value of the apocalyptic, drawn from the apocalyptic texts, as a normative resource for political theology. In this section, the author also critiques the existing conceptual, disciplinary and methodological separation between theology and the political

and between theological ethics and social ethics. Engaging with the political theology of M. Shawn Copeland, Phillips contends that the theological engagement of discourses outside the ethical (problem-solving) frame can help broaden our political considerations, which are deeply ethical in the sense that they have a direct influence on our concrete political praxis.

In part II, the author presents her ethnographic study of Christian Zionism, which she conducted in an American congregation in 2007. According to her observation, eschatology plays a key role in shaping the theopolitical imagination of this congregation, where eschatological language is often invoked at worship, prayer meetings and other church events to express a hope of militant victory of Israel as a nation-state. However, contrary to the common assumption that Zionism is offering support to Israel simply for the sake of hastening the second coming of Christ, Phillips discovers that this congregation exhibits a more complex understanding of divine revelation and eschatology. To these Christian Zionists, the militant victory of Israel, as promised by God to Abraham in Gen. 12 and prophesied by Ezekiel to the dry bones (Ezek. 37:3), is a sure reality that will be fulfilled in the near future. This military success, including not only the establishment and expansion of the state of Israel but also the failure and fatality of Israel's "enemies", is not a means through which Christ shall return but the *ends* itself that occurs at the second coming of Christ, a time when the sovereignty of God is revealed to the world. Their political activism in funding Israeli settlement and war in the land of Palestine is, therefore, understood by the community as a participation in carrying out God's ultimate will for humanity and all creation. As Phillips rightly points out, this literal interpretation of biblical texts as predictions to be fulfilled through nationalist militarism, disregarding "Scripture's own critiques of militarism, nationalism, violence, and injustice," is highly problematic (p. 72). Notably, the grave consequences yielded by such dangerous theology is now tragically unravelled in the genocide taking place in Gaza against the Palestinians.

In part III, Phillips compares Christian Zionism and its dispensationalist eschatology with the theology of John Howard Yoder, whose eschatology and view of a political Jesus rest not on the militant triumph but on the very suffering of the Lamb slain by the imperial regime. Concurring with Yoder's analysis of the deconstructing function of the apocalyptic, Phillips argues that definitive forms of the apocalyptic should manifest in 1) *deconstruction* – disclosing the possibility of a different reality, 2) *proclamation* – proclaiming the sovereignty of God against oppressive power and 3) *empowerment* – enabling the community of faith to speak truth to power. In this section, she discusses the doctrines of "The Two" with a creative approach to put Yoder as an interlocutor with Augustine, examining the boundary between the sacred and secular, public and private, church and world, and church and state. Regardless of the numerous insights present in Yoder's academic contributions, Phillips makes note of Yoder's sexual misconducts and discusses the complicated legacy left by Yoder in shaping Anabaptist theopolitics in the twentieth century.

In part IV, Phillips engages with the work of Herbert McCabe, Anthea Portier-Young and Judith Herman to explore the element of hope as a theological virtue in the apocalyptic. She argues that an apocalyptic imagination and praxis that "emphasizes the integration of the political, linguistic, narrative, and bodily essence of our human nature and morality" (p. 149) can not only provide comfort to a people who are undergoing great suffering but also empower them to reclaim their agency and resist the domination and hegemony of the oppressive powers with a counter narrative grounded in God's providence and sovereignty. The Eucharist, the author proposes, is one of such apocalyptic practices that allow the participants to see "how the depth of catastrophic human oppression is met and overcome by what Herbert McCabe called the 'revolutionary depth' of our future in God and how it

impinges on our present life” (p. 156). While Phillips asserts that the Eucharist is not a “moral magic... [that can] make us more moral and make social ills disappear” (p.157), it does make one wonder if the apocalyptic hope expressed through this Christian liturgy might resonate with those outside the Christian community who are experiencing suffering.

Apocalyptic Theopolitics is a rich and timely read that provides invaluable and constructive insights into the apocalyptic and its relation to political theology. It is particularly relevant amidst the ongoing genocide carried out by the Israeli–US coalition with a Zionistic tone. While this book warns us of the perilous use of apocalyptic eschatology in Christian Zionism, it advocates for a reimagined apocalyptic that takes roots in the textual–historical analyses of the apocalyptic texts and centres in its function of unveiling the oppressive narratives in the world. Bringing together intellectual depth and pastoral and homiletic wisdom, this volume stands as a visionary resource for scholars, church leaders and Christians wrestling with the apocalyptic literature in the Bible and seeking to embody their faith in response to the contemporary sociopolitical complexities and challenges.

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Richard McCallum, *Evangelical Christian Responses to Islam: A Contemporary Overview* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024)

This is an invaluable resource for academics and students who are seeking to understand evangelical Christian responses to Islam. It is divided into three parts. First, McCallum builds on the work of Habermas, Fraser and others to argue for an “Evangelical micro-public sphere”, one of many “that together form a global network of spheres making up broader transnational macro-public spheres” (p. 15). McCallum establishes the nature of the evangelical micro public sphere on Islam, documenting the issues, participants and texts that are discussed. In the second chapter of part one he explores typologies of encounter, outlining the breadth of what it means to be evangelical and how those who identify in this way respond to Islam.

Part two dives into the issues of: Allah, Muhammad, Qur’an and Hadith, Sharia, Islamisation, persecution, violence and Israel–Palestine. Various evangelical responses to each issue are set out clearly and the subtleties and nuances of the differences between them are explained. At the end of each chapter is a helpful one- or two-page discussion, where McCallum draws together the threads of the argument and poses questions and challenges for the reader. The chapters range broadly across the globe. White men from the US and UK do dominate but other voices are present. A real strength of this book is that McCallum has gone beyond the “usual suspects” to ensure a genuine plurality of voices are heard. The final chapter outlines the range of different answers that evangelical writers give to the question “What is Islam?” The answers given are a religion, a heresy, a political ideology, a conspiracy, the enemy, demonic, an essence, diverse, Muslims and a social construct.

In part three McCallum explores how evangelical Christians talk to and with Muslims, as well as methodologies for evangelism and conversion, friendship and dialogue, and apologetics and polemics. As in part two, a wide range of strategies, approaches and global contexts are discussed. McCallum does not shy away from the difficult issues, raising the question of the ethics of any outreach or evangelism for example. The final chapter discusses types of evangelical response to Islam. As with any typology, it presents a series of theoretical constructs that may not map to real life but are nevertheless useful for opening up conversation.

In his conclusion McCallum recapitulates his argument to date and draws together the threads of his discussion, including issues such as convert care, geographical difference, race, gender, sexual orientation, and climate and environment. He sets out for the directions of future activity including the importance of education, research, hospitality and humility. He ends by suggesting Christianity is at a crossroads both in terms of what it means to be Christian and what it means for Christians to engage with Islam.

Evangelical Christian Responses to Islam is a meticulously researched and lucidly written book. Not just the discussion, but also the lists of references, make this a go-to resource for all students of Christian responses to Islam in particular, and mission studies in general. Since it is currently only available as an academic hardback, sales may be limited for the moment to libraries, but once the more affordable paperback edition is out, I would urge anyone with serious interest in Christian-Muslim relations to buy a copy of this book.

Tom Wilson, Leicester



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