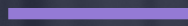




# ANVIL

Journal of Theology and Mission



*Movements, Communities  
and Sodalities*

Vol 41 – Issue 1


 CHURCH  
MISSION  
SOCIETY

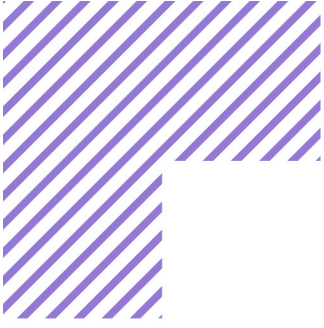




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# The Editorial

Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross

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**Welcome to a bumper issue of ANVIL. The idea for this issue was prompted by the launch of Aspen in November 2025. Aspen is a spread-out community, set up to look after the charism of pioneering mission (or whatever name you prefer to use) and to generate more of that practice. It is a response to the movement in mission we have seen grow in Britain and other post-Christian contexts over the last 30 years.**

We have included in this issue the founding Aspen document that describes the purpose and charism of Aspen, and I (Cathy) have written a reflection or commentary on the process of setting it up. It's a particular kind of community, a sodality to use the mission jargon. That community is a contribution to the ongoing movement in mission in post-Christian Britain and beyond. We thought it would be interesting to explore further the combination of movement and community in mission. It is of particular interest to us in CMS as we have been through a refounding process over the last six years or so. Our participation in mission globally has pivoted towards catalysing, co-creating and contributing to mission movements as we seek to notice and join in with what God is doing at the edges. This issue is focused towards post-Christian contexts (one of CMS's areas of participation in mission). We hope a future issue might be able to build on this by exploring the theme further for other movements in mission.

There is a lot in the issue so do take your time with it but we are really thrilled with what has come together. 'Movements' is a slippery concept and I (Jonny) have written an article on some of their contours. I fear this may not be tight enough for some people who want to pin down what movements are but the very nature of movements is such that they keep moving and evade definition! And as I say in the article, attempts to pin them down often end up feeling more like descriptions of pyramid selling. Mission community and movement are nothing new so it's great to have Ade Green's article on being a Franciscan, one incredible movement that has been running for over 800 years. It makes quite a good 'compare and contrast' with Matt Richards' article on new monasticism and mission.

We all need friends for the journey and at CMS, as we have been networking with others involved in mission in similar spaces to us in post-Christian contexts, we have really enjoyed the friendships that have emerged. Street Psalms and the Parish Collective, both of which are based in the US, are sister communities. Tim Soerens and Kris Rocke both share lots of wisdom in conversation with Tina Hodgett and Johnny Sertin respectively. Katharina Haubold reflects on the Fresh X-Network through conversation with others who have been part of the movement in Germany around mission and fresh expressions. We have had good friendship with Katharina and others in Germany over many years now. That in itself is illustrative of how movements work, though making connections, sharing ideas and friendship, and mutual encouragement and learning. Common Grace is a movement in Aotearoa/New Zealand that is focused on activism and justice, seeking to transform unjust structures in society. Alex



Johnston tells their story in a way that we found very compelling. We hope that international flavour is helpful. We'd like to deepen that further.

There are further articles reflecting on practice. Idina Dunmore reflects on her experience of being part of a mission community, Servants Southall, London. Kairos is a new movement and community in Yorkshire catalysed through the Methodist church's New Places for New People work. Liane Kensett tells their story and how they have developed a rhythm to the community's life as they seek to reimagine what that might look like if we become future-facing. Harvey Kwiyani and Nuam Hatzaw have a conversation around Harvey's book *Decolonizing Mission*. This conversation took place at the Assembly which is our annual get-together with people in the network. This is also movement, through a slightly different filter – exploring mission practice and the contours of a missiology after empire, after colonisation. The reflection on Aspen and its founding document, as mentioned above, also feed into this focus.

At CMS we have been pondering what sort of spirituality enables a life lived in mission. Ian Adams has been conducting lots of conversations with people about their own practice under the header "Presence". Together with a couple of others, this has been distilled to a pattern of five principles to aid a life of prayerful presence, a mission spirituality if you will. This is being offered as an invitation across CMS to live a life of prayerful presence in mission. It seemed a perfect fit with this issue of ANVIL and we are grateful to Ian for letting us include it, to invite you into that too.

To top it off, there is a series of book reviews. Several of those are books that accompany this issue particularly well so do enjoy those too. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this issue. Everyone does so voluntarily as a gift of their time and energies, which we really appreciate.

Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross



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# New monastic community, church and mission: A faithful fit?

By Matt Richards

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## Introduction

Recent decades have seen significant and sustained interest across the United Kingdom in a concept commonly known as “new monasticism”. This ancient-yet-modern embodiment of Christian community is something I have long felt called to explore, and am beginning to do so in practice here in north-west Cumbria.

Within the wider church, however, it remains a relatively unknown entity – a fringe concern that is treated with varying degrees of curiosity or suspicion. I believe this to be at least in part due to a theological and relational disconnect between mainstream church and new monasticism. In other words, people struggle to understand if and how the two might properly relate to one another.

This felt like a subject worth exploring, which I gladly undertook for my undergraduate dissertation with CMS. The following essay is drawn from that work, and examines the relationship between new monasticism and church through the lens of mission. My hope is to demonstrate a relationship that is not only theologically sound but also, by God’s grace, wonderfully fruitful.

## Church

In his classic work, *Models of the Church*, Catholic theologian Avery Dulles offers an array of ecclesiological typologies, each emphasising different aspects of the nature of the church. At one level, he introduces us to ‘The Church as Mystical Communion’ – an image of the universal body of Christ, “with particular stress on the mystical and invisible communion that binds together all those who are enlivened by the grace of Christ”.<sup>1</sup> This communion in Christ transcends cultural and historical barriers, making the past instructive to our present endeavours, as is very much the case with new monastic community.

Dulles recognises however that “the Church of Christ could not perform its mission without some stable organizational features”<sup>2</sup> – leading him to introduce ‘The Church as Institution’. Such structural manifestations of the church are a necessary feature of Christ’s pilgrim people in the present day. I myself am held within the Anglican tradition, but new monasticism tends

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Random House, 2002), 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

to sit more lightly towards institutional structures. In this sense it addresses itself well to a contemporary world with “little interest in theological siloes or ecclesiastical brand loyalty”.<sup>3</sup>

Between the poles of church as institution and church as mystery, Dulles offers ‘The Church as Sacrament’, whereby “The Church becomes Church insofar as the grace of Christ, operative within it, achieves historical tangibility through the actions of the Church”.<sup>4</sup> In other words, this is the existence of church at a local level, manifesting the grace of God within the warp and weft of daily community life. The further models of church as ‘Herald’ and ‘Servant’ complete this understanding of the church’s call to proclaim and enact the good news of Jesus in the lives of local communities. It is at this local level that I am particularly drawn to the practice of new monastic community.

Recent developments in ecclesiology have fostered an appreciation of the rich variety of ways in which the church can be locally expressed, with the language of a “mixed ecology” challenging the assumed ubiquity of the congregational parish system. Rather than seeing this as a novel development, however, I would suggest it is instead the recovery of the church’s dual charism deeply rooted in history.

Alongside the ‘normal’ structures of the local, rooted church, there have always existed other elements of church no less ecclesial in nature but also somehow differentiated. An understanding of this dual nature of the church throughout its history is described by Ralph Winter through the terms “modality” and “sodality”.<sup>5</sup> The former term derives from the root word ‘mode’, referring to the customary way things are done. “One might say it is the default position, or prevailing fashion or custom.”<sup>6</sup> Sodality, meanwhile, comes from the Latin root, *sodalis*, which can be translated as ‘comrade’. “The first is open to everybody, and is represented by the parish church or the congregation. The second, however, is open only for those with a special vocation and who are prepared to make special vows.”<sup>7</sup> Instances of sodality can be found in the early church example of Paul’s apostolic missionary band, or more recently in the international missionary agencies which proliferated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, perhaps the most consistent example throughout history is that of the monastic movement.

Monasticism has a long and distinguished tradition within the life of the church, although it was largely rejected by Protestants after the Reformation, added summarily to the pile of Catholic traditions to be jettisoned.<sup>8</sup> Such a move was not without reason, for as Lings notes, the monastic life “became seen as an achievement of the elite that the laity could not emulate. By allowing specialists, it justified low standards for the majority.”<sup>9</sup> This distinction is exemplified by the words of Pope Urban II in 1092, who described the religious as the “strong ones”, stating that “from the beginning the Church has always offered two types of life to her children: one to aid the insufficiency of the weak, the other to bring to perfection the goodness of the strong.”<sup>10</sup> Such a division certainly invites critique, for did Christ not call all to follow him, without preference or distinction?

Dutch theologian Stephan Paas considers this dilemma in his astute work *Pilgrims and Priests*, where he questions, as did the Reformers, the ecclesiological implications of this “hierarchical complementarity”. While noting the challenges it raises, he ultimately concludes, “There are, in short, people whose Christianity is the sun in their universe around which everything else turns, and people for whom their Christianity is one of the planets in a universe that orbits another centre. And I think that this – admittedly typological – difference has always existed.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the understandable distaste of the Reformers for the monastic

<sup>3</sup> Steve Aisthorpe, *Rewilding the Church* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2020), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Dulles, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Winter, *The two structures of God’s redemptive mission* (The American Society of Missiology, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> George Lings, *Why Modality and Sodality thinking is vital to understand future church* (Church Army), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Steve Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 67.

<sup>8</sup> See Craig Gardiner, *Melodies of a New Monasticism* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 97.

<sup>9</sup> George Lings, *Seven Sacred Spaces* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2020), 123.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 135.

<sup>11</sup> Stephan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 27–28.

life, it perhaps expresses something universally intrinsic to the human expression of life and faith.

Lings also reaches this conclusion, offering the analogy, “Just as Formula One racing has led to more efficient engines and better brakes and tyres in everyday cars, so monastic life was intended to be a way to raise the quality of the whole church.”<sup>12</sup> This reminds us that rather than seeking to excuse a laxity within the modal church, monasticism at its best will act as a source of inspiration and encouragement to all. So too in our time, new monasticism should not seek to replace or denigrate the wider body of Christ, but rather to serve faithfully within it.

## Mission

Any concept of church is incomplete without reference to mission. Not without reason is Emil Brunner so often quoted as declaring that “the Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning”.<sup>13</sup> Steve Bevens and Roger Schroeder explore this in *Constants in Context*, writing that “the church of Christ does not so much have a mission as the mission of Christ has a church”.<sup>14</sup> They ground their reasoning in an examination of the first account we have of the life of the church – the Acts of the Apostles.

This, they argue, demonstrates that it is only as the first followers of Jesus respond to the Spirit’s call to continue his mission (and not prior to it) that they are formed into the church. Thus the book of Acts “shows that the origin of the church is intimately connected to its consciousness of the mission that it saw before it”, providing “a strong biblical basis for the dictum that the church is ‘missionary by its very nature’”.<sup>15</sup> This scriptural foundation also reminds us that mission is not owned in any way by the church, but rather flows from the life of God. Mission is intrinsic to who God is, and therefore becomes our primary calling “because to be Christian is to become part of God’s life and God’s vision for the world”.<sup>16</sup> When we speak, therefore, of new monastic community expressing the mission of the church, we are not describing an optional extra, but rather something indispensable to the church’s identity.

We turn now to consider the place of mission within monasticism throughout history. This witness is surely instructive to the possibilities of new monasticism, as it likewise seeks to embody the mission of the church today. In his foundational work, *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch considers the missional impact of monasticism within medieval Europe, writing, “At first glance, the monastic movement appears to be a most unlikely agent of mission. The communities were certainly not founded as launching pads for mission.”<sup>17</sup> Bosch is not alone here, with many seeing the intention of the early monastics as a flight from the ‘sinful world’ into the deserts of solitude and silence. “Monasticism’s one object,” continues Bosch, “was to live in purity and die in peace.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite this apparent juxtaposition, the resulting missional impact of monasticism within Western Europe can hardly be overstated. To begin with, there is the missional effect of monasticism on the church itself, about which Bosch enthuses greatly, arguing that throughout Europe’s ‘dark ages’ monasticism “saved that medieval church from acquiescence, petrification, and a loss of its vision and truly revolutionary character.”<sup>19</sup> The outworking of this monastic witness was arguably most pronounced in the British Isles, where monastic influence far preceded the establishment of diocesan and parish structures. Ian Bradley, a leading voice on the history of the early British church, writes, “For Christians living in the British Isles between the fifth and eleventh centuries, the monastery rather than the

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<sup>12</sup> Lings, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Bevens and Schroeder, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>17</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2010), 231.

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

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

parish church was the primary focus for worship, pastoral care and religious instruction.”<sup>20</sup> This was particularly suited to the tribal culture of the time, yet even beyond the establishment of the modal church in Britain, monasticism retained a central and influential place. “In England, alone among the major European nations, many of the cathedrals continued until the Reformation to be Benedictine houses,” notes Rowan Williams, suggesting that “the centrality of the apostolic and monastic vision in the life of the Church could find expression in setting community life visibly at the centre of a diocese”.<sup>21</sup>

A second facet of the monastic mission was its witness of countercultural presence within the surrounding milieu. Rather than concerning themselves purely with ‘spiritual matters’, monastic life grew to embrace all spheres of life as holy, with the rule of Benedict placing particular emphasis on the sanctity of manual labour.<sup>22</sup> Each monastery was therefore “a vast complex of buildings, churches, workshops, stores, and almshouses – a hive of activity for the benefit of the entire surrounding community”.<sup>23</sup> The monastic life was ordered pointedly and publicly about the person of Jesus Christ, an everyday witness to a radically different way of life. It willingly embraced the harsh rigours of labour usually reserved for the lowest in society, doing so with a “a spirituality of the long haul”<sup>24</sup> that shrugged off barbarian invasions and inspired others through its persevering tenacity. “Even without knowing it and without intending it, their conduct was missionary through and through,” concludes Bosch. “Small wonder then that, increasingly, their implicitly missionary dimension began to spill over into explicit missionary efforts.”<sup>25</sup>

This brings us to the final element of monastic missional witness, that which was explicitly and intentionally evangelistic. Here Bosch notes, “It was Gregory the Great, himself a Benedictine monk, who first conceived the idea of a planned ‘foreign mission’, when he sent the monk Augustine from the heart of Benedictine monasticism in Italy to the kingdom of Kent on the British isles to initiate a missionary venture among the pagan English.”<sup>26</sup> Far from being an exception, this missional enterprise was the norm in Britain, where evangelisation in “the Romano-Celtic and Anglo-Saxon eras occurred through the missional endeavours of monks, nuns and friars, and not primarily through bishops, priests and parishes”.<sup>27</sup> Thus developed within several streams of British monastic life the apostolic conviction “that one should not remain in the monastery for one’s own salvation, but save and serve others”.<sup>28</sup>

## New monastic community

Having now examined the concepts of church and mission, we turn finally to consider new monasticism itself. As a movement, it can be traced to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer foreseeing its advent in 1940: “The restoration of the Church must surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have only one thing in common with the old, a life lived without compromise according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Jesus. I believe the time has come to gather people for this.”<sup>29</sup>

As is often the case with new phenomena, there is a multiplicity of language currently being used to describe overlapping and evolving entities. None are without issue, as identified by Andy Freeman when he writes that “each time I hear of expressions of monasticism around the world I realise there is not much that is ‘new’ about what we do”.<sup>30</sup> Simpson concurs, suggesting that “the discovery of monasticism among protestants is more a new discovery

<sup>20</sup> Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Way of St Benedict* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2020), 45.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>23</sup> Bosch, 232.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Bosch, 235.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Mobsby, “The Importance of New Monasticism as a Model for Building Ecclesial Communities out of Contextual Mission”, in *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, edited by Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy (London: Canterbury Press, 2010), 12–18, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Bosch, 235.

<sup>29</sup> Ray Simpson, *High Street Monasteries: Fresh expressions of committed Christianity* (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2009), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Andy Freeman, *New Monasticism, Mission and Young People*, in *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, 50–56, 50.

than a new monasticism".<sup>31</sup> There is indeed a risk that the phrase might suggest a degree of originality which is unwise to claim. Personally, however, I find the explicit mention of 'monasticism' provides a meaningful anchor in the tradition of what has gone before, while recognising the 'newness' and difference of contemporary expression.

Indeed, as Paas notes, "innovation that burns all the bridges towards the old and traditional will not be recognised as innovation. Renewal is always the renewal of something; it is not creation out of nothing."<sup>32</sup> By this, he cautions us not to jump clean off the pier of Christian heritage, convinced that our new expression will float with a life of its own. Writing in a similar vein, Steve Aisthorpe suggests, "Rewilding the Church begins by drawing from the deep wells of Christian identity."<sup>33</sup> This provides a valuable counterculture in a time when an idealised future is often our overriding frame of reference.

The possibilities for applying the fruits of the monastic witness to new contexts are widespread indeed, with writers such as Simon Reed exploring how monastic practices might enrich mainstream ecclesial life.<sup>34</sup> Others have sought to apply the Rule of St Benedict to business management,<sup>35</sup> while Rowan Williams has examined how the Benedictine way might positively influence contemporary European culture at large.<sup>36</sup> Yet, rather than applying monastic principles to a particular field of life, I would understand new monasticism as being a further iteration – or a new embodiment – of the monastic tradition. Ray Simpson concisely describes it as "a fresh expression of committed Christianity for the post-modern age."<sup>37</sup>

While new monasticism does not seek to replace that which has gone before, it is nonetheless enacting what Paul Bradbury describes as travelling "home by another route". Recognising the huge cultural shifts of the past century, Bradbury writes convincingly of our need to look "for a way home in a cultural landscape that has lost the familiar paths and landmarks of the past".<sup>38</sup> While therefore recognising the essential place of traditional monasticism to the understanding and practice of new monastic community, it is also important to acknowledge the places where old and new part company. Indeed, we should not expect it to look the same, for as Ray Simpson writes: "True monasticism is never an end – that would be to make it an idol – it is a means to a transformation, a fullness of humanness in Christ, and must only be followed in as much as it serves this purpose."<sup>39</sup>

New monasticism's change of approach is arguably exemplified by its focus on communal living, rather than a life of solitude. As Andy Freeman admits, "there isn't too much 'mono' about who we are and what we do. Prayer and contemplation, for me at least, sit alongside community and mission and so we look more like Franciscan Friars than monks."<sup>40</sup> It is less that prayer and isolation are entirely shunned, but rather that a different and more flexible balance is sought in their practice. The Northumbria Community, for example, uses the phrase "alone and together" to describe their communal charism, an approach which more closely approximates the Orthodox monastic tradition than the Roman Catholic model of differentiated 'active' and 'contemplative' orders.<sup>41</sup>

This move typifies the kind of flexibility that new monasticism is seeking to embody. Simpson argues that contemporary Christians "are wary of structures that are imposed from the centre; they do not want to be trapped in a new legalism; they don't want to be shut off from ordinary people".<sup>42</sup> Where traditional monasticism is typically defined by strict adherence to an ascetic

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<sup>31</sup> Simpson, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Paas, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Aisthorpe, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Simon Reed, *Creating Community: Ancient ways for modern churches* (Abingdon: BRF, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Kit Dollard, Anthony Marett-Crosby and Abbot Timothy Wright, *Doing Business with Benedict* (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Williams, 66–83.

<sup>37</sup> Simpson, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Bradbury, *Home by another route: Reimagining today's church* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2019), 85.

<sup>39</sup> Simpson, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Freeman, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Abbot Stuart Burns, *Reflections on New Monasticism*, in *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, 140–145, 143.

<sup>42</sup> Simpson, 57.

rule of life, the adaptable nature of new monasticism is arguably more suited to the complex fluidity of postmodern culture.

This raises the difficult question, however, of how far one can depart from the well-trodden paths before what is left ceases to be authentically monastic, or indeed authentically Christian? “When is a spiritual community truly a New Monastic Community?” postulates Ian Mobsby. He offers the suggestion that “there needs to be some form of shared rhythm or rule of life; just having values is not enough. These rules then need to define some form of shared practices.”<sup>43</sup> I would see this comment as being representative of wider practice, and while each community will vary, they will nonetheless aspire towards some embodiment of such values-driven, communally held practices.

It is important to recognise, however, that many communities will still be on that journey of aspiration, with an outward expression far less developed than the monastic ways we are used to. After all, the most ancient communities were themselves once new, and we would do well to remember that “those early God-seekers of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries followed no written Rules – there were none”.<sup>44</sup> The final word on new monastic community is yet far from being written, such is the emergent nature of this missional movement within the church.

## Conclusion

I hope to have shown throughout this essay that new monastic community is something very much related – and relevant – to the church today. It may well exist at the fringes, yet so too did the Desert Fathers in the early days of the monasticism. Rowan Williams, exploring their relevance for today, indeed reminds us that “the church is always renewed from the edges rather than the centre”.<sup>45</sup> If new monasticism is to play a faithful part in this renewal, it will need both the rich inheritance of the monastic witness, and a bold embrace of an unknown future.

In doing so, I believe new monastic community to be a living, local, beautiful sacrament of the church’s call to mission. How this happens in practice was the central focus of my dissertation research, which I could share another time! Personally, it has led me to explore what this might look like in my own life, leaving the realm of the theoretical and diving into the adventure of discovering this calling in Christ.



**Matt Richards** is an ordained pioneer minister in Cumbria, where he finds joy seeking God amid the quiet beauty of the fells, the chaotic delight of family hospitality and the constant adventure of community life.

<sup>43</sup> Mobsby, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Mother Mary Clare, quoted by Philip D. Roderick in *Connected Solitude: Reimagining the Skete*, in *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, 102–119, 109.

<sup>45</sup> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The wisdom of the desert* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2004), 109.



# Contours of movements

By Jonny Baker

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When I first joined CMS, the team I was in had been set up to bring about change. Part of our conversation was about what was the best way to describe CMS that would call her to be her best self. The thing we stumbled across was an old CMS carrier bag that had a logo and the words “a movement of people in mission” which we abbreviated to MPM. Since that time, I have been interested in movements, what they are, how they are catalysed and animated, and how they might grow. Yet, it is surprisingly hard to find a coherent work drawing together insights on movements. Where people claim to do that in the missions world, it never seems to quite do what I am looking for but rather is lured into something formulaic which feels more like pyramid selling: follow this simple formula and don’t detract from it and you will see huge multiplication. That may work for some reductive version of the gospel but not really if you are interested in contextual mission that hopes to see imaginative engagement with the gospel that gets opened up creatively in response to the Spirit in a range of contexts.

What I think many of us have worked with over the years are clues, fragments, that come from writing on emergence, religious life and dissent, systemic change in organisations, network theory, biblical studies in areas such as the prophets, Gospels and the book of Acts, social movements, and mission studies stories and articles. Often, they are stumbled across and experienced as a sort of sense-making. I have experienced that on multiple occasions where someone has passed an article to me or I have stumbled across it through a blog and I have felt described in a way that made sense of what I saw or was experiencing intuitively.

People keep asking me to write a piece on movements, what they are and how they work. And I have never quite known how to approach that. I have settled in a place of reflecting that a collection of insightful fragments that contain different insights and nuances is good or as good as we are going to get. It is enough. It is especially good if those fragments are shared and held in conversation with others who share the same desire or quest. Movements are so dynamic that it would probably be a bit strange if they could be systematised into a formula we could all use – that wouldn’t be very movement-like! All that to say that here are a few fragments which I have come across which are on emergence, desire, dissent, innovation, small worlds and fringe dwelling.

## Emergence

One very fertile area of writing and thinking is in emergence. Emergence often looks to the way creatures relate and self-organise in the natural world, such as ants, swarms or murmurations, where perhaps the most significant thing is the importance of relationship. We have been so taken with this that, in setting up the rhythm of life for the Aspen community, we draw on the image of a murmuration. In her book, *Emergent Strategy*, Adrienne Maree Brown says, “My dream is a movement with such deep trust that we move as

a murmuration the way groups of starlings billow, dive, dance collectively through the air – to avoid predators, and it seems to pass time in the most beautiful way possible.”<sup>1</sup>

When we did some research for Aspen around what pioneers might be looking or hoping for in a community, the word that came to the fore was “connect”. In other words, people can feel alone or isolated but know the experience of connecting with others is energising and important. ‘Connect’ is now one aspect of Aspen’s rhythm and this is how we draw on the murmuration in Aspen’s founding document: “In a murmuration the dynamic movement happens because each bird has a set of relations to 6 or 7 neighbours. As long as a bird moves with them it works. Each member is encouraged to identify 6 or 7 (the number is not important - it could be more or less) other pioneers/changemakers and to be intentional about connecting with them. Be free to do that how you like - in a group, by visiting individually, or whatever. We encourage a couple of things. The first is that in a murmuration each time it moves it will be a different set of relations. So that set of connections can be for a year and then a new one the next and so forth or at least some mix of the two. Secondly, with our value of ubuntu at the centre of belonging, we invite you to make sure some of those connections embody difference.”<sup>2</sup>

Adrienne Maree Brown looks at six elements of movements.<sup>3</sup> For example, one is fractals – a similar pattern that you see at different scales. What you practise at the small scale sets the pattern for the whole system so it’s a challenge to embody and become the new community we want to see. Another is that emergent systems are interdependent and decentralised: leadership, power and other functions are distributed. It reminds me of the book *Starfish and Spider*<sup>4</sup> which caught the imagination in this regard as a fragment several years back.

My strongest experience of feeling that what I was intuitively doing was being described was when I read Margaret Wheatley’s article, “Lifecycles of Emergence”,<sup>5</sup> which I came across through a friend in Australia’s blog in 2007. (I mention that because it is indicative of how emergence works in practice through informal connection.) She writes about how networks become communities of practice which can become systems of influence, not through organisational control but through emergence. The article opens like this: “Despite current ads and slogans, the world doesn’t change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what’s possible. This is good news for those of us intent on changing the world and creating a positive future. Rather than worry about critical mass, our work is to foster critical connections. We don’t need to convince large numbers of people to change; instead, we need to connect with kindred spirits. Through these relationships, we will develop the new knowledge, practices, courage, and commitment that lead to broad-based change.”

It is a very short piece in which she describes four steps – Name, Connect, Nourish and Illuminate – which perhaps in relation to the missions world we are in is something like this:

- ◆ Name – identify/see contextual missional practice on the margins.
- ◆ Connect – connect those edge practices together, whether through gatherings and spaces where people collide, connectors who say to people “you should meet so and so”, or connecting online.
- ◆ Nourish – add value to the networks with encouragement, by participating in them, by helping share learning, training and perhaps putting resource into capacity through some people to animate it.
- ◆ Illuminate – tell the stories so that the word gets out and the emergence expands.

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy* (Chico: AK Press, 2017) 71.

<sup>2</sup> Aspen Founding document.

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

<sup>4</sup> Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, *The Starfish and The Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organisations* (New York: Portfolio, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/using-emergence.pdf>

There is a lot more that could be said within each of these four but that is the lifecycle she names. See the Berkana Institute to dive deeper.<sup>6</sup>

## Desire

I was very struck by Tina and Tim's conversation on movements in this issue of *ANVIL*. It struck me that what they were describing was a naming of how they see movements emerge in response to desire. It probably caught my attention because I am very influenced by Ignatian spirituality which pays attention to the significance of God-given desire and longing as a sign of the Spirit's movement which is something to notice and follow. Somewhat tentatively I emailed Tim and Tina saying what I thought I was hearing. I thought it worth adding here as a new fragment into the mix in case it is helpful to others. You will have to watch their video to understand the dancer reference.

- Desire – someone has a desire on the edges through seeking to join in with the Spirit. That desire gets named gradually and some practice is embodied in a place (the lone dancer).
- Connect – common desire gets discovered through connecting and listening to the desire of others. Through what can feel random, you find others who have the same desire. It feels magical. (A few more dancers join.)
- Communication – connecting is helped by champions, advocates, comms, getting out and about, colliding with others whom God has prepared. It takes work and belief that something more than doing just your own local practice is worthwhile.
- Articulate – share and work together on practice, language, models, stories, making sense that can only come after a few years of learning and iteration. All this builds up a toolkit. (The dance moves are looking good.)
- Amplify – get amplified through particular moments in publishing or gatherings that broaden the reach of connection. Amplification is still fundamentally relational through particular connections. (A crowd is now dancing, and some are going to start dances in other places.)
- Keep doing it – keep connecting, keep communicating, keep experimenting, keep learning, keep gathering.

## Dissent

When I was writing a design brief to help us think about how we would discern the shape of the Aspen community, I was at St Beuno's in North Wales which is an Ignatian retreat centre hosted by a Jesuit community. It felt such a gift to be doing that work in such a community. While I was there, I took the opportunity to have a look through the library to see what I could find on spread-out ecclesial communities or religious congregations. To my delight, I found a shelf of books. Gerald Arbuckle highlights the significance of religious congregations within the Catholic church's ecclesiology. As spread-out communities gather around a particular purpose they are prophetic, calling the rest of the church backwards to revisit the heart of the gospel and forwards in mission.<sup>7</sup> He names this as dissent, by which he means the proposing of alternatives to business as usual and those who find the path for that and those who can advocate for it within the structures.

There are a couple of pieces of thinking in the missions world that conclude something similar. One is Ralph Winter's discussion of sodal and modal expressions of church.<sup>8</sup> The modal is the local gathered and the sodal the one spread out, gathered around a purpose. He says that the energy of the church in mission needs both. A second piece is Beth Keith's research into pioneer ministers set in conversation with Jeremiah's call where she shows that

<sup>6</sup> <https://berkana.org/>

<sup>7</sup> See especially Gerald Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993) and Gerald Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988)

<sup>8</sup> <https://munsonmissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/606d6-two-structures-gods-redemptive-mission-winter.pdf>

those able to generate genuinely new practice and not get stuck are those who belong to a sodal community.<sup>9</sup> It is these threads that persuaded me over that last decade that we were being invited by the Spirit to give birth to an ecclesial ecumenical community such as Aspen. It is exciting that it now exists in the world.

But back to St Beuno's library. I found myself laughing out loud at the familiarity of the experience of the religious in the Roman Catholic Church. They carry a burning passion for something new and invariably are exasperated at the resistance they encounter from the powers that be. Here are a few quotations. I have replaced the word "religious" or "congregation" with "pioneer" to make the resonance explicit. Get in touch if you want the fuller version.

*These first two are really simple short summaries of these kinds of communities...*

"The dynamic of the pioneer charism is the call to a work in the world. It is primarily a mission, and from this flows a community and a sense of identity. The foundational spiritual experience bears these marks – the sequela Christi as a call to ministerial service, the acceptance of a mission, the gathering of companions, and the emergence of a new path of Christian discipleship."<sup>10</sup>

"We require leaders giddied with charismatically inspired creative imaginations... For them the general formula for any innovation: a willingness to question the status quo, pragmatic imagination, an idea, initiative, courage, and a few friends to help the project off the ground."<sup>11</sup>

*Pioneering (or prophetic or apostolic) ministry is perhaps focused more on the incoming future than the preservation of the past. It sees creative and as yet unimagined possibilities for how the gospel might unfurl and is able to form people for that. This is essential for the wider church but also can create tension...*

"When thinking of the church's primary task of preaching the kingdom within an ever-changing world we need apostolic creativity of quantum leap proportions. In other words, renewal of existing pastoral strategies is insufficient. Rather we require radically different and as yet unimagined ways to relate the good news to the pastoral challenges of the world... Thus pioneers or 'apostolic quantum leap' persons are needed within the church to critique or dissent from the conventional and ineffective pastoral wisdom of the present. Without these courageous people the church simply cannot fulfil its mission."<sup>12</sup>

"We must form a people who follow the Jesus who walked from Galilee to Jerusalem touching the unclean, consorting with sinners, contending with the teachers, giving the hungry food he did not have, talking to the rich on behalf of the poor and praying on mountaintops, in synagogues, and deep in desert places on his way to cleanse a temple – not to traffic in the trivia of maintaining the superficial and empty trappings of religion at any cost."<sup>13</sup>

"We must form for the prophetic rather than for the obedient, for the pastoral rather than for the ecclesiastically proper. We must form for prophetic presence, not for institutional development that insulates us from the life of others."<sup>14</sup>

*And I loved the challenge in these last quotes for pioneers to take responsibility for living out their calling, rather than to be worried about pleasing or gaining approval from the modal or denominational forms of church. It's precisely why this second kind of structure is needed to help look after this gift and call and it is critical to stay true to that call.*

<sup>9</sup> Beth Keith, "To Pluck up and Pull Down, to Build and to Plant", in Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (eds) *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in mission* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014) 117–140.

<sup>10</sup> Gemma Simmonds, *A Future Full of Hope* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2012) 141.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Joan Chittister, *Fire in these Ashes* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 171.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

“There is an urgently felt need for pioneers themselves to reclaim their own story, and take on those daring and controversial initiatives that will re-ground a more authentic vision for the sake of the world.”<sup>15</sup>

“It may be precisely when we become the good children of Mother Church that we run the risk of becoming its underdeveloped children as well – loving and lovable, perhaps, but dependent and depressingly unimaginative at the same time; open to direction, yes, but closed to the Holy Spirit at the same time. In an age long past business-as-usual, we must teach again that pioneers are meant to be the wake-up call of the Church.”<sup>16</sup>

“The close liaison with the official Church often alienates us from those very people whom we feel the call to accompany in a special way. I refer to the millions of marginalised women and men for whom the Church no longer offers either meaning or hope; or the millions who feel they have outgrown the need for formal religion but still search for spiritual meaning. In many cases we encounter these people and engage more dynamically with them outside, rather than within, an ecclesiastical context... Reclaiming our mission at the heart of the world is in no way a denial or rejection of our alliance with the Church. What it does necessitate is a very different way of being Church.”<sup>17</sup>

## Innovation

Movements usually occur within a wider system or organisation. An area with lots of pieces of wisdom to offer is innovation, systems change, which invariably also requires culture change. There is a lot in that space and the theory is a lot easier than the practice. A well known example is the bell curve of change that relates a theory of how the diffusion of innovation happens.<sup>18</sup> It is a simple idea that change begins with a small group of innovators (or pioneers?), but for it to happen more, it needs to diffuse across wider groups. The group most likely to pick it up are early adopters but it is when the practice begins to move into the early majority that you can reach a tipping point where the whole system begins to change. I first came across this in discussion with Stephen Croft when he was leading Fresh Expressions and he drew the bell curve on a piece of paper over coffee at Greenbelt festival and said he saw what I was doing with CMS was in the front end of the curve but he was more focused on the early adopters and early majority, which was really helpful. In the book *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*, Richard Twiss researches a movement of contextual practice in First Nations people in North America and he uses this theory to make sense of that.<sup>19</sup> As an aside, I found it interesting in that case that so many of the innovators went on to study, to make sense of what they were doing and offered thought leadership to the wider movement.

The second fragment which is also coded into a diagram is the two loops theory which has proved very helpful. It comes from Margaret Wheatley (again) and Deborah Frieze, first sketched out in their book, *Walk Out Walk On*.<sup>20</sup> Tim Soerens and Tina reference it in their video conversation in this edition of *ANVIL*. It is how an emergent system grows out of an established system. Contrary to a theory of ever-evolving change, this suggests something more disruptive that is about a new paradigm. All systems stagnate, things die and new ones emerge. We all recognise this process. Pioneers engage in practice connecting and building communities that are able to develop into the emergent system. Some people are helped to make the move across from the old to the new by paying attention to that transition point and working as transition guides. Others simply don't want to make that move and are wedded to the established. There is not space here to build on it but see the footnote for some links. They all include versions of the diagram.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Reframing Religious Life*, (Slough: St Pauls) 132.

<sup>16</sup> Joan Chittister, *Fire in these Ashes*, 165.

<sup>17</sup> Diarmuid O'Murchu, 131.

<sup>18</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion\\_of\\_innovations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_innovations)

<sup>19</sup> Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys* (Lisle: IVP, 2025).

<sup>20</sup> Deborah Frieze and Margaret Wheatley, *Walk Out Walk On* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Article: <https://visiblenetworklabs.com/2024/08/16/what-is-the-two-loops-model/>

## Small worlds

Small world theory comes from the study of networks and how they work in practice. Often, we assume that networks operate through every member connecting to every member. But in practice this never happens. What actually happens is that people connect to a relatively small number of people (their small world). But as long as that small group has one or two people who also connect to people in the wider network in another small group, it's only one step removed to reach anyone else in the network through the connector. This is how most networks work – a mix of dense and sparse connections rather than everyone linked to everyone. Those people who focus externally are connectors. Most people are quite happy existing in a small world but connectors often hold an astonishing level of connectivity across small worlds. Six degrees of separation works because these people create huge shortcuts and it's often these connectors that people start thinking about unconsciously when looking for that connection.

Another interesting insight from the theory is that energy is multiplied in the network through connection with difference. Energy tends to dissipate if you have too much sameness so movements need clear purpose but connection with difference. You can look it up to find out more.<sup>22</sup> There is a good summary in Clay Shirky's book, *Here Comes Everybody*.<sup>23</sup>

This led me to ponder the kinds of gifts or people that make movements function well. We might ponder what the equivalent of Paul's fivefold ministry in Ephesians might be for movements. To save us some work, Dustin Benac did some research into two movements in North America, one of which was the Parish Collective, and published it in his book, *Adaptive Church*.<sup>24</sup> He draws a diagram following his research of six modes of leadership or being-with that he reflects are at play in movement teams. They are: champion, catalyst, connector-convenor, guide, caretaker and surveyor. It was obvious to me that movements need champions, catalysts and connectors but perhaps the roles of caretaker, guide and surveyor are less visible but equally important. They are not necessarily six different persons in a team but more like six things that need attention.

## Fringe dwelling

Perhaps it might help to add an example on movements from the Bible as a last fragment. In *Fringe Dweller* together with David Cotterill, we look at 40 encounters in the Gospels between Jesus and those at the fringes.<sup>25</sup> One of the things I have pondered since it has been published is that Jesus is catalysing movements at the fringes or at least it seems that way. Let me give three examples.

The first is amongst tax collectors. This is perhaps the most surprising and I had not thought about this before. To most people the idea that a mission movement could take place among a group who were seen to be collaborators with the Romans is inconceivable. But Jesus calls Levi-Matthew to follow him. He has seen and names something. It turns out that Levi-Matthew is a networker and connector who throws parties and invites Jesus into that space round the table. Zacchaeus is a tax collector who joins the movement and it is possible that it is through the network of tax collectors he has heard Jesus is coming so goes out to meet him. Tax collectors are present in the crowds: for example, when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son. Jesus has a reputation for hanging out with tax collectors and sinners so it is a regular thing that they were around. Levi-Matthew becomes one of the apostles so an insider to that group is in the leadership of the wider movement as it grows.

Video: <https://walkoutwalkon.net/walking-out-on/video-two-loops-theory-of-change/>  
Presentation which also maps the 'name, connect, nourish, illuminate' onto it: <https://annarborpublicpower.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Two-Loops-Guide.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> This wikipedia entry is pretty comprehensive: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small-world\\_experiment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small-world_experiment)

<sup>23</sup> Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* (London: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Dustin Benac, *Adaptive Church* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022) chapter 7.

<sup>25</sup> Jonny Baker and David Cotterill *Fringe Dweller* (Getsidetracked, 2026) – available from [www.getsidetracked.co](http://www.getsidetracked.co)

The second is Samaritans. Jesus is intentional about connecting with them. In the encounter with the woman at the well, he is invited to stay for two days in Samaria. Rather than invite them to Jerusalem to learn the Jewish faith (which due to history would have been too traumatising), he begins an insider movement inside the Samaritan religion with the woman at the well as an apostle to the Samaritans. It takes time to develop the work and on one occasion when Jesus tries to visit a Samaritan village, he is turned away. It takes a long time to change the disciples' perceptions from wanting to rain down fire from heaven to seeing that God is at work in the Samaritans beginning a mission movement. One of the ten healed from leprosy in the borderlands between Israel and Samaria is a Samaritan who goes to his people to share good news. In a piece of thought leadership Jesus reframes the perception of Samaritans in the story of the good Samaritan. By the time we get to Acts, Samaria is named as one of the areas of the Spirit's activity that the apostles will join in with as they follow the Spirit's becoming across borders.

A third is the mission movement in the Decapolis on the other side of the lake. The man from Gerasa freed from his occupation by Legion is sent to be an apostle to his own people in Gentile Syria rather than go back with Jesus to be a disciple in the Jewish culture and religion. Jesus circles back there after the encounter in Sidon and Tyre with the Canaanite woman whose daughter is healed. (Perhaps she becomes an apostle to the Canaanites and a movement starts in Lebanon too?) When he arrives, there are 4,000 people gathered so the man from Gerasa has been quite the apostle, it turns out. And a movement is underway on the other side of the lake.



Clearly there are a lot of gaps in the stories so we are left to puzzle over this but what I take away from Jesus' movement-catalysing ministry is the need to be intentional, to get out of the comfort zone, to be with those who are pushed to the fringes and notice where God is at work and who God is calling. The key to the movement seems to be those indigenous leaders who are insiders in their culture, who become apostles to their own people, whom Jesus comes back to from time to time to encourage and do some teaching with, but he largely leaves them to get on with it. And he stops them from getting too much of his own culture in the process, which would be very easy to do.

## Keep moving

I have been revisiting the notion of movements for two reasons. One is that in CMS, the strategic direction is to catalyse and collaborate in mission movements round the world in response to discerning where God is calling CMS to participate in God's mission at the edges. The second is that we have launched Aspen as a spread-out ecclesial community. As discussed elsewhere in this issue of *ANVIL*, this is a response to what God is calling us to in this season of the movement that has emerged of mission in post-Christian Britain and other contexts over the last 30 years. We are in a new season of emergence. Things never seem to stay still but keep moving. These fragments have been extremely helpful to us in our conversations, thinking and practice.



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# The Lord gave me brothers: a Franciscan story of life in community

By Brother Ade Green OFM Cap

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## St Francis and his brothers and sisters

In his final testament, dictated not long before he died, St Francis of Assisi spoke with a more reflective tone than you find in his earlier writings. Here, rather than exhortation we find encouragement, acceptance rather than frustration. Here, the sons and daughters of St Francis finally hear a Francis who has become the founder of a community, a role he had so struggled to accept. His testament was a last word to those who had also 'left the world' inspired by this remarkable man of Assisi.<sup>1</sup>

In this testament we hear St Francis telling his own story and acknowledging with profound gratitude the action of God in the decisions he made. After remembering the lepers who so inspired him, the priests whose human frailties he understood and whose vocation he deeply revered, the Scriptures for which he had such great care, and the Church for which he had worked tirelessly, Francis turns to the brothers, and he utters a phrase that has the power to continually knock us back on our heels when we get a little too sure of ourselves. He says, "Il Signore mi diede dei frati," that is, "The Lord gave me brothers."<sup>2</sup>

Francesco Bernadone, a fun-loving and somewhat raucous young man, enthroned as the 'King of the Party' in Assisi, dreamed of fame and fortune: his desire was to become a knight and be immortalised in song. A failure to reach this dream plunged the young Francis into a deep and despairing depression: we are told that he spent the best part of a year recovering, mostly under his blanket.<sup>3</sup> He had become isolated, his health was fragile, and hope was a far-off thing.

After a while he began to do something that would become a pattern in his life, whenever troubled or depressed: he spent time in the beautiful Italian countryside. Time spent with nature began to revive his drooping spirit. It was during these moments that he encountered a leper and was moved by their plight.<sup>4</sup> He began to explore the margins, to leave behind the

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<sup>1</sup> Francis of Assisi, "Testament", in *Francis of Assisi: The Saint Volume 1 of: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, JA Wayne Hellmann and William J Short, (New York: New City Press, 1999), 124–127.

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

<sup>3</sup> Thomas of Celano, "The First Life of Saint Francis", in Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (eds) *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volume 1: The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999).

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

lure of fame and fortune that is so often the empty promise of the city, and he began to spend time in churches praying, as he puts it in "Testament", with 'great simplicity'.<sup>5</sup>

It was at one of these churches, San Damiano, which at the time was much more secluded than it is today, where Francis had his first deeply mystical experience, setting him on the path where he would later receive the gift of brothers. Knelt in front of the Byzantine cross of San Damiano, Francis heard Christ speak, giving him a mission, saying, "Go and rebuild My Church which you see is falling into ruin."<sup>6</sup> Francis, who was often impetuous, and at times quite literal, took this to mean the church in which he knelt, so he did just that: he rebuilt San Damiano. As he lay towards the end of his life, dictating his last testament, he would have been able to see that this was not quite what the Lord had meant, but in any case, this venture was the humble start to something that would have much deeper and broader influence – the Franciscan Community.

It is a principle of Franciscan spirituality that St Francis, and St Clare of Assisi, as founders of the Franciscan Community, are exemplars. The form of the Franciscan life that we aspire to is as much the lives of these two extraordinary people as it is the words written in our Rule.<sup>7</sup> It is generally true that those who become Franciscans, in whatever state of life, are inspired to do so by the lives of St Francis and St Clare and other Franciscans. It is not really an idea that attracts us, but the possibility of the wholeness and holiness made visible in their lives. My own attraction to life as a Franciscan friar was no different.

## In the footsteps of St Francis

I hope it is not too bold a claim to make that I discovered in my own life resonances of the life of Francesco Bernadone. My most significant early encounter with him was through the biography written by G.K. Chesterton. It will always be the case that a biography written about such a historical figure as St Francis will say as much about the author as the subject, and there are numerous versions of St Francis on offer in the multitude of books. However, the person I met in Chesterton's *St Francis of Assisi*,<sup>8</sup> was one I could identify with on many levels. I too had become somewhat depressed in my youth, I dreamed of finding fame, I enjoyed a party (sometimes a little too much), and although faith was present, I had not reached a point where it guided my actions. We seemed to have a good deal in common.

I too had always felt a deeper sense of reality, truth, and love in the beautiful countryside of Devon and on the shores of Cornwall where I grew up. My experiences of supporting people with severe and enduring mental health difficulties had led me to start to recognise the injustices of many of our world's systems, which create desperate suffering for so many. I had discovered meditation in my early 20s and found myself spending time in holy places in simple prayer. At 28 years old, I did something I would have thought unthinkable just a few years earlier: I went to church.

I had grown up in a Christian household: my mother an Anglican from a long line of Methodists, and my father a reluctant Catholic. When my dad became a little less reluctant, we committed ourselves as a family to the Catholic tradition. This is where my faith formation happened. In my teens I drifted away from church life because the community I experienced amongst my friends seemed more authentic than the community I experienced in my parish. I had not renounced anything, nor had I lost faith: I just felt more accepted and understood.

I had been exploring spiritualities for a number of years, spending time in various holy places before plodding my way nervously towards the Church of the Holy Cross parish in Bedminster, Bristol, where I experienced at that mass something I had been unknowingly searching for, and in that hour or so realised it was not something, but someone. I experienced the presence

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<sup>5</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Testament*.

<sup>6</sup> Celano, *Life of Saint Francis*.

<sup>7</sup> *The Constitutions of the Friars Minor Capuchin* (Rome: General Curia of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *St Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923).

of Jesus, I remembered him, I had come home. It was not too long after this that I began to consider this thing I was hearing about – vocation.

I had heard a bit about vocation as I grew up. In fact, my parents were keen that I find a path in life that had more to do with my heart than my head. Unfortunately, at school we had career advice rather than vocational discernment. What we wanted to do with our lives, we were told, was much more to do with what we would like to be rather than who we were discovering we are. Vocation is all about who we are. Coming from the Latin *vocare* – to be called – it signifies a call that, to the Christian, is from God, and is discerned through the whole of our being, the things that attract us, the desires we sense growing in ourselves, and most of all the person we are becoming in relationship to Christ Jesus.

As I became more aware that who I am is in some mysterious way entangled with the path of life that God hopes for me, a freedom began to move in my life. I did not need to be shackled to the expectations of the human society in which I lived and moved: capital, savings, success, were not the measure of a fulfilled life, but that I endeavour to work, live, move on the earth in the way that God has intended from the very beginning. Discovering one's vocation is to take another step into the culture and community of Christ.

It was on one of my explorations, visiting a Capuchin Franciscan friary that I came across Chesterton's *St Francis of Assisi*, began to see and hear in myself attractions and desires to learn to live a Franciscan life and, looking back, it was a fairly easy decision to "join up". In the end it felt a quite natural thing to do, and I was significantly encouraged by the fact that when I told my family and friends my intentions, no one seemed particularly surprised.

So, after a year or so of visiting, and discerning, and after assessments of mental, social and physical health, I was accepted into the first stages of life in a religious order. I had followed the footsteps of St Francis, treading out a path in literature, community life, and the brothers I met along the way, and found myself knocking on the door of the friary with a few bags ready to "join up".

## A less common question

Often when people find out that I am a member of a religious order, have promised to live my life according to the Rule of the Friars Minor (the official name of the Franciscans) in obedience, chastity and without anything of my own, the questions that come next are mostly around why I would join, what happened to lead me to make that choice, and how it all unfolded. We all, that is those who have discovered their vocation – and this includes married and single life as well as religious life and priesthood – have a story to tell and this story is important and frequently full of colour and energy. However, there is another story to tell and one I dare say is more valuable and enriching. It is that one that tells the story of why we stay.

There is a well trodden path towards integration into a community, and those who have walked it have left signposts and way-markers. There is a great deal of wisdom to be found in the formation processes of religious orders. These formation processes have developed over a long period of time to provide clear guidance on discernment and incorporation. They tell one side of that narrative, it is a formal description of the story of those people who have discovered a way of life and a form of community in which they hope to be accepted.

In general, the formation process begins with an aspirancy, a period of expressing an interest, and when the candidate is then deemed ready, they enter a year-long postulancy. This year is about asking the question, "Is this a life and community I want to get to know better?" If this question is answered positively by both sides, the postulant and the order, the postulant then becomes a novice. The novitiate is again a year long. This time the novice is received into the order proper, and for us Capuchin Franciscans it is the first time we wear the habit of the Order and are known as Brother. This year is spent living a more intense version of the life of the congregation or order, prayerfully taking small steps in beginning to live the charismatic life as expressed in the day-to-day activities.

Following on from the novitiate year, the individual is presented with the opportunity to take the Evangelical Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience for a temporary period. This post-novitiate period can last from three to nine years, by which time the Temporarily Professed Brother or Sister is expected to decide as to whether they will take Perpetual or Solemn Vows, a promise made to God and the community to live in this community for the rest of one's life. Now, this might sound fairly straightforward, but the story within the story is one that is often winding, confusing, surprising and painful.

Again, we might look at the life of Br Francis, as it offers us insights into the experience of becoming a member of a community. It is true to say that Francis did not set out with the intention to begin a small community of brothers, let alone found one of the most significant religious orders. His intention was personal and was to fulfil the mission that Jesus had given him in San Damiano. It does not seem to be the case that he had any notable feelings against bringing together a band of brothers either: it just did not occur to him. His conversion of life was something that had happened to him, and the idea that others might want to share in it did not enter his mind, but it did happen.

Following the experience at San Damiano, Francis was changed to such a degree that many in Assisi, including his own family, assumed he had gone mad. He was often overwhelmed by joy, he sang the praises of God wherever he went, the selfish boy had become a man of service, and this had taken his friends and neighbours by surprise. The enthusiasm for his new life seemed to send sparks out from him, setting fire to some latent kindling in others, and it was not too long before local men, both cleric and lay, began to seek his company and eventually stay with him. Through these first years of new life, friends and neighbours began to see a divine cause and took him more seriously.

In the space of 10 years, the fledgling Franciscan community was approved by Papal seal, gifted dwellings, sought after for preaching and blessing, and had expanded into the thousands. It is in this time we begin to see Francis struggle with both the pressure of leadership and the vicissitudes of life lived with others.<sup>9</sup> We can also see how the brothers struggled to form themselves into a community and looked more and more to Francis to accept the mantle of leadership. On both sides this struggle would manifest in disappointment, confusion, anger and depression. The realities of a committed community life emerged and required something different of the members.

My experience of becoming a member of the Franciscan community follows much the same pattern. A great enthusiasm created the necessary wave on which I rode the first moments of aspirancy, questioning and formation. I, in a certain sense, fell in love. I fell in love with the possibilities offered by this conversion to a new way of life. It was exciting, thrilling, filled with hope and joy. However, as one matures it becomes more apparent that falling in love is not enough – we can't fall forever. What comes next, as anyone married for a good number of years can verify, is a learning to love in the midst of the everyday, when things are not exciting or thrilling, when the future is more uncertain, even quite bleak. How did this happen in my life? Much the same way that it did in Francis's life.

There seems to be a moment in the lives of all of us that commit ourselves to a community, whether that be the partnership of married life, a fraternity, a church, that enables us to make that next step into a loving relationship. For Francis it came in a vision of a Seraph on Mount La Verna where he asked Christ Jesus to allow him to experience the love that had led Jesus to the cross. Why did he ask for this? Because his community, the community that held him as a founder and leader, were driving him crazy. There was a great deal of tension in the order around its true character. Some believed that it was necessary to own buildings and to create structures of governance akin to the older religious orders: others wanted to keep to a strict poverty and itinerancy. There were brothers who just did not like each other. There was intrigue and politics. In short, it was a human community with human problems, and Francis

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this subject see David Flood, *Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Movement* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2017).

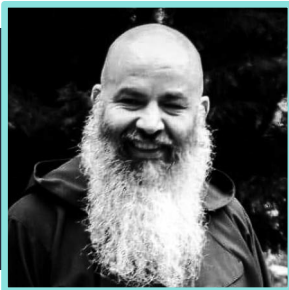
was frustrated because he had shown them how to overcome these. But the Lord had given him brothers and then given him the experience of the love necessary to be their brother.

Once I had settled into life as a brother of the order, the wave of enthusiasm that had enabled me to navigate my way to that point began to subside. I too began to experience the everyday life of community with its politics, tensions, disagreements. So, I was faced with a choice, the same choice as Francis, the same choice as everyone who has found themselves in that moment of commitment. I had to ask myself, in the words of The Clash, “Should I stay or should I go”. In the end I discovered, with the help of the story of St Francis and his Testament, the only reason to stay with the brothers I found myself among, that the Lord had given them to me, and me to them.

## The greatest gifts

Community life is at different times exciting, bleak, frustrating, full of joy, deeply enriching. It is also true that, as Thomas Merton puts it, “We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another.”<sup>10</sup> We are made for relationship, and this is manifest in our tendency towards community life. Wherever we find our enthusiasm leading us, it is vital to remember that we will also find disappointment and be often disillusioned and disheartened. However, there is a remedy for this, and it is Christ Jesus himself and the love by which he loved.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate act of giving and the greatest of all gifts. God was not satisfied with this though and continues to give at all times and in all places. The gift of God’s self happens, amongst other ways, in the relationships we have with the diversity of created beings every day of our lives. So, the only *good* reason to stay, to remain in the midst of all that can seem unsatisfying and at times painful, is that the Lord gives us to each other and in doing so gives us himself.



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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955).



# Aspen: a new community

By **Cathy Ross**

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## The incubation

Why a new community and how do you go about setting it up? These were questions in my mind as I participated in the beginnings of this new thing. Jonny Baker was the initiator as he had been incubating the idea of a dispersed ecclesial community for several years. However, he is wise enough to know that ideas are best incubated and developed in community and through relationships. I watched and learned as Jonny took this forward. Here is my perspective on the story of Aspen.

## The beginnings

Jonny had been talking about this idea for a while. We knew that many of our students were sad to leave studying with us and really wanted to remain connected in some way. Often, when they go to or remain in their various contexts, as pioneers, they feel alone or misunderstood by the church. They craved companionship, support and other people to share ideas, try out new things, be brave. Jonny was acutely aware that many pioneers around the country, and even globally, were feeling like this and he was keen to help them connect together. So, the idea of a community of dispersed pioneers was born.

## Getting started

At our annual gathering, The Assembly 2024, we presented this idea to those present to ask if people wanted this and there was an overwhelming yes to designing it and bringing it back to the group the following year. We put out a call for any who were interested to be on a kind of founding group. About a dozen people committed to this and we started with online conversations to discuss together: purpose and charism (our particular gifting), what does it mean to be a sodality or dispersed community, what might its rhythm look like and finally how to function in practice. I experienced the art of asking a good question as these were vital to catalyse this process and to get us going. It is amazing what can emerge when people are together sharing in reading the Bible, praying, attentive listening, throwing out all sorts of ideas. The Miro boards were soon full of great suggestions that were distilled for further reflection and percolation time. Membership, organising, structure and governance, capacity, offering a library of gifts, hopes and fears were discussed in these early conversations. These ideas were then sent to a wider group of people for feedback and input. There was a lot to think about but amazingly it did not seem overwhelming as we were planning this together.

We got into these discussions in different ways. For example, we tried to imagine who might like to join Aspen, what would be appealing and helpful, what level of belonging they might want and what they would not want. We had great fun dreaming up all sorts of avatars but quite quickly we could see certain values emerging such as hospitality, prayer, diversity, a

place to call home. We were all certain that we wanted belonging to be 'light touch' and for the community to be life-giving and enriching, not another burden to add to busy lives.

Already the magic was present – there was certainly something delightful about these online conversations – ideas were flowing, laughter was plentiful, hope was present – something new was emerging. Our next step was to try to pull it together in a two-day residential.

## **Pulling it together**

Several of the founding group met at a former student's lovely property that she kindly allowed us to use. One cooked superb meals for us and this certainly helped the creative process! I think that food and friendship were two of the magic ingredients for getting this community started, as well as down time for walks, swims and chats.

It could have felt overwhelming – there was a lot to sort out! We brought with us all our ideas from the three conversations and the resulting feedback as well, and we knew that by the end of these two days we needed a road map and a name for this new community. It happened. Looking back, it is hard to say exactly how but, without sounding super spiritual, I think God's Spirit was in it and helped us to redeem the time. By the time we left, we had a name, a purpose, a charism, values, a rhythm and a plan for differing levels of belonging or membership.

We then shared it with a wider group to gain people's reactions and insights and suggestions for change. The response was overwhelmingly positive such that very little got changed from our original design. This felt very graced.

You can read all of this in our founding Aspen document which is included in this issue of ANVIL. We left with more work to do – to start a group that can animate the community, think more about governance and safeguarding, determine our relationship with CMS, prepare for the launch, which took place in Glasgow in November 2025 at our annual Assembly gathering. I left feeling energised, excited and hopeful. Here was a community who was called to pioneering mission, determined to keep that front and centre in our lives, committed to a strong relationship with Jesus as the pioneer of our faith.

It also struck me that this community was birthed in creativity – thanks in large part to Jonny's initiative and way of leading us into things. This resulted in our having more fun, more relational exchanges and more ideas than when we sit around a table in a more formal fashion. I guess there is a place for those kinds of meetings, but after so many years of experiencing this kind of 'Dreaming Space' at CMS, I seriously wonder why we do not allow more room for fun, play, creativity and imagination in these planning spaces. One of our mantras in pioneer training is "Everyone has a piece of the wisdom"<sup>1</sup> and this was at play here. We could all bring who we are to the conversation and it was heard and celebrated. I believe that as this was birthed in creativity, with the help of God's creative and life-giving Spirit, so Aspen will continue to flourish and develop in creative ways and not get stuck.

## **What's in a name?**

Lots of people ask me, why Aspen? Good question and it did seem to come as a surprise. We played around exploring various names and Aspen emerged as the favourite among us. When we did further research into this name, we discovered how entirely suitable it is for our community. The Aspen tree is a pioneer species and its resilient, shimmering leaves could symbolise a kind of link between heaven and earth with a strong relational underground network. Loads of resonances here! This confirmed our choice of name.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Benet McKinney, *Sharing Wisdom: A process for Group Decision Making*, (Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1987), 13.

## Who we are: charism and values

You can read the Aspen document at your leisure but let me highlight a few important aspects here. The purpose is clearly linked to our charism and values.

*Our shared purpose is to connect and accompany changemakers, pioneers, fringe dwellers, and midwives of the new to join in God's unfolding movement to heal and renew all things.* This would be an excellent definition of mission. It also points to a few things such as newness and change so as not to become mired in what can sometimes seem to be the stuckness of the church. It is a call to healing, renewal, mending.

Our purpose is linked to our charism of newness, context (we say context is everything at CMS – well, nearly everything), freedom and diversity. These are all equally important but I do want to highlight diversity here. Diversity and global perspectives are essential for us and close to our hearts. Our colleague Harvey Kwiyani reminds us that “diversity is the new normal”<sup>2</sup> and in our charism we picked up the phrase, “a fellowship of the unlike” from former CMS General Secretary, Simon Barrington Ward. Although slightly quaint language, I love this concept. It comes from the story he told of Ibribina and the community she had envisaged. Ibribina was a prophetic woman leader and trader, who lived at the end of the 19th century in Niger. She had been filled with the Holy Spirit in a mission church. Subsequently she learned how to read from the local CMS missionary so that she could read, translate and interpret the Gospels. Barrington Ward wrote,

She saw in ‘Jesu’ Krisi’ a new love, a new all-pervasive Spirit power, the possibility of a new people, a fellowship of the unlike, bonding together all tribes, all ethnic groups, both black and white, into a new society. Here the rich would care for the poor and the strong for the weak in what was to be a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>3</sup>

This would be my dream for Aspen, where there is a fellowship of the unlike and all are cared for equally. This resonates with CMS’s vision of being involved in mission at the edges, something that many pioneers are called to. Indeed, CMS’s purpose is to make disciples of Jesus at the edges. Another former General Secretary of CMS, John Taylor, was a fan of the edges. He wrote, “If you are concerned with movement and growth in a Church or in a society, look to the fringes. Watch the things that are pushing out on the edge.”<sup>4</sup> We believe that Aspen will flourish best on the edges.

Our values are linked to our charism and are ubuntu, generosity, attentiveness and creativity. Again, you can read about these more fully in the Aspen document but let me just comment briefly on the African value of ubuntu, “I am because we are.” We are not who we are meant to be without one another. Belonging is made real and relational through mutual participation and we are diminished if others are excluded. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote evocatively on ubuntu as follows, “We belong in a bundle of life. We say ‘a person is a person through other people.’ It is not ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather; ‘I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.’”<sup>5</sup> This is a powerful vision for the Aspen community.

It is worth noting how the Aspen document explores how we will know if we are exhibiting these values. For each value, there is a series of suggestions that will provide evidence of whether we are practising our values. For example, we will know if we are practising ubuntu if we welcome both friend and stranger and help everyone to feel at home. We will know if we are not practising ubuntu if people feel ignored, rejected or invisible. I find this approach very helpful and practical.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Kwiyani, *Multicultural Kingdom, Ethnic Diversity, Mission and the church*, (London: SCM, 2020), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Barrington-Ward, “My Pilgrimage in Mission”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, April 1999, 61.

<sup>4</sup> John V Taylor, *CMS Newsletter*, No. 285, September 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, (London: Ebury Press, 1999), 34.

## Rhythm

Our rhythm is intended to be light touch and manageable. There is a helpful review document if you wish to use that to discern, with a companion or group, how you might want to learn and grow. We offer a monthly prayer, micro-liturgy and reflection on the first Monday of every month, online for 45 minutes, led by Aspen members. There is a monthly newsletter welcoming new members, giving info on various events and other opportunities to connect. Members are encouraged to be part of a murmuration – a small group you connect with. We have a directory where you can see where other members are in the world so you can connect with them if you would like to. There will be an annual, in-person gathering for those who wish to attend. Nothing is required, all is possible. We encourage you to self-organise.

## What next?

I am excited to see how Aspen will develop. There are still things to put in place and we are learning as we go along. Much will be determined by you, the members, and we are excited to see what happens as we grow. Let me conclude with how one person described what they were longing for in the design phase of Aspen, “A sodal community that awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.”

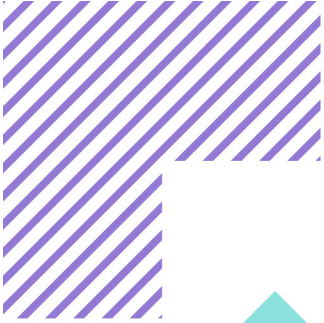
## Growing slowly

We have been advised by others who are wiser and more experienced than us in these kinds of communities that we need to take our time, to grow slowly. There is not yet a website or any public space for Aspen but I am sure that will come in due course. We’re just taking one step at a time. If you’d like to know more, do get in touch by emailing [aspen@churchmissionsociety.org](mailto:aspen@churchmissionsociety.org).

You can also download a copy of the **ASPEN Community PDF** at [churchmissionsociety.org/aspen-doc](http://churchmissionsociety.org/aspen-doc) to learn a little more about the ASPEN Community.



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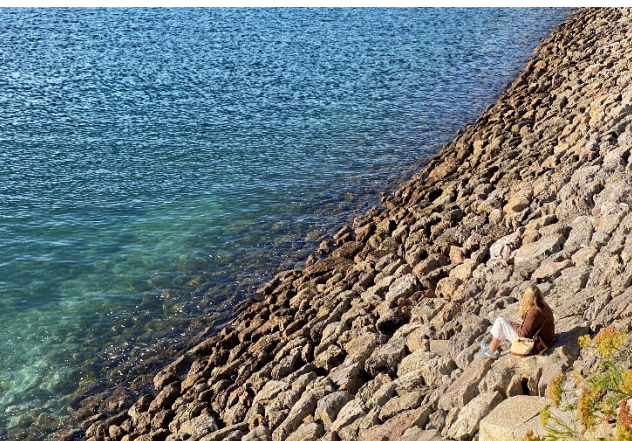


# Here I am: prayerful presence

By Ian Adams

## Take a moment. Turn aside. Breathe deep.

As pioneers we have a natural inclination and capacity to move quickly and boldly, to do what we dream, to make things happen, to bring change. This, of course, is all potentially very good. What a gift. What a task. What a privilege!



But to enable such action to be truly good and holy, perhaps the most important first step we can make as *changemakers, pioneers, fringe dwellers and midwives of the new* is to commit ourselves to a stance of ever-deepening prayerful presence; to being humbly attentive to God and to the people with whom we are living and working.

If we are to *join in God's unfolding movement to heal and renew all things*, that unfolding, healing and renewal must first begin to take shape in us.

Prayerful presence as a stance – indeed as a way of being – cannot be achieved quickly. Nor can it be completed once and for all. It is a daily task, and a lifetime's work. But thankfully that task and work is not just down to us.

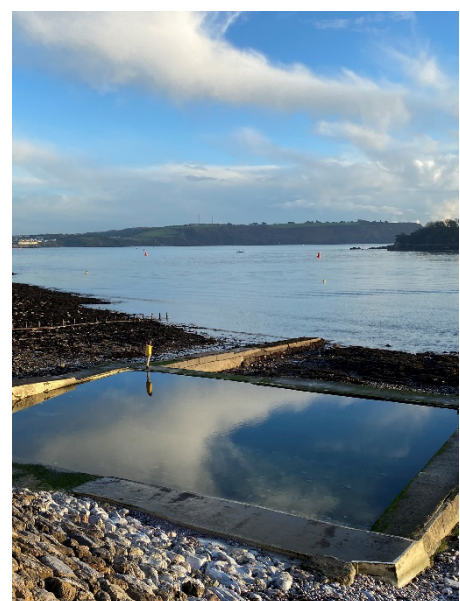
## Land, sea and sky-scapes open up slowly.

We need to settle into a place with humility and curiosity, to begin to see what truly is. The attention required takes time, persistence and, I suggest, love.

This realisation came to me a few years ago when, for the first time in my life, I lived in a rural setting. Repeatedly walking the same paths in woods, through fields, by the estuary, at either end of the working day, in all seasons, I gradually began to notice what I had not seen before, and to sense my belonging there.

I've since learned that the same pattern is true of urban contexts. The photographs for this article were all taken in and around Firestone Bay in Plymouth Sound. Most days when I am here, I will come to the bay. I'll get a coffee, greet people I am getting to know, walk, sit and take photos. Like any city it has a gritty quality, but also great beauty.

And it has become for me a great teacher. Drawing me into slowing down, into noticing, into enjoying the place, into thanking the Creator



God, and into celebrating the people who gather there. It has become for me a place of prayerful presence, encouraging me to continue to nurture that stance wherever I am.

### How might we make prayerful presence our way of being?

Here is one possible pattern, drawing on a resource recently created for the CMS movement, addressing the possibility of prayerful presence: *Pray in the Holy Spirit: 5 Principles for a Mission Spirituality*.



## Prayerful presence

Usually and understandably, prayer begins with our words. Our own experience needs to be brought to God in prayer. Words of sorrow and regret, words of anger and disappointment, words of yearning and praise. All belong. And they are vital. We need to articulate and voice our experience to God who loves us. This is the beginning of prayer.

But a vital new possibility will emerge if, having spoken our words, we can allow ourselves then to become faithfully silent. To let go of our words. To step, fall or let go into prayerful presence, seeking to become present to God who is always present to us. To embody that repeating biblical stance “Here I am”, with open hearts and open hands.

Prayerful presence is the vital starting point for the nurturing of mission and community, a stance to which, I suggest, we must continually return. This takes practice and persistence.

**Reflection:** *How might I begin or deepen a practice of prayerful presence? What might that look like?*

## God's work, our assent

As the pattern of voicing words and then letting them go becomes more familiar to us, we may encounter a growing realisation that the work of prayer is actually, primarily, the movement of the Holy Spirit within us. It's not just down to us.

Recall what it's like to swim in the sea. Our hesitant entrance into the water, the cold hitting us, our gasped words, our attempts just to breathe, and then to stay afloat.

But gradually we may realise that the sea – both vast and intimate – is doing the real work, not us. And if we can allow that to be so, we float, held in water, bathed in shimmering light.

If we explore this as a motif for the spiritual life, imagine with me an invitation to enter into the deep ocean of God's love. Each step from shore into sea requires our assent and commitment.

But through that assent, in God's grace, change happens. A gradual deepening of love for God and for the people with whom we are working. This change is being accomplished in us by God.

**Reflection:** *What might be the changes, however apparently small, that God is bringing about in me at this time? How might I step deeper “from shore into sea”?*





## Prayerful guides

Slowly, over a long period of time, the sense may grow that, in the grace of God, we are undergoing some quiet and profound transformation, becoming closer to the likeness of Jesus Christ, both in our prayer and in our action.

On this journey towards transformation, we all benefit from the help of prayerful and wise guides. The experience, prayer and company of fellow pilgrims, past and present, can be amazing gifts to us as we seek to deepen in love for God and for people.

The Aspen community is already proving to be a rich source of encouragement in our sharing of experiences and in our prayers for each other.

The CMS Presence project is similarly inciting deeper faith, hope and love, with a particular emphasis on nurturing the life of prayerful presence.

And the practice of spiritual direction and other means of personal accompaniment are particularly valuable, enabling us to draw on the wisdom of prayerful guides, and a means by which our true guide, the Holy Spirit, may work within us.

*Reflection:* Who are my pilgrim guides? Might it be good for me to explore spiritual direction or similar accompaniment?

## Intercession

From a place of prayerful presence our engagement with our contexts will be more profound, shaping our actions – and our prayers.

Intercessory prayer has a vital role to play in our mission spirituality, helping us to discern God's presence and activity in our world, giving a vital outward momentum to our prayerful journey.

As pioneers of prayerful presence I suggest that it is important that we commit to pray with and for the edges on and around which we live and work.

It is important too to recognise that our shared prayers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are a vital element in the earthly-heavenly struggle for righteousness and the coming of God's kingdom. Every prayer is part of that struggle.

One of my pilgrim guides – the 14th-century English mystic Julian of Norwich – gives us this powerful insight regarding intercessory prayer:

“God's love is so great that he regards us as partners in his good work; and so he moves us to pray for what it pleases him to do.”

Let us pray for what it pleases God to do where we are!

*Reflection:* How might understanding prayer as partnering in God's good work be a gift? How might I pray with and for the people and places in which I live and work?



## Kind and Curious

In the CMS Presence project we have learned that as Christians we share many common experiences in the nature of encounter with God in prayer. We have also learned that the prayer experiences of other Christians may differ from our own.



Thankfully, the Holy Spirit is not confined by our preferences or limitations. Jesus Christ always meets us where we are, but always draws us on. Our journeys will bear similarities with others', but each of us has a unique story, through which the Christ of the Emmaus Road seeks to engage with us.

'Jesus himself came near and went with them.' Luke 24:15

This recognition encourages us to nurture great love and respect for the prayer traditions of the Church over the centuries. It calls also for kindness and curiosity, generosity and humility from us when we encounter something not

familiar from our own tradition, as we seek to encourage each other in prayerful presence.

**Reflection:** *What have been my most helpful experiences in the practice of prayer? Is there another great prayer tradition of the Church that I might explore?*

## Here I am

A powerful story from Exodus may be a particular gift at this time.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." (Exodus. 3:1-4)



Much of our life and work seems to call us to the fringes of society and culture, even to be "beyond the wilderness". With Moses, and in the grace of God, may we have the courage to live with prayerful presence, to turn aside to the bushes of God's presence that are blazing all around us, and to embody the prayer "Here I am."



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# Common Grace Aotearoa: equipping the church for structural change

By Alex Johnston

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Great social movements of the past have often been shaped and led by people of faith: think of Dr King and the civil rights movement; Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect's long campaign to end slavery. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the spiritual leaders Te Whiti and Tohu coordinated mass non-violent resistance to colonisation at Parihaka that later influenced Gandhi and King.<sup>1</sup> The Christian Women's Temperance Union led the suffragette movement that made New Zealand the first country to grant women the right to vote in 1893. In more recent memory, theology students at St John's Theological College coordinated flotillas that resisted nuclear warships entering Auckland Harbour and famously carried a cross onto the rugby pitch during an All Blacks match to protest the Springbok tour during apartheid-era South Africa.

Common Grace Aotearoa seeks to build on this Christian heritage to equip and organise the church in New Zealand today – supporting those whom God is calling to step up into the mission field of transforming unjust structures. We were established in early 2023 to train, organise and mentor groups of people eager to learn why and how to transform unjust structures from a Christian perspective. As they learn by doing – in prayerful teams with supportive mentors – they develop the skills to organise and train their own communities, building the capacity of the wider church to participate in social movements for the common good.



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<sup>1</sup> Parihaka was a 19th-century Māori settlement in New Zealand that became a powerful symbol of peaceful resistance, when its prophet leaders Te Whiti o Rongorangi and Tohu Kākahi led their people in nonviolent civil disobedience against colonial land confiscation only to be met with the invasion of over 1,500 government troops in 1881. Te Whiti and Tohu were deeply shaped by early Christian missionary contact – they drew heavily on biblical stories to frame their philosophy of nonviolent resistance, and their methods of civil disobedience were said to have later influenced Gandhi and Dr King. < <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/te-ra-o-te-pahua-invasion-pacifist-settlement-parihaka> >

We started Common Grace Aotearoa out of a discipleship gap – one we recognised in our own experience and believe is present in many parts of the post-Christendom West. Most mainline denominations would have a stated missional tradition of ‘faith in the public sphere’. Missional commitments to ‘transforming unjust structures’ are enshrined in frameworks such as the Anglican Five Marks of Mission<sup>2</sup> and the Presbyterian Five Faces of Mission.<sup>3</sup> But in practice, we would suggest, many have far less confidence and competence in forming Christians to do this.

Church goers would be deeply familiar (if not always confident) with proclaiming the gospel, and churches are old hands at providing spaces for teaching and nurturing people in faith. Many, too, respond to human needs through local initiatives such as food banks, playgroups and homeless shelters. All crucial ways of outworking mission. But what of the call to transform unjust structures? Some churches may have set aside a sermon or two a year on social justice, or donate to missional organisations that work in international development or poverty alleviation. Perhaps historically a denomination might have had a social justice role or committee that could write policy submissions, and denominational leaders might put out statements into the ether and hope they make an impact.

Worthy as these are, these expressions feel increasingly insufficient in a world that is increasingly unstable. They don't equip the everyday church goer to address the structural causes of poverty, the industrial roots of environmental degradation, or the entanglement of land and law that has embedded colonial systems in lands such as Aotearoa New Zealand.

So the problem, as we see it, is that there are very few missional ‘containers’ for Christians to transform unjust structures as an expression of everyday faith, and even fewer spaces to be disciplined into doing so. The church is therefore not meeting its potential to alleviate injustice, make holistic disciples, or serve as a witness to the world. Common Grace Aotearoa seeks to step into this gap with a threefold mission: to achieve tangible change in Aotearoa's social and environmental injustices through strategic advocacy campaigns in the areas of climate change, inequality and indigenous rights; to equip local churches to be a gracious and compassionate voice in the public sphere; and to develop a generation of Christian leaders with a commitment to faith-driven advocacy and action.

## **Prophetic responses: speaking truth to power**

One way we've sought to build the church's capacity in systemic action is to act as a bridge between grassroots social movements and the slower-moving church institutions – drawing on trusted relationships with church leaders and the established networks of denominations to activate the church's voice with real impact.

In the area of Treaty relations, indigenous rights have come under sustained political pressure in recent years in New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> When the controversial Treaty Principles Bill was introduced that sought to redefine the rights guaranteed to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi, it demanded a structural response from the church. Common Grace was newly formed, led by two non-Māori, without perfect relationships or deep existing credibility in this space. But in conversation with key partners, we discerned a clear invitation to help mobilise the church to meet the moment.

<sup>2</sup> The Anglican Five Marks of Mission: <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/five-marks-of-mission/>

<sup>3</sup> The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand's five ‘faces’ of mission: <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/about-us>

<sup>4</sup> The Treaty of Waitangi – Te Tiriti o Waitangi – was an international Treaty signed in 1840 between the British Crown and over 500 Māori leaders that affirmed key rights of Māori tribal groupings' existing sovereignty, while allowing a limited form of government by Queen Victoria over the small settler population. It is a key constitutional document for New Zealand, but was later disregarded in law and policy and a colonial form of Western parliamentary sovereignty was imposed over Māori people and lands. Since the 1970s, civil resistance movements have secured key legal recognition of the Treaty and its principles in law as incremental moves towards Treaty reconciliation were conceded by successive governments.

Over 600 church leaders signed our open letter on the Treaty Principles Bill, attracting major coverage across all national news outlets, dominating headlines, and helping shift the narrative of what it was morally acceptable for the New Zealand government to support.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, this Easter, in response to legislation that would effectively criminalise rough sleeping and begging in New Zealand city centres, we worked with eight church denominations to hold a Palm Sunday overnight vigil opposite Parliament. Hundreds gathered for public worship and liturgy. The vigil was broadcast on breakfast television to the nation, and government ministers were compelled to respond.<sup>6</sup>



When the church is activated in its prophetic role – to speak truth to power – there is a genuine public space for Christian witness that not only holds decision-makers to account but articulates what God's kingdom values look like, and invites the wider public in.

## Equipping the local church for systemic action

While Common Grace initially sought to mobilise the 'activist edge' of the church, we have come to see that a significant part of our mission is inviting the mainstream 'centre church' into education and action. Where there might be one or two passionate justice advocates in a local church, if we can equip them – or their church leader – to bring the wider congregation through an accessible invitation to learn about an issue and have clear ways to respond, the uptake has been remarkable.

One way we have done so is by producing accessible, scalable resources for churches and small groups to help connect their faith to how the Treaty can be honoured in central and local government. Our 'Treaty 101' course has reached thousands of people across more than 350 churches of all denominations, equipping these groups for courageous conversations about honouring indigenous rights in New Zealand and to respond to key political moments.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>5</sup> See, for example: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/527412/treaty-principles-bill-440-christian-leaders-sign-open-letter-asking-mps-to-vote-no-440> had signed the letter at time of release. Subsequently over 600 leaders signed on.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/commongraceaotearoa/videos/sunday-nights-vigil-for-compassionate-solutions-to-homelessness-was-a-powerful-c/1129977082583123/>

<sup>7</sup> Belonging in This Land: Treaty Basics from a Christian Perspective, <https://www.treatyandbelonging.nz/>



Another has been to mobilise submissions on key policy proposals. We have been able to flood the Electricity Authority – the independent regulator of New Zealand's electricity sector – with submissions from adults and children after Sunday services, leading the Authority to agree to a full suite of consumer protection reforms rather than the more limited set proposed by power companies.<sup>8</sup> We delivered over 1,000 handwritten prayers and submissions on the Treaty Principles Bill and contributed over half the submissions to the government's draft climate action plan.

The mobilising capacity of the church at these key moments rests on the key social infrastructure of the Sunday service. There are few other spaces in New Zealand society where hundreds of locations across the country gather people of all backgrounds and generations, in person, every

week. In a fractured, online-heavy and highly individualised political culture, the church as a social organisation still holds enormous potential.

This is especially true given the somewhat unique demographic of the aging mainline denominations. During countrywide referendums on whether to disestablish Māori representation on local councils, activist groups whose networks oriented around urban, younger populations struggled to reach the people who consistently turn out to vote in New Zealand regions. We were among the few organisations capable of reaching that base – to educate and inform over 100 churches in referendum areas and counter the disinformation flooding their communities.

The church has also served wider social movements directly. During the national Hīkoi mō te Tiriti – the historic march for honouring New Zealand's founding Treaty – up to 100,000 people converged on Wellington, a city of 210,000. Over 20 churches offered to host and feed groups travelling down for the hīkoi, providing connection points that crossed cultures and social worlds in ways few other organisations could.

## Developing and discipling Christian leaders

Through working with small volunteer teams, both online and in person, Common Grace seeks to build community and equip emerging Christian leaders to find their vocation in social justice – developing the skills, character and confidence to lead advocacy campaigns as an expression of their faith.

Our campaign teams are the primary space where emerging activists learn the craft of advocacy by doing it. Teams meet weekly or fortnightly to progress campaigns together, with semi-regular training for volunteers. Leadership formation includes engaging church leaders, convening community gatherings, meeting with politicians, and learning to speak faithfully in the public square.

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<sup>8</sup> Electricity Authority, "[Updating and strengthening the consumer care guidelines](#)" (February 2024)

Recognising that some campaign team members lacked an intentional discipleship space beyond Sunday services, we developed a pilot discipleship programme. Alongside the campaign teams, the discipleship group meets online to explore the intersection of Christian faith and social justice – a space we have found is needed for those disillusioned with institutional expressions of church. The formation content helps participants grapple with theologies of justice and activism, supported by reflective practices, spiritual tools and in-person retreats. So far, these have fostered deep personal growth and unexpected community. Participants have demonstrated greater faith, hope and a clearer sense of calling – affirming the value of integrating discipleship with justice advocacy.

The great social movements of the past were not secular projects that Christians occasionally supported. In many cases, they were movements shaped, sustained and often led by people of faith who understood justice as inseparable from the gospel. That same calling has not expired. In a moment of deepening inequality, climate crisis and the unfinished work of honouring the Treaty of Waitangi, the church in Aotearoa New Zealand has a vital role to play – not as a chaplain to the status quo, but as an active participant in movements for lasting, structural change. Common Grace Aotearoa exists to help the church rise to that calling.



**Alex Johnston** is a co-director and co-founder of Common Grace Aotearoa. He currently lives in Whanganui, New Zealand, on the lands of Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi with his wife Genevieve and their two daughters.



# Kairos: a mission movement and community in Yorkshire North & East

By Liane Kensett

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The journey of the Kairos Movement began just before COVID-19 hit. Leslie Newton (chair of the Methodist Yorkshire North & East District), Andy Lindley (Methodist Presbyterian then located in York) and I (lay worker based in the Hull area) were wondering together what the Methodist Church across our district might look like in the future. Here, like Methodism in churches everywhere, the season of what has been is clearly coming to an end.

As Leslie reminds us in his book,<sup>1</sup> Methodism emerged in the 18th century with a real sense of movement as new communities started with very contextual small groups, and as this evolved it became a movement of real transformation. As with many things, we like to duplicate and then standardise what ‘works’ and over the years Methodism has become an institution, and then in many ways has become stuck. However, people within the institution have earmarked significant money to explore what new places might look like for new people, and so we decided to make use of that and start an exploration of what new thing might be waiting to grow in Yorkshire North & East.

The geography of Yorkshire North & East is varied: we have beautiful coast, forest, moorland, historic towns, industrial towns, many market towns and villages, the cities of York, Hull and Ripon. Each place has a rich history and its own culture. It is a large and varied anthropogeography where one size definitely does not fit all, so we set out to discover what new things are emerging.



**Photo:** *We are custodians of a yurt which we love and which recently got called our “mobile mother house”. I wonder if that will stick? Yorkshire was a major centre of monasticism historically: maybe we are rediscovering some of that spirit for a new age.*

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Newton, *Revive us Again* (PublishU, 2023).

## Encounter Encourage Explore

We named our new endeavour the Kairos Movement and hoped that reflected a sense of divine movement at this time. We then discerned some guiding principles. It was to be an endeavour guided by **encounter** with one another and the divine. It would be a community where we would **encourage** one another and where we could **explore** what that might look like in everyday life.

Our movement consists of an organic network of small groups, drawing people together with an itch to explore different spiritual practices, ministry or interests. Initially, all our gatherings were on Zoom, which enabled us to meet from across the district, and was part of most people's lives anyway due to COVID-19. As time has gone on, many of us have fallen out of love with Zoom and although still relying upon it, we are gradually working out a balance of connection via social media and physically gathered meet-ups.

We reflect a lot on what the natural world teaches us through the mycelium network (incredibly tiny 'threads' forming a vast fungal network that enables nutrient absorption, ecosystem recycling, and symbiotic communication between all land plants and soil) as we connect with those rooted in the different physical and faith communities across the district. Together we are figuring out how to support and encourage one another as we experiment with how to live a dispersed community life.

The Kairos Movement has certainly done a lot of shape-shifting since its conception. Many of the mini experiments have had very short seasons, such as the regular 'Zoom lounge' we thought might act like the workplace 'water cooler', offering space for casual, passing relationships to grow. It didn't, so we stopped it.

The Kairos Community, as we now call the intentional faith community, has become part of the New Streams Circuit in Yorkshire North & East, a circuit that is an incubator as well as providing a home for New Places for New People in our district. The Kairos Movement, its core community and network of small groups continue to provide both a haven and a space embracing a more progressive, inclusive faith for individuals with and without other places of faith belonging. New Streams is overseen by Andy, and the Kairos Community by Liane, but we continue to work and seek the Spirit for wisdom together and with an expanding core team.

The Kairos Community doesn't have a building, and physical gatherings often involve being outside (often in the rain for some reason), as we try and meet up in different places across the district, joining in with what is already going on. Usually there are very small numbers at any one thing, but we do try and get as many of us as possible together for a day in the summer and a weekend in the winter.

Many of those who find their way to us have been hurt and burned out, and/or are in some kind of faith shift from a doctrinally conservative Christian faith. We are grateful for the diversity of small groups as people can select and become involved wherever is most helpful for them at any one time. The priority is for everyone to be seen, heard and valued as they explore their own identity, meaning and connections; we aim for each of us to grow deeper roots grounded in the divine story of love we find in the way of Jesus. We draw on a breadth of ancient and modern faith practices. Groups vary from contemplative prayer to a physical gathering that is constantly "being interrupted".<sup>2</sup>

We have steered away from stating a set of beliefs, as each one of us acknowledges what we believe might change from day to day, and we treasure what doubt and questioning have to teach us. We aim to be pilgrims alongside those at different stages of spiritual growth, not always anticipating progression. For those who find us, we feel we are responding to a cultural and spiritual shift from linear logic and hierarchy to a more sustainable, intuitive, holistic

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<sup>2</sup> Al Barrett and Ruth Harley, *Being Interrupted* (SCM Press, 2020).

interconnectedness which are expressed in our shared values. These values grow out of our Christian and Methodist heritage (see Wesley's manifesto).

In our human hunger for meaning, we recognise the need for ritual<sup>3</sup> and have noticed a rhythm to our collective life is emerging. In some places it is embedded in the local community and offers opportunity for deep connection, such as the Fridays@ group in Hull where we are collaborating with CMS and a local community-based charity to host a reflective conversation space. Or in Co-create, our monthly online "Awe and wonder bring and share" where we each bring something: a poem, picture, song or thought that has been inspired by the theme and offers a glimpse of the divine.

Virtual Campfires offers a space to intentionally explore values-based reflective practice, to celebrate and commiserate as those responding to the call to build community in new and different ways across the district. From a podcast for young families to *outside church* to ideas of cold water swimming, mentoring young people as a visual storytelling community, creating space for families with additional needs and celebrating neurodiversity, there are inklings and glimpses of opportunities to be and share love. And in our monthly Zoom, we walk alongside one another in our explorations of these passions.

If it sounds like we are all highly productive people with an agenda to constantly make and do, I think I have given a false impression. Rather than always being the ones who lead and organise, we try to join in with what is already happening, and encourage one another to be active participants in our dispersed local communities, but also to learn how to 'be' and to have a healthy rhythm of life.

Our gatherings are usually participative, with mutual sharing of insights and stories in response to blogs, videos, podcasts or people active in their ministry. Out of deep conversations that emerge as we hang out together, we are discovering a shared spiritual journey and figuring out how to be a co-created community that gently supports and shapes our lives. It often doesn't look like much at all, just a couple of people getting together over a cuppa, a card sent in the post to someone to let them know the community are thinking of them, or a small group turning up at a local Pride march.

Alongside our weekly mailing, our community and each of our groups have their own WhatsApp group, where we continue the conversation and strengthen relationships. We are currently building a rhythm of prayer and meditation throughout the week using Zoom or WhatsApp, something that builds a collective framework alongside our independent and dispersed lives.

I hope this gives a glimpse into the journey we are on with Kairos. We are currently finishing all our physical gatherings by speaking one-sentence blessings over one another, so here is my blessing for you. What blessing will you say into the circle?

*"May we share a hope that does not fade and embody love that cannot be lost; in the darkness, vulnerability and unorganised mess of real life, may we find and share Light."*

Find out more on our websites: [www.newstreams.org.uk](http://www.newstreams.org.uk) and [www.kairosmovement.org.uk](http://www.kairosmovement.org.uk)



**Liane Kensett** is a pioneer with the Methodist Church, co-leading the Kairos Movement in Yorkshire North & East, and a mental health chaplain in the NHS.

<sup>3</sup> Casper Ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual* (William Collins, 2021).



# Mission needs fellowship: Qualities of the Fresh X movement in Germany

By Katharina Haubold

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*This article draws on conversations with participants at the Fresh X-Network gathering in March 2026: Claudia Fischer, Felix Goldinger, Miriam Hoffmann, Thomas Meyer, Aline Ott, Torsten Pappert, Martin Roemer and Susanne Zippenfenig. I am grateful for their openness and willingness to share.*

The “Fresh Expressions of Church” round table in the German-speaking world was founded in 2012. From the outset, it was ecumenical, with people from free churches, Protestant regional churches and Roman Catholic backgrounds. Inspired by the Fresh Expressions movement in England, people came together to learn more about incarnational mission, to exchange experiences and to explore together how the church might be reshaped through its participation in God’s sending. Over time, a small team emerged, materials and courses were translated and developed, study trips were organised and a digital platform was built. The Fresh X-Network now includes 28 organisational members and 270 individual members. Perhaps one particular gift of the Fresh X-Network is that it offers a framework for encounter and companionship across denominational boundaries. But as a mission movement, it lives above all through connection, exchange and encounter.

It has had a significant impact such that now most denominations in the German-speaking region have their own projects and formats for experimenting with new forms of church, strengthening missional initiatives and setting out afresh with people who have had little or no connection to church or faith. Over the years, questions have kept surfacing – and at present, in the face of rapid membership decline after a long period of stability in the German churches, they have become especially pressing: Do we really still need this network? Has it already fulfilled its original task of “communicating the posture and attitude of fresh expressions into the centre of the church” and therefore become obsolete? Given shrinking resources, can we really afford all this networking? Is the output worth the investment of time, energy and money?

Yet, in these concrete encounters, many of us keep experiencing qualities we would not want to lose. So when we gathered for the network meeting at the end of March, we used small, informal conversations around the edges of the event to explore what those qualities actually are. What follows is shaped by those conversations and by the voices of those who shared their perspectives.

## Your name is enough

One of the qualities is a companionship in which your name is enough.

*“I find it so fascinating – this is one of the very few spaces in church life where the name badge simply carries a name: no role, no title, perhaps just a topic the person would like to talk about. With many people here, I don’t even know where they work, what denomination they belong to, or what their formal position is. It makes for very different kinds of encounters.”*

Of course, as conversations unfold, people sometimes do talk about role, position and profession. For some topics it is helpful to know the context, perspective and experience from which someone is speaking. But usually this is only shared when it actually serves the conversation. As a result, people from very different professions, levels of hierarchy and denominations speak with one another more openly and as equals without the need for titles or positions. I really appreciate the loosening of the usual habits which so often get in the way of our calling and life together.

## **Sharing is caring**

I have found so much inspiration over the years through the Fresh X-Network: good questions, wonderful resources and space to experiment. Sometimes this happens at the annual gathering and sometimes through newsletters. Simply knowing that there are so many people carrying the same longing in their own contexts – creatively and open to the movement of the Holy Spirit – is a treasure and a gift. I also know that I can simply call someone, that others are interested in my experience, that across all boundaries we understand ourselves as companions on the way. There is something deeply connective about that.

I notice how deeply grateful I am that “sharing is caring” is genuinely a principle that I and others experience here. Sharing is caring not only when it comes to ideas, inspiration and resources, but also when it comes to worries, frustration and fear. In the quiet conversations, in a walk during a conference, in messages and emails, there is also room for what is heavy. It does not always become lighter straightaway, but simply knowing that it may be shared fills me with gratitude. We do not gather, and we do not stay connected, in order to outdo one another with our successes. We gather in order to journey together, in all the dimensions that such a journey involves. At our best, we experience this: everything may be brought.

## **A space that changes us**

*“The horizon of thought is wider here.”*

This sentence expresses something essential about what becomes possible in this network. In these encounters, something shifts, sometimes quite noticeably. Sometimes it is only in retrospect that it becomes clear just how much moved. I experience it too. In conversations, sometimes almost in passing, thoughts arise that I would never have had on my own. Ideas are not immediately evaluated, but first allowed to unfold. Questions that I may have carried around for a long time suddenly find new words, or I watch someone else take them up and develop them further in a process of co-creation. Sometimes those questions lose some of their weight simply because others share them. And sometimes things that had become stuck in my thinking and acting, without me fully noticing it, become visible here, are questioned, and in the best sense become fluid.

I notice my perspective widening – on church, on mission, on what is possible. And sometimes also on what I need to let go of. That matters deeply to me. Thinking more broadly does not simply mean building more and wanting more. It also means seeing more clearly what I have so far been unwilling or unable to relinquish, even when the time had come. In recent years, the theme of “exnovation” has become increasingly important in our movement. There is no innovation without exnovation, without letting some things go, without creating space. Yet, at times the theory of exnovation seems even harder to put into practice than the theory of innovation. Perhaps we – or at least I – simply began far too late to practise this properly.

Those who let something go sometimes make themselves even more unpopular than those who experiment and try something new on top of what already exists. As long as it is an “add-on”, new ideas tend to be welcomed. But when the existing is examined just as critically as the new, when treasured things have to be released and farewells have to be made, resistance grows louder. In this network I find companionship in those areas where it is hard for me to let go, even though I sense it is time. And I find courage and strength, with others, to face the necessary endings.

*“You leave feeling that you understand your calling a little more clearly.”*

The change is not only at the level of thought. It gets personal. I have heard this sense of being changed in conversations with people from the Fresh X-Network. People get a reset, get back on track. And for that, it is so helpful not only to be travelling with people from one’s own immediate context. This is not necessarily about ready-made answers. It is more about an inner sorting, a new prioritising. Sometimes things fall into place and we see more clearly what is actually called for, where there is life and perhaps where there is no longer life. Perhaps this is one of the underestimated qualities of such networks: they do not simply produce ideas; they change people. They create spaces in which we do not only talk about mission, but continually locate ourselves afresh within that sending.

## Heart-deep connection

*“There is such a heart-deep connection here.”*

Many of us know the feeling of being lonely with the things that stir us. We get used to hearing again and again sentences such as these: “We’ve always done it this way.” “That didn’t work before.” “That’s naive and far too idealistic.” “But have you thought about the older people / younger people / families / those attached to tradition / the donors... ?” “Who is going to pay for that?” “What you want isn’t really church.” “We already have enough other problems.” It costs a lot of energy to inhabit church settings where there is criticism and where no heart-deep connection exists, spaces where you have to be tactical, where you can be quietly dismissed, where everyone is mostly just doing their own job and any shared vision has been lost. Some of us have seriously wondered whether paths outside institutional church life might be simpler and more promising.

Yet, by way of contrast, in the encounters we have in the Fresh X movement it is so life-giving not to have to explain ourselves for once, not to feel strange, not to keep hitting the same kinds of walls over and over again! Where our longing and our searching meet resonance, suddenly a burden lifts. The concrete situation may not have changed at all. But it is like we are taking a deep breath that creates space in the soul. We feel understood. For such heart-deep connection, we need spaces that allow vulnerability. Yes, some dreams of church are naive, and sharing them can expose them. Yes, experimenting may mean failure. And being able to speak about that without being judged gives courage to keep going anyway.

It is especially meaningful when we share spirituality together and make our different traditions tangible to one another. That is not always easy. It seems to require a constant remembering together that this is one of the levels on which we want to meet, so that it does not slip from view. Sharing spirituality with one another, and allowing others into this heart-deep connection, often seems harder than listening to talks, holding panel discussions, or drinking coffee together. And yet it is so valuable to choose it again and again, and to become vulnerable on this level – sharing what we love and trusting that it will be received with respect and appreciation, even if it feels unfamiliar at first.

I notice that what is still missing for me in this network is a shared spirituality that can be carried into everyday life. In recent years, we have not engaged very deeply with the question of personal discipleship. Something remains open here for me – something I would love to see grow stronger.

## Sent together

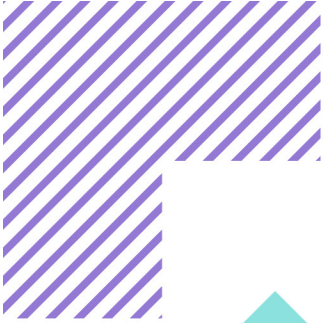
We are sent together. Jesus' sending does not stop at denominational boundaries. This mission movement quietly and steadily reminds me that we are never sent alone – neither as individuals nor as separate denominations. Jesus' sending is given to us as the ecumenical church in the German-speaking region. Jesus' sending belongs to the worldwide ecumenical movement. It does not end at the boundaries of the churches.

Again and again, we find ourselves united in the conviction that God is already at work in the world, always present, and that we are participants in God's own self-sending. I experience that as deeply healing. Healing, because it corrects me and broadens my perspective: my image of God, my spiritual practices, my priorities in faith, my limitations. But it is also healing because it reminds me so clearly that the companionship of Jesus spans the world, and that I am safely held within it – with those who came before me, with those with whom I now travel near and far, moved by the Spirit of God, and with those who will come after us. That includes those whose way of living out their calling is so different from mine that I do not necessarily feel an immediate heart-deep connection with them. Over the years, the Fresh X-Network has offered a place in which being joined together in mission is experienced and deepened. We are discovering that in so many places we not only face the same challenges, but also share the same heartbeat.

The question of whether the Fresh X-Network is still needed is not one we have asked for the last time. And perhaps one day we really will arrive together at the point of saying: this particular form of mission movement is no longer needed right now. But the dimensions of fellowship that I have experienced here over the years are something I don't want to lose. And if I no longer find them in the Fresh X-Network, then I will need to find them elsewhere. Because mission needs this kind of fellowship.



**Katharina Haubold** lives in Cologne, where she is part of a team pioneering a fresh expression of church, and has been involved in the Fresh X-Network in Germany in various roles since 2017.



# Servants Southall community scrapbook

By Idina Dunmore

Ten years on from closing our doors, this collection of memories illustrates the journey of pioneering the Servants Southall community. I hope this 'scrapbook' gives encouragement to anyone considering this type of incarnational ministry. It all began with a picture God gave me in 1999:



## From the Servants Southall newsletter, December 2010

I can't help feeling a little old when I consider that it was back at the end of the last century when God gave me a vision of transformation in Southall. At the time, 1999, I was working as a Health Visitor at a clinic in Old Southall, so I was becoming acquainted with the issues for families in the area: low quality and crowded housing; poor medical facilities; relationship problems including substance misuse and violence; financial difficulties; lack of safe public places . . . Although it was overwhelming, I also had a growing passion to contribute to change and help find solutions to some of these issues.



One weekend, I was driving out of London with my prayer-partner and good friend. As we drove around the by-pass we had a good view of Southall and the iconic blue gas tower that looms over the area. As we were on the flyover, the sun broke through the damp clouds and a rainbow appeared, overarching the tower and the town. "There," said my friend, "God's giving you a sign about His promises for Southall!" We laughed and didn't think much about it, except that it was one of those pictures in your mind that doesn't fade, neither for me or my friend. And we often reminded each other of it.

Funnily enough, more than ten years later, my friend lived in Southall for several years, having married a local vicar. And I live here now too, with a supportive team, and most of my work is in the community with women and families.

In September I, with a small team from St John's Church, set up a Baby & Toddler Group in the Parish Centre. It has started small but already good, supportive relationships are being built with and between parents.

And having prayed about a certain house on Havelock Estate, which was in an ideal location, Mary and I moved into it at the end of October. On the first weekend living there, another rainbow appeared outside our front door, framing my view of the estate. What can I say about God's plans, except to exclaim with the Proverbs writer, "We make our own plans, but the Lord decides where we will go." And that they are good!!

## Innovation

It was in September 2008 that five people relocated to Southall to start an intentional, Christian, missional community. God had given me the vision two years before and confirmed it clearly.

I was on the board of trustees of a small mission organisation called Servants ([www.servantsasia.org](http://www.servantsasia.org)). They were looking to set up teams in the Global North, and independently a vicar in Southall met the international coordinator of Servants and requested him to send a team to Southall.

When I heard of their interest in Southall, I wrote a vision document, prayed for a team, and we moved into the area. The photo below shows us at our first meeting – gathering to thrash out what a community would look like in Southall.

We were united by our faith in Christ and the principles and values of Servants, but between us we had little experience of living or serving in community.

Below are some of the steps we took. We really didn't know what we were doing, but with good counsel, and as we stepped out in faith, God did guide our path.



## Nurturing new growth

Before we did anything, we hired an allotment... a prophetic statement about transforming the wasteland into a garden – but also with the vision for starting a community garden on the plot.

This was quickly realised by partnering with A Rocha and became a thriving gardening project/community who worked on the land together every week, supporting each other, and starting Southall Transitions Group funded by the local council. Seeds of another A Rocha project were sown here too: Wolf Fields Urban Nature Reserve was subsequently created half a mile away and continues to be a beautiful urban oasis.





## Initiating community

We rented two houses in the same street – near enough to “carry a casserole dish of food in our pyjamas”!

We set about forming a rhythm of life: prayer in the mornings twice weekly at 6.30am, and twice weekly team meetings in the evening, with shared meals together. One of these evenings soon became ‘outward-focused’, where we invited our neighbours in to join us for a meal and social time.



Our God, you are Trinity, Community,  
Unbroken relationship, Love without beginning  
or end.  
And most wonderful of all, you make room for us,  
Drawing us in out of the cold, calling us friends.  
As we come to you, you lead us to each other,  
Into the security of belonging,  
And the risks of openness.  
We will not attempt alone what we can do  
together.  
With family and friends, team and neighbours,  
With those we would prefer to avoid.  
Help us live the reality of trust and forgiveness  
today

*From Servants Rhythm of Prayer  
- Into the Presence*

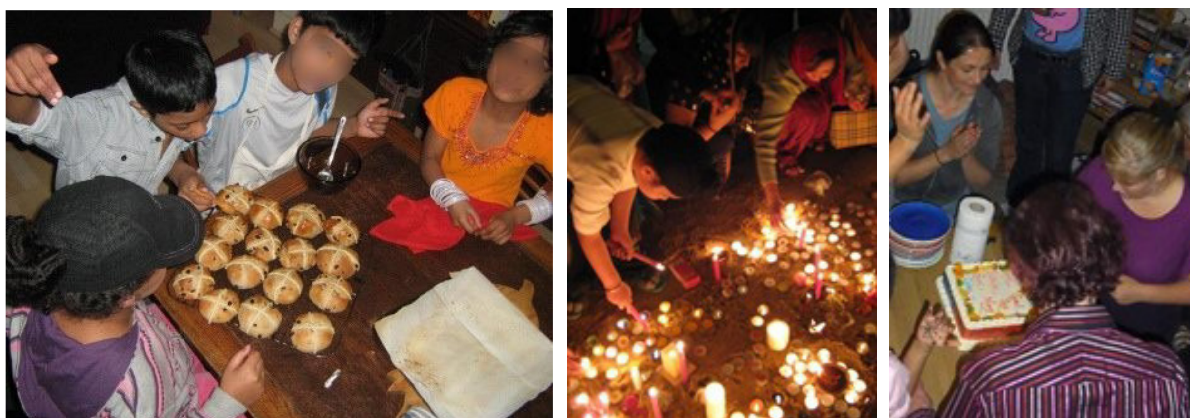
## Reaching out to those beyond the church

How did we get to know our neighbours? We did it through:

- ◆ partnering with churches and volunteering at other organisations,
- ◆ such as A Rocha, Missionaries of Charity, teaching English in a Somali NGO
- ◆ hanging out in our front garden, and D. starting to mend bikes for local children
- ◆ as the children started hanging out in our house, getting to know the parents, and starting an impromptu homework club



And we took every opportunity to celebrate: festivals: birthdays, babies, hellos or goodbyes:



## Happy Anniversary!

We've now all been in Southall for one year. How does it feel? What have we done?

We've all got new paying jobs and joined local churches

We've lived in the community: over the summer the local kids from our street played in our home most days. We've talked to social workers, started tutoring sessions, helped with computers, mended bikes, given out vegetables, hosted cooking and art lessons, taken trips to the local library and even warned off drug dealers!

We've started hosting regular Creative World Justice evenings with a local flavour: for example, we invited some friends from a persecuted people-group in Burma, the Kachin, to

inform us of their struggle. Most recently we heard from a Tamil leader about the genocide that is currently occurring in Sri Lanka.

We've progressed through our Formation material: we've discussed issues such as simplicity, Islam, non-violence, eco-responsibility, community development. We've read relevant books each month and shared our reflections together.

We've prayed consistently early mornings on Mondays and Thursdays

And we've served the local community: helping at English classes, a toddler group and soup kitchens.

Personally, I rarely tire of this vibrant community, where I very often meet people I know in the street as I go to the local vegetable shop or grocers. I hear Hindi spoken all around me, which encourages me to continue learning, and I enjoy the Indian essence of our neighbourhood.

*Written by Idina in Servants Southall newsletter - October 2009*

## Team building and pastoral care

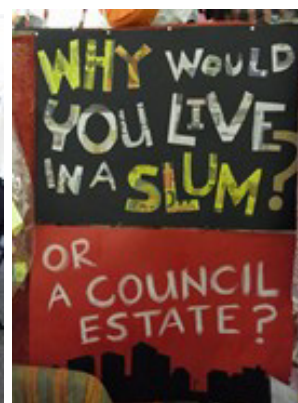
In our first year we followed "formation material" that our organisation provided and we adapted to our context. We had a reading list of books we studied and then discussed together. We also majored on team-building and understanding each other through personality profiling. This remained important to us in the many ups-and-downs of community life. We had 'team days' and also annual weekend retreats away, as well as spending social time and eating together. We all found spiritual directors to encourage our spiritual growth.



*Photo: 'Church on the beach' at our team weekend away.*

## Prophetic voice

We led discussions on missional community at the margins and ran a promotional stall at Greenbelt. We also engaged with other like-minded groups and contributed at conferences, including Speak Network.



## Re-visioning:

We had known from the outset that our charism was to reach out among the most marginalised in Southall. As we prayed about this, we felt drawn to a local council estate, called Havelock Estate.

In the summer of 2010 when our former landlord asked us to move, we found a house to rent on the estate... and subsequently two houses on the same street.

## Servants Southall

As a community of Christians choosing to live in an urban, multi-cultural and low-income area of west London, we commit to:

- ◆ Follow Jesus
- ◆ Share our lives and support one another as a community of households
- ◆ Extend a warm welcome and generous hospitality
- ◆ Empower local people in co-operation with churches and other organisations
- ◆ Challenge the individualistic materialism prevalent in our society
- ◆ Work for justice from both local and global perspectives

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength... Love your neighbour as yourself." (Mark 12:30-31)

Our community flourished as we met our new neighbours: through the community garden, in the street or at other activities, and at events such as an unofficial street party (for the royal wedding in 2011) and carol-singing around the estate.



## Forming a new community of faith

We began a weekly Thursday night bring-and-share meal to which we invited our friends and neighbours.



A stable group began to emerge, mainly of people at the margins of their own community for some reason: family difficulties, single parenting, domestic violence, mental or physical health issues, poverty.

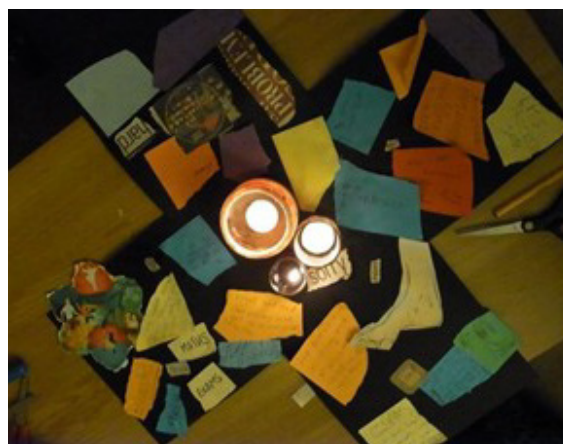
The group slowly became a support for each other, perhaps an 'extended family' for those with few other resources – and for us who had moved into the area.

We planned a programme of social activities: barbecues, bonfires, trips to local countryside and the beach, and to cultural events. We also encouraged sharing and creative responses, which gave people confidence in their abilities.

### Creative faith-sharing

Our neighbours and friends were mostly from Sikh, Hindu and Muslim backgrounds. However, they knew we are followers of Jesus and many natural faith conversations arose. We had a time of prayer for 30 minutes before each evening, and also led Jesus-centred worship, prayer and discussion especially at festival seasons. A men's discussion group and a creative women's group emerged, where issues of faith were the focus of the sessions.

A time of reflection and response to Jesus as the light of the world on Diwali (Hindu and Sikh festival of light):



It was interesting to notice that as the members of our group were nurtured, they became keen to volunteer and especially to serve others in Southall who were in difficult situations, because they recognised the needs of people in the neighbourhood, and perhaps because they saw us modelling that service too.

They have helped with a food bank, winter night shelters for the homeless, Messy Church and toddler group, a community garden, and an English class crèche. And they, in turn, built community in those places.

### Partnerships and networking

From the outset, partnership with local churches was at the heart of the Servants Southall community aims. At the local CofE parish churches, we were able to encourage and catalyse the church to serve its local community through outward-looking ministries:

- ◆ parent-and-toddler group
- ◆ Messy Church
- ◆ homeless night shelter
- ◆ food bank
- ◆ mental health drop-in and warm space



I became a governor at our local nursery school, and part of the planning group of an annual fun day at the Children's Centre on our estate, to which we invited the parish church, Servants and Transitions to have a presence. I found this an exciting event, as the community came together to share and connect with one another, and discovered that we could work for transformation together.

### **Working for transformation at the margins:**

'Sometimes the needs in Southall seem overwhelming. It can seem that almost every household has a major issue going on; whether sickness, disability, financial hardship, family breakdown, mental health concerns. It can feel hopeless. But we know that Jesus came to restore hope, to bring life, and establish shalom – 'life in all its fullness'. Can we dream what this means for our friends here? Do we know our part in this? Maybe we're just starting to ...'

*Written by Idina in Servants Southall Newsletter – April 2010*

In living among our neighbours and walking with them through good times and difficulties, we started to see glimpses of transformation, in them and in ourselves. It is often that the new is growing alongside the old, and at times we see more of one, at times more of the other.

But we kept praying with those in our neighbourhood and held on to faith that in Christ transformation to a new, full life is possible, to become all God has made us to be.

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,  
wherever He may send you.  
May he guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm,  
May he bring you home rejoicing at the wonders he has shown you.  
May he bring you home rejoicing  
once again into our doors.

*Northumbria Community blessing for Morning Prayer*

### **Endings**

After eight years, in 2016, it became clear that it was time to close the Servants community in Southall. There had been 11 team members during these years, and they scattered to pursue new initiatives, the majority inspired by their time in this community.

The Thursday evening group was able to be nurtured into a new worshipping community at the local parish church, called The Table, which has been documented in this book: <https://ccx.org.uk/resource/send-me/>, and this video: <https://ccx.org.uk/stories/the-table/>


Ten years on, I hope something of the legacy of Servants Southall remains. We keep some contacts in the neighbourhood, and it is encouraging to hear about continuing faith journeys and engagement in community transformation. The local churches continue to work together, with the neighbourhood now partly gentrifying.

With our friends we continue to pray for God's goodness, justice and peace in Southall.

*With thanks to everyone who has been part of the Servants Southall community*



**Idina Dunmore** was a founding member of the Servants Southall Community in 2008. She was ordained as a pioneer minister in 2019, having trained at CMS, and is currently associate minister at Church on the Corner (COTC) in Islington. She is enjoying seeing several new pioneering initiatives emerge there, including a warm-space drop-in with prayer-space, an international meal with refugees, and a lay team focused on community ministry across the parish.



# Mission, movements and sodal life

## Johnny Sertin in conversation with Kris Rocke

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**J:** Street Psalms has been at the forefront of cultivating a sodal network over a number of years. What first compelled you to give your life to this kind of movement rather than a more traditional organisational model?

**K:** Thanks for the opportunity to journey with Aspen or what I affectionately call a “sister sodality”. There are not that many of us. As you know historically there have been two main forms of church in history – the sodal and the modal form. The modal form is what we think of when we think of a local congregation – a community that does life together from cradle to grave in a specific parish community. The other form is the sodal form. This is a community that gathers around a shared mission and has a shared “charism” that it nurtures for the sake of the larger body of Christ. Typically, these were called “orders”. Well, “orders” fell out of favour at the Reformation but the need for the sodal form of the church has never stopped. I grew up Catholic so orders always made sense to me. In fact, I was drawn to the missional focus of the orders. I knew I didn’t want to pastor a local congregation (which is a good thing, because it was a mutual feeling... as it turns out, no local church wanted me as a pastor). So, it was always sodality or bust for me. Street Psalms’ mission is to free leaders to love and serve in Jesus’ name. Our charism is the way we “see and celebrate Good News in hard places”. Our role is to steward this gift on behalf of the modal form of the church – to walk alongside leaders and congregations who are living out the gospel in their context.

So, we are an order with a seminary and a design studio that serves a global network. We have 41 ordained members scattered throughout the world (that is, they are ordained into Street Psalms). Our seminary is the reflection side of our work. It provides formation for those seeking ordination, our fellows and all those who want to be formed with us. Our design studio is the action side of our work. We co-create models of social innovation that lead to human flourishing. So, we are a religious order with a seminary and design studio that serves a global network that represents more than 100 cities around the world.

So, that’s my best spiritual answer as to why we chose the sodal form of the church. And it’s true: it fits who we are. We’ve been doing this work for nearly 30 years and we have always shown up as a sodality, even when we didn’t know that word. But it wasn’t until about four years ago that we got serious about formally incorporating as a sodality and the truth is it wasn’t exactly a spiritual impulse. To put it bluntly, by incorporating as a sodal community it allowed us to continue to receive large grants from high-impact donors and foundations. I won’t try to explain the complicated philanthropic codes of the United States, but let’s just say that it was greatly to our advantage to incorporate as a religious order – which we were happy to do since that is how we understood ourselves anyway. Sorry if that makes us a little less spiritually grounded, but hey, it’s the truth.

**J:** Looking back over the early years of Street Psalms, what have been some of the most significant learnings, particularly where reality didn't meet expectation?

**K:** In retrospect, Street Psalms got lucky about something that took us years to understand. Nearly 30 years ago, a diverse group of leaders came together around our shared love for the city, the most vulnerable and Jesus. What we didn't anticipate is that we would become such great friends who liked each other. I have a hunch that it was our delight in each other that became our most attractive quality. We were having fun and others wanted to join the party. Maybe there is something more powerful than friendship, but I'm not sure what it is. Even Jesus seemed to think that friendship is what agape-love looks like when it is fully mature. He says to his disciples, "I call you friends." I don't want to undersell the high ideals around which we gathered – they too have served us well – but it's the gift of friendship that has sustained our movement, from early-stage friendship where affection was easy and mostly just fun, to late-stage friendship that can bear one another's wounds and failures and hold life's complexities. We are now testing the next frontier of friendship – one that includes our enemies. We're a dispersed and diverse, cross-denominational community of Protestant and Catholic and this includes right of centre and left of centre and all that entails. The gift of friendship looks different now, but I have a hunch that if there is a future for our community, it will come down to something as simple as our mutual affection for one another.

**J:** In your experience, what is it about place and community that makes mission come alive? And why do you think this is especially important in this cultural moment?

**K:** I live in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, in the city of Tacoma, near the Puget Sound. I have a well used fishing boat that allows me to get out on the water. It's a happy place for me. Every boat needs a name, so I named the boat "*Now.Here.This*". It's from the title of an old Off-Broadway play. The name reminds me that the only moment we have is the present moment. That's all we ever get. It's in this moment that Word made flesh comes to us. That is how God is enfleshed... moment by moment. I bring this up because most of us are conditioned to live in a constant state of FOMO. There is always somewhere else we want to be. I am the chief of sinners in this regard. The key, I am told, is to be where we are... living in the *now* (not then) and being *here* (not there), and welcoming *this* (not that). "*Now.Here.This*." It's in this light that our community is encouraged to take something like a vow of stability – to dig where we stand – to root where we are planted – to love, not only the people in our lives but also the places to which we belong. And to do so moment by moment, in community, which is the only way this works. At Street Psalms we are not dogmatic about our quasi vow of stability (life is too complex), but given that it takes most of us a lifetime to become fully human and build communities of human flourishing, generally speaking it's a good idea to stay put and work it out. If there is nowhere God is not, and all ground is holy ground, then I suppose wherever we are is plenty good enough. God is fond of the particular. *Now.Here.This*.

**J:** For those of us nurturing emerging sodalities like Aspen, what practices or postures have you found most essential in forming people for this kind of shared life and mission?

**K:** It is tempting to list off practices that have meant a lot to our community, but I don't think that's how it works. What's more important is that you have some practices and it's even more important that you have rhythms by which you engage those practices. Finding what Paul describes as "the unforced rhythms of grace" is worth all the effort. As for "posture", well, I'm a big fan of whatever posture allows you to take your work and call seriously without taking yourself too seriously. I guess you'd call that humility, and a good indicator of humility is having a sense of humour – which is something that I've experienced first-hand in your community.

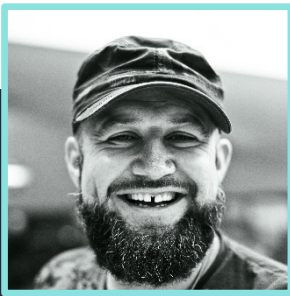
**J:** There's often a tension between movement and structure, freedom and form. How have you navigated that within Street Psalms, and what wisdom would you offer to others trying to hold that balance?

**K:** The creative tension you speak of is where the mojo is. Living in that creative tension is the role of leadership, I think... and leadership is one long creative act. In my experience, creation is

not a thing that happened a long time ago... it is a present reality to which we are invited. When Jesus in-spires the disciples in the resurrection – literally “breathes into” them – he is not only animating them with life, but calling them to participate in the ongoing act of creation. And for my money, creation happens in the creative tensions you describe. Too much “structure” and not enough “movement” restricts, clamps down, holds back. Maybe that’s something like constipation. Too much movement and not enough structure, well, I’ll let you guess what that is like. Anyway, given the various temperaments within a community, the creative tension will probably make the whole community slightly frustrated and I sort of think that might be healthy.

**J:** If you were to name one or two signs of genuine transformation in people or communities, what would you point to as evidence that this way of life is bearing fruit?

**K:** One of the surest signs of genuine transformation in a community that is undergoing the gospel of Jesus is the increased capacity to receive and give mercy. And this opens the way to an unusual kind of community. The kind of community that can create belonging without othering... the kind that can occupy its wounds and the wounds of the world in a way that becomes the womb of new creation. This is the sort of sign that I think Jesus had in mind... And then again, all this can sound so serious and can leave us feeling a bit too self-important. So, perhaps the chief sign of genuine transformation is something that one of your very own jolly prophets noticed. It was G.K. Chesterton who said, “Joy is the gigantic secret of the faith.” Yes, joy may very well be THE sign of transformation.



**Jonny Sertin**, Britain hub movement lead at CMS, is a well-known practitioner in the field of local and global missions. He is an entrepreneur, community developer, and ordained minister. He has lived or served in over 40 nations exploring the edge between contextual mission, spirituality and community practice.

**Kris Rocke** is the executive director of Street Psalms, a global organisation focused on developing incarnational leaders in urban communities.





# A conversation between Nuam Hatzaw and Harvey Kwiyani

**This conversation between two CMS lecturers, Nuam Hatzaw and Harvey Kwiyani, took place at The Assembly in Glasgow in November 2025. Harvey describes how he came to write his book, *Decolonising Mission* (see the book review section) and offers reflections on mission and empire. He tries to imagine mission being done without power and money, but rather reliant on the hospitality of others, rooted in relationship and motivated by love.**

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## 1. Motivation for the book

**N:** Harvey, can you tell me what motivated you to write this book? I know you have a long career in mission organisations.

**H:** Two things, really. First, I'm trying to process what happened in my own story – my village, my people, my family. My great-great-grandfather, Mtimawanzako Nacho, was one of the first converts of Scottish missionaries working at Blantyre Mission in Malawi at around 10 years old in the early 1880s (after escaping from the hands of slave raiders who took his parents away). The missionaries later brought him to Stewart's Melville College in Edinburgh where he attended from 1885 to 1887. After returning to Malawi, he worked closely with the missionaries and eventually became the first Malawian to be entrusted with running a mission station independently.

He served Chiradzulu Mission faithfully from the 1890s into the 1920s. But later in life, he became entangled in conflict with Alexander Livingstone Bruce who owned the Bruce Estates at Magomero (where I was born) as part of the British settler farmers during the colonial era. That conflict escalated to the point that, in his 70s, after a lifetime of Christian leadership, he took his own life in 1945. So for me, this is not abstract. It's deeply personal. I'm trying to make sense of how mission, faith and colonialism became so entangled that it produced that kind of outcome for someone like him.

Second, I am convinced that much of our missiology today remains shaped – often unconsciously – by the colonial assumptions that have shaped much of mission in the past 500 years. There lingers a defensive posture, as though Christendom is perpetually under threat, *as if Constantinople might fall again*. That anxiety continues to frame mission as the protection of the faith against external others.

Yet, when we turn to the Gospels, we see something quite different. Jesus is not defending an empire; he is announcing and enacting a kingdom that unsettles and subverts it. His mission does not secure power: he wants to give it away to those oppressed by the empire so they can live their lives to the full.

As long as mission remains tied to empire or to the cultural frameworks of Western civilisation, Christians from the rest of the world cannot participate as equal agents. At best, they are incorporated; at worst, they are managed. But we now inhabit a different moment, the era of world Christianity. Christians from every part of the world are already on the move, bearing witness to the gospel in ways that are not dependent on traditional sending structures.

Mission is no longer the preserve of one region or tradition; it is a shared calling of the global church.

## 2. Empire and reference points

**N:** That's really helpful. The gospel spread in the context of empire, but not through empire. In colonial theory, there's always a "centre" that defines everything. In Jesus' time, Rome was that centre. Who is the centre today?

**H:** The British empire is no longer what it once was, but it still carries immense influence. The American empire certainly does. And when we look at global evangelicalism, those centres still shape much of what we call mission. But it's not just Britain and America: European empires more broadly continue to shape global Christianity. These are the powers we are still negotiating as we serve Christ today. I am also aware of conversations that suggest that Silicon Valley and many other technological hubs are centres in the economics of empires.

**N:** And there's also a kind of Christianity that functions like an empire, a very narrow definition of what it means to be the church or to do mission.

**H:** Exactly. Empires shape how people think. They produce theologies that serve their own interests. I argue in the book that what we call evangelicalism today can sometimes function as a kind of "religion of empire", spreading a form of Christianity that serves imperial structures rather than subverting them.

## 3. Power, empire and the Spirit

**N:** Let me push back a bit: can God not use centres of power? Think of Cyrus in the Bible.

**H:** God can use anyone. But the issue is this: even when we are within empire, the gospel of the kingdom subverts the logic of empire. The danger comes when we mix the gospel of Christ with the logic of empire. That's where we lose clarity.

Empires organise the world around centres and peripheries. Historically, to be 'Christian' was to be located near the centre – the city – while those beyond it were dismissed as 'pagans' or 'heathens'. Jesus disrupts this geography even before it emerges. He forms his disciples in Galilee, far from the recognised centres of power, and sends them out from Jerusalem – not Rome or Alexandria, but from a marginal, contested centre within a colony, one that would itself be destroyed within a generation.

Mission, in this sense, does not proceed from imperial strength. It begins at the margins and moves outward – without the backing, validation or resources of empire. And crucially, he tells them to wait – not for political power, but for the power of the Spirit. So, if we are serious about decolonising mission, we must ask: are we relying on the power of empire – money, influence, institutions – or on the power of the Spirit?

## 4. Money and mission

**N:** That leads us to money. Mission requires funding, but money is also tied to power. How do we think about that?

**H:** In Luke 10, Jesus tells his disciples not to carry a purse – just go. They are to live as people without power, dependent on the hospitality of those who receive them. Mission, in that sense, is not resourced by wealth but sustained through relationships. Today, however, mission is often restricted to those with access to financial resources. Yet, when Christ says, “Go,” he is addressing everyone, rich and poor alike. If participation in mission depends primarily on access to money, we need to ask what kind of mission we have constructed.

This is especially important today when millions of Christians are already on the move. A Pew Research Center report (2024) suggests that around 47 per cent of international migrants are Christians.<sup>1</sup> They move for work, education and trade, but they also carry the gospel with them. We rarely recognise them as missionaries because they have not been formally “sent”. Perhaps decolonising mission requires a shift in perspective. Instead of asking, “Who can we send?” we might begin by asking, “Where is God already at work through people on the move – and how can we join them?”

## 5. Rethinking success in mission

**N:** What does this mean practically, especially in areas like funding, reporting and evaluation?

**H:** In Western systems, we often measure success through numbers: how many people were converted, how many decisions were made. That drives funding. But what if success looks different?

What about the missionary who spends years building relationships, showing the love of Christ, but sees no immediate conversions? That witness may bear fruit in the next generation.

Mission is relational. It is about presence, faithfulness and witness – not just measurable outcomes. If we change how we define success, we will change how we practise mission.

## 6. The complexity of mission history

**N:** How do we deal with the complicated legacy of mission, both its positive and negative aspects?

**H:** It is complex. Take David Livingstone, for example. In Malawi, he is remembered as a hero. But historically, he also contributed to arguments that enabled colonisation. His work led, almost directly, to the colonisation of the Congo by Leopold II of Belgium, to the Berlin Conference of 1884, and to the Scramble for Africa that followed.

And then there are stories like that of Nacho, my great-great-grandfather, a local mission leader whose contributions are largely absent from the official record. I had to come to the Edinburgh archives to learn his story. It is not preserved in Malawi.

So, the issue is not that every missionary was bad. The issue is the system. The system was entangled with empire. We need to acknowledge that honestly – lament it, repent of it – and then imagine new ways of participating in God’s mission that are not shaped by those same structures.

## 7. Imagining mission without empire

**N:** Finally, what might mission without empire look like?

**H:** We need to ask some fundamental questions. Can we imagine mission without conquest? The word *missio* has military origins: it is about the sending of soldiers. But the New

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, The Religious Composition of the World’s Migrants (Pew Research Center, 2024), [https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/08/PR\\_2024.08.19\\_religious-composition-migrants\\_report.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/08/PR_2024.08.19_religious-composition-migrants_report.pdf)

Testament idea of sending (*apostolos*) is relational. It is people sending people, not empires sending agents.

**So what would mission look like if it were:**

- ◆ driven by love rather than fear?
- ◆ shaped by vulnerability rather than power?
- ◆ rooted in relationship rather than conquest?
- ◆ empowered by the Spirit and not empires?

Can we imagine mission that is not backed by military or economic power, but by compassion? If we are to rethink mission today, these are the questions we must take seriously.



**Nuam Hatzaw** is MA lecturer in Asian Christianity at CMS; her research and teaching focuses on migration, Asian theology and world Christianity.

**Dr Harvey Kwiyani** is a team leader at CMS where he leads the Acts 11 project on mission and migration and leads the African Christianity route through the MA. He is a theologian and missiologist specialising in African Christianity, diaspora mission and intercultural leadership, working at the intersection of theology, migration and the global church. He is the author of *Decolonizing Mission*, which advances a vision of Christian witness beyond imperial frameworks toward a more Spirit-empowered, polycentric and relational global church.





# Anvil Book Reviews

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## **Andrew Walls, *Christian Conversion and Mission: A Brief Cultural History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2025)**

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Published posthumously, this edited, accessible, condensed short book (about 150 pages with notes) is an excellent introduction to the writings of Andrew Walls who died in 2021. It explores the cultural history of Christian conversion which Walls, a Scottish historian of Christian mission, had spent most of his long life considering in the company of other leading missiologists and theologians from around the world. Conversion is a contested notion in contemporary societies. Walls perceived Christian conversion as “turning toward Christ what is already there”. He argued that the cultural context needs to be considered and understood both in and across history. People come to Christ differently and express themselves in both geography and history.

Mark R. Gornik writes an informative introduction to the lectures, notes and writings of Walls. Interestingly, the first four chapters are from his lectures at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1996, which were unpublished transcripts. They provide, in my opinion, a hitherto-lacking coherent, concise introduction into Walls' writings and thought. They look at the nature of converts and proselytes in Jewish Christianity and Hellenistic Christianity, contrasting with Barbarian Christianity and the birth of Christendom, culminating in Chapter 4 with his insights on “Christianity without Christendom”.

Chapter 5 (“Worldviews and Christian Conversion”) highlights some of the important developments and implications for mission over the centuries, whilst chapter 6 (“Monks and Evangelicals”), only four pages, looks at the nature of Christendom and some of its radical movements. In Chapter 7 (“When World Christianity Fell Apart”) Walls describes the astonishing diversity of the Church in culture and geography, and comments that the current reality of global Christianity is “a return to normality, a return to the multicentric, multilingual, multicultural reality of the Early Church...” In the epilogue there is a summary of six different phases of Christianity with its ensuing diversity but also noting points of coherence and continuity. Having read Walls previously, I found this last short book to be a good entry point for both the general interested reader and for those students who wish to explore the dynamics of conversion and culture further. As it is edited posthumously from notes, lectures and conversations it occasionally lacks a completely smooth read but it does provide an authentic expression of Walls' unique contribution to mission, theology and faith.

This book is ideal for mission practitioners, church planters, discipleship trainers, evangelists and church leaders pondering the interactions of culture and conversion over church history. When we encourage people and communities to turn to Christ, what exactly are we seeking to do? How much of our culture (including the way we do church) is essential, disposable or open to transformation in the process? Reading this book could lead to stronger reflection on how to generate healthier, more open creative Christian communities, stronger disciples and

a more multi-culturally relevant church. Not only do I recommend this book but I am buying it for friends and for those I think would benefit from contemplating its contents.

*Paul Thaxter*

### **Jamie Pitts, *Organizing Spirit: Pneumatology, Institutions, And Global Imagination* (London: T&T Clark, 2025)**

In *Organizing Spirit*, Jamie Pitts wants to challenge and complexify the dualistic either/or perception that the Holy Spirit is active in marginalised, community-based movements and absent from stable institutions. To develop his theology of how the Spirit may work in organisations, he describes a “pneumatological-sociological picture” (p. x). Writing as a professor of Anabaptist Mennonite theology, Pitts attempts to answer this question by putting Mennonite pneumatology in conversation with Pierre Bourdieu’s relational sociology.

His argument builds over five chapters. In Chapter 1 he makes an argument for expanding how theologians see the Holy Spirit at work in the organisation of complex human social structures such as communities, movements and institutions. In chapters two to four Pitts develops his argument through three case studies, using the themes of eco-theology, gender and sexual minority inclusion, and racial justice. The book concludes with a proposal for a political theology in which the Holy Spirit is the organiser of Christian institutions that can counter the global phenomenon of neo-liberalism.

I found inspiration in *Organizing Spirit* for developing theological insights into my own area of research interest of a practical theology of change in the church, and how institutional change could be influenced by the Holy Spirit. Practical theologians concerned with the topics of the three case studies – climate change, equality and social justice issues – will find value in Pitts’ work as a way of understanding how the Holy Spirit gives agency to human action, as will those who are interested in the growing field of organisational ecclesiology.

In my mind there are two shortcomings in the book. Pitts says that he will develop a framework for discerning if an institution is participating in the life of the Holy Spirit. I was interested in this as a practical theologian as a way of measuring or discerning how God works through institutions, but Pitts does not fully develop these criteria (p. 176). He draws out a few conclusions from the three case studies, and states the obvious, that “all institutions are fallible and liable to go wrong” (p. 160). I would have liked to see these criteria developed further. It is also ambiguous throughout the book whether the organisations and movements that Pitts has in mind are explicitly Christian in foundation and activity or whether the Holy Spirit can also act through non-Christian institutions. I think that he falls into the first category, but he does suggest that the Holy Spirit can use “worldly institutions” to call the church to account for failing to live up to its vocation (p. 150).

Should you read this book? I would say yes, even if you do not have direct interest in the topics of the case studies. For many denominations, institutional presence and power can often overshadow the theological reality of the church. The perspective outlined in *Organizing Spirit* offers the possibility and hope for organisational redemption and sanctification.

*Revd Ben Morgan Lundie*

*Rector, The Looe Valley Benefice and doctoral candidate at the University of Roehampton and Church Mission Society*

## **Jonny Baker and David Cotterill, *Fringe Dweller* (Getsidetracked, 2026)**

Fringe Dweller invites the reader “to encounter the person of Jesus Christ afresh” through 40 reflections on a variety of gospel stories. It’s intended as a devotional text that can aid both individual and group engagement. The way in to this dialogue between the reader and the characters and action of the gospel is the idea of ‘fringe dweller’. This descriptor is taken from John V. Taylor, bishop and missiologist, whose work Jonny Baker has previously taken inspiration from (see *Imagining Mission with John V Taylor* by Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross). It’s a lens that the reflections employ with consistency and to powerful effect in two ways.

Firstly, it maintains attention on the radical and disruptive nature of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ encounters are repeatedly with people who live on the fringes of society. Jesus disrupts and disregards the multiple ways we categorise and marginalise – something that also makes him a fringe dweller. There are also ‘fringe’ places, those no-go areas that are best avoided by respectable people.

These kinds of people and places are highly recognisable in Christian ministry, particularly for those that have a pioneering or missional orientation. This is the second way that the fringe-dweller lens is effective, as the reflections and suggested spiritual practices are deeply rooted in the realities of ministry. There’s wisdom and encouragement here on the highs and lows of mission in fringe places and on the impact Jesus can have on those that live there.

I really liked the straightforward style of the writing that makes the reflections engaging and accessible. However, as the authors state, this does not mean that they have left the academic at the door! There is sound scholarship and contemporary theology informing these reflections, making them a ready tool for use in all sorts of gathered settings. The liturgies add to the possibilities here. They are all ready to use or, as the authors invite, can be adapted or added to, or can inspire you to create your own.

There’s a humility to this book that is refreshing. While the authors are committed to the fringe-dweller notion, they also acknowledge that this needs to be read in conjunction with other perspectives on Jesus. The illustrations give the book the look of a graphic novel and this creativity in locating Jesus in our context so that we can follow his fringe-dwelling way is true to the book’s purpose.

Taking a cue from the 40 reflections, I used this as my book for Lent. So often I set out on these seasons of preparation with just such a good intention and only manage to make it to day three. I looked forward to picking up *Fringe Dweller* and travelled through Holy Week with the final reflections, having made it the whole way through! I highly recommend it as a resource to draw on for yourself and for use with others.

*Natalie Burfitt*

## **Ed Olsworth-Peter and Dwight J. Zscheile (eds), *The Starter’s Way: Leading New Contextual Christian Communities* (New York: Church Publishing, 2025)**

The Starter’s Way is written for those starting what the editors, Olsworth-Peters and Zscheile, have called “new contextual Christian communities”. While this name doesn’t roll off the tongue, I understand it to be an attempt to speak to a wide range of people who have a similar sense of calling. Focusing on the desire to respond to context when starting a new Christian community is a helpful way to encourage people to identify through what they have

in common rather than through their differences, whether church planters, pioneers, leaders of fresh expressions or new monastics etc. Continuing this approach, the contributors to the book also represent a diversity of voices working with a variety of practices and approaches.

The book presents 15 principles which have been discerned as common across the practices of leading contextual churches, and are clustered in three groups. The first group, “Spiritual Foundations” identifies principles of Jesus-centred, life of prayer, calling, bicultural identity and responsive obedience. There are five inward qualities named in the second group as discerning, self-giving, playful, hospitable and resilient. Finally, five outwards practices of noticing, adapting, experimenting, co-creating and persisting make up the third group. Each of these principles forms a chapter in the book, written by a different contributor. The book is then topped and tailed by chapters introducing the book, and then drawing the ideas together in further thoughts and a conclusion.

The fact that many of the writers are practitioners gives an energy to the book, where ideas flow, and stories draw one’s attention. I found myself particularly enjoying the final section, where chapters on noticing and adapting offered some helpful wisdom developed in practice, and the chapters on experimenting and co-creating were both inspiring and practical. Each chapter ends with “five things to consider” which helps the reader to identify ways to think about the principle more deeply, to put the principle into practice and to reflect on their current practice in light of the principle. There was some gold within these “five things”, and I wondered whether some chapters would benefit from being much more focused towards them. The 15 principles are offered as a helpful framework, rather than any sort of model or approach. This is particularly drawn out in the introduction, final thoughts and conclusion which do a reasonable job of drawing together a huge variety of approaches, ideas and insights.

As might be expected from a volume such as this, some chapters work better than others, and the framing given by Olsworth-Peter and Zscheile isn’t always easy to hang onto when reading through the book. My biggest issue with the book is that there are almost too many ideas, suggestions, quotes and stories. While this is real plus, providing plenty of ideas to inspire and help one’s own practice, the negative is that it doesn’t always flow when reading it. I can’t help wondering whether it has slightly fallen in a gap between a theological account of these principles and a practical handbook. I realise that my perspective as a teacher and trainer before I’m a pioneer practitioner might shape the way I read this book, and I would certainly be interested to hear how those involved in pioneering and church planting day in, day out find it. I do wonder whether there is a way this could be streamlined to really play into that strength of its practical perspective. That being said, I can still happily recommend it as a book which has offered a helpful framework which I’m sure I will return to. There is a wealth of ideas and practices, and some really helpful chapters opening up ideas which are less commonly encouraged and reflected on. (Harvey Kwiyani’s chapter on bicultural identity particularly comes to mind.) What I can really get on board with about this book, and why I think it is a valuable contribution to reflections on pioneering and church planting, is the way it moves away from presenting particular models towards encouraging principles focused on practices, postures and spirituality – in the words of the book, moving from a focus on doing to a focus on being.

*James Butler*

## **Alison Milbank, *The Once and Future Parish* (London: SCM Press, 2023)**

“The question should never start with, are we keeping the church open or are we closing it? The question really ought to be, how will we best be church in this context?” This is a question asked by one of the interviewees of some research I have carried out with Clare Watkins at the University of Roehampton. The question tries to move the discussion of church decline away from a question of economics to a question of theology and pastoral care. Behind this question are the very same instincts that led Alison Milbank to write *The Once and Future Parish* which seeks to advocate for the Church of England parish in the midst of a perceived turn against the parish within the way the Church of England operates. Milbank seeks to build on her previous book with Andrew Davidson, *For the Parish*, to provide a theological basis for the Save the Parish movement. However, while challenging a potentially unhelpful tendency towards centralisation within the Church of England, Milbank never seems to reach our asking interviewee’s question, “how will we best be church in this context?” because she already knows: it is the parish church. I think fundamentally this is the problem with the book, the underlying assumption that the woes of the Church of England are broadly all because the Church of England lost confidence in the parish, without a willingness to ask whether being faithful to the parish might look different in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain.

Reading the book I am broadly onboard with the critique offered of the Church of England: the centralising tendencies and often uncritical adoption of management theory, along with a concern that the Church of England is losing touch with many in the population. However, the solution offered of having more confidence in the parish church seems to me to not really be interested in actually getting to grips with what is going on. At one point Milbank suggests that the secularisation of the UK was broadly down to the Church of England choosing to withdraw from public life through the decisions it made about structure and parish. The fact that the trends facing the Church of England are mirrored in so many UK denominations, not to mention established churches in other Western European nations, seems to completely pass her by.

The book is laid out logically, beginning with the broad thesis, and then exploring the history and development of the church. Milbank asks really important questions about mission, ecclesiology, the adoption of management methods, the approaches to church planting, and the understanding of the role of the clergy and laity. It feels, though, that there isn’t a desire to really get into the complexity of the questions, as she slips into polemic at quite a number of points rather than developing carefully evidenced argument.

I think there is value in reading this book to get a view of what some think about the ways the Church of England is changing and developing, and I think the questions she asks are important and helpful. Her instincts about the issues facing the church feel right to me. I would have just liked to see a more nuanced engagement based in a more careful study of the present realities of parish in all their complexity – their fruits and their failures. I’m sure the book will be celebrated by the advocates of Save the Parish, but whether it will helpfully open up the discussion, or speak to those who are more sceptical about Save the Parish’s proposals, I’m less convinced.

*James Butler*

## Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Decolonizing Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2025)

Harvey Kwiyani lays out a well considered case for the need to decolonise mission in order to facilitate and improve contemporary mission praxis and theory, recognising that all followers of Christ are called into the worldwide mission of God. From the start, the coming of God's kingdom was challenging to imperialism, as he notes in the chapters "Jesus and the Empire" and "Imperializing Jesus", yet much incorporated military language within the mission glossary highlights the close link between Western imperial expansion and the spread of Christianity, especially over the last 500 years. Through careful historical research, and well chosen examples, Kwiyani demonstrates this interdependence of mission, empire, wealth, power, perspective and influence. For many non-Western people, this is obvious. In Chapter 1, Kwiyani shares about his personal family experience growing up in Magomero, Malawi, where David Livingstone's family had their colonial estate. Such experiences are so multitudinous across the globe yet hardly acknowledged even in current Western missiological discourse.

This intentional critique is seeking to open up new spaces in missiological thinking not dominated by Western discourse and seeks not just to decolonise missionary language but also to create new language to describe and demonstrate God's mission in the world, aided by many new voices. In view of Christian demographics, this is long overdue as he emphasises when he quotes Andrew Walls saying, "Western theology is too small to answer the questions of all world Christianity."

I would have appreciated a longer chapter on "Mission According to the Colonized" in which he quotes some key African thinkers such as John Mbiti. Kwiyani presents a genuine open challenge to Western missiologists: "Can you eat our missiology with us?" There is the plea for a much more authentic conversation and, amongst the church beyond Western paradigms, to encourage mission praxis into a greater reliance on a posture of humility, prayer and the Holy Spirit. He concludes thus, "We need to learn how to engage in God's mission among God's people in God's world, simply as God's co-labourers, servants and slaves – with no armies to make the way before us and no empires behind us."

This book is well worth the challenging read. It is historical research which is academically well evidenced. I found it both intentionally provocative and collaborative, inviting the reader into a deeper discussion so often avoided or ignored or dismissed by those with a dominant Western mindset. In my UK experience, the history and impact of the British Empire, colonialism and the spread of Christianity is rarely taught and little known, and where it is done, it so often focuses on its perceived benefits. Christian missionary histories likewise tend toward collusive narratives which describe the benefits of what has been achieved with little credit to local Christians, and so often no admission of their complicity in the denigration of people, place and culture. This book can be helpful in developing more cultural awareness and sensitivity about ourselves and others.

I recommend it for those interested or engaged in mission today both locally and internationally, ministers, mission organisations and Christian ministerial colleges, and those engaging in (Western?) postcolonial studies. I doubt though whether the term post-colonial or post-imperial will ever be apt to describe the world in which we live. We will still need tools to recognise the various disguises of empire. All the more reason to decolonise the mission of God.

*Paul Thaxter*

## **Greg Bakker and Tina Hodgett, *Into All the Parish* (London: Church House Publishing, 2026)**

*Into All the Parish* by Rev Greg Bakker and Rev Tina Hodgett is for anyone passionate about mission, community, and the future of the church. Rather than another 'How to Grow Your Church', this book offers something more hopeful and sustainable; working with what God has already blessed us with.

The book is rooted in scripture, with practical, lived out examples and case studies. Bakker and Hodgett share stories of ordinary churches and people discovering how God is already at work in their parish and learning how to join in.

One of the themes running throughout the book is that this is not another initiative. The authors show readers that mission is not about doing more. Instead, it is about recognising where God is moving, having an expectation that God is already at work, and responding with faith and courage. There is a genuine invitation for churches to become more adventurous; to be willing to walk with Jesus, take a risk, and do something different.

*Into All the Parish* places an emphasis on working in community, fostering unity and embracing diversity, encouraging churches to value the unique gifts, stories, and cultures already present within their parish thus enabling people to connect with Christianity in meaningful, and relational ways.

For leaders, dreamers, and blue-sky thinkers, this book offers plenty of imagination and possibility. It challenges churches to pay attention to where God is already active in their parish. For anyone longing to see faith become more connected, hopeful, and rooted in everyday community life, *Into All the Parish* offers a way to do church differently.

*Revd Marie Meredith, Vicar to the Churches of Great Wyrley: St Andrew's and St Mark's*



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