

Moynagh, Michael. 2017.

*Church in Life: Innovation,
Mission, and Ecclesiology.*

London: SCM Press.

ISBN: 978-0-334-05451-1

REVIEWED BY PATRICK TODJERAS

University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany

patrick.todjeras@uni-greifswald.de

CHURCH IN LIFE CAN be understood as the sequel to an earlier book called *Church for Every Context* (2012) by the Anglican theologian Rev. Michael Moynagh. Moynagh, based at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, UK, has served as a theologian and consultant for the fresh expressions of Church movement in Britain since its beginnings in 2004.

Moynagh follows a “see–judge–act” methodological structure in this book following the lead of Joseph Cardijn. In part one he “sees” new ecclesial communities emerging, using his “innovation framework” to describe the processes involved (17–140). Part two “judges” these new communities in light of the church’s theological identity (141–294). Part three “acts” in the sense of describing dynamics and practices that founding teams can attend to and encourage to fan the flames of innovation from which new ecclesial communities emerge (295–415).

In his previous book *Church for Every Context*, Moynagh discussed the theology of new contextual churches, like fresh expressions of Church, and how missional thinking developed new forms of church up to and since the publication of the influential Church of England report “Mission-shaped Church.”¹ In *Church in Life* he develops a model of innovation for new forms of churches, which he calls new ecclesial communities. Moynagh combines complexity and entrepreneurial theory through which he examines the process of innovation in the church. He explores a theology for change and within it a theological understanding of innovation and invention. He draws deeply from ideas which are emerging in business, technology and social science and is always looking for a theological angle to what he is seeing and learning by the examples he interprets. He also includes practical examples illustrating his points and draws out his theory through data from informal interviews conducted with practitioners.

Moynagh envisions three audiences for this book: those who reflect on the church’s life, people who lead and encourage new forms of church, and traditional church planters (6).

Moynagh’s work assumes a British society in which the local church’s presence has decreased and the Church in general is in retreat. Through the process of innovation new ecclesial communities are being established among the unchurched. Although Moynagh calls them “ecclesial communities” due to the fact that he wants to highlight the relational aspect of these new forms, Moynagh understands them as being or becoming church. They ought not to be stepping stones to traditional, inherited churches but be fully church on their own. This focuses the discussion on the relationships within the ecclesial community rather than the practices or structures of it. The models that he advocates are organic, making space for complexity and change, and have a narrative structure that is self-involving (19).

The strategy for establishing new ecclesial communities is a “serving-first journey.” Entrepreneurial teams would serve a certain segment of society, share its concerns and joys, becoming

1. Editor’s note: see the article from Sabrina Müller elsewhere in this issue.

truly incarnational. Through the offering of friendship, a community builds around common questions and interests. Together they explore what it means to be disciples. Here it is obvious that the first step is not establishing a worshipping community but building relationships and contributing to the needs and aspirations of people in a certain context.

The re-occurring framework through which Moynagh understands the future of the church is innovation. He boldly declares, “Through innovation eternity takes root in the midst of history” (8). He proposes using the innovation framework of dissatisfaction, exploration, sense-making, amplification, edge of chaos, and transformation, and encourages the reader not to think of church development in terms of a linear progression.

These can be useful paradigms for a founding team as they analyze what has brought them to start a new initiative (dissatisfaction with the existing state), explore new possibilities, make sense of them theologically and contextually, draw others in (amplification), tread the fine line between seeking stability and continual innovation (edge of chaos), and gradually see transformation in the people or cultural landscapes in which they are operating.

Moynagh opens up some new ways of thinking about the church today regarding its nature, its purpose and its identity. He finds his ecclesiological thoughts on what he calls the “essence” of the church, by which he understands four dimensions of relationships which need to be fostered: relationship to God, relationship to the wider Church, relationship to the community, relationship to the context. He differentiates the essence from the “essentials,” which would include practices such as baptism, scripture, eucharist and so on. For Moynagh such an approach is the new work of the Holy Spirit, as he mentions, “The coming kingdom contains possibilities for natural and human flourishing. Imagining these possibilities creates dissatisfaction with the current state of the world. Through the Spirit, this dissatisfaction breeds a desire to bring the kingdom closer” (63).

As concerns leadership, Moynagh’s advice is provoking. Leaders are to be entrepreneurs rather than managers. Leadership is

supposed to be exercised dispersed among the community. Leaders are to be “hosts” not “heroes” who do not centralize control and therefore reduce reflexivity (i.e., self-critical and exploratory thinking) and flexibility (fast response to changes). These leaders host ideas and talents.

Other provoking thoughts are, for example questioning the idea of sustainability of new ecclesial communities. He critiques that the emphasis on longevity which has become a dominant paradigm instead of the quality of a new church’s existence. Moynagh says, “What matters is not the durability of new ecclesial communities, but their fruitfulness. . . . It is not difficult to think of congregations that have existed for many years but no longer appear fruitful” (375).

Besides the enriching thoughts Moynagh proposes, there are a few concerns one might have when placing Moynagh’s book in the broader discussion on missiology and ecclesiology. First, Moynagh is little concerned with so-called “inherited churches” (those that have historically existed in parish contexts) and only focuses on the newly established ecclesial communities. He suggests that innovation only (!) comes from these new forms. That might be an arrogant statement in light of church history. Furthermore, the tenor of this book is that fragmentation is the future of the church, which raises the question of how the unity of the church will be put into practice in embodiment. Second, it seems that Moynagh has a strong belief that all new ecclesial communities are innovative, are “expressions of God’s reign” (7), and are church without ever discussing how right beliefs, doctrine or right practice might relate to that. These observations might trigger discussions which add to what this book has to offer the interested reader.