

Editorial

NIGEL ROOMS

Church Mission Society, Oxford, UK and The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, UK
nigel.rooms@churchmissionsociety.org

IT IS WITH GREAT pleasure I can write this editorial knowing it will be published online and Open Access along with all the articles through the Radboud University Press and Open Journals in The Netherlands. We were extremely grateful to the good people at Wipf & Stock who originally published us and helped us get our 'foot in the door' as an international journal. However, after a tip off from Stefan Paas, who is on our Editorial Board, and via Frans Wijzen from Radboud University who has kindly joined our Board we can now offer the journal as "Diamond Open Access" with our new publishers. All articles, including the back-copy from the first two volumes, will be made available online – free to write for authors and free to download for readers. Do spread the news far and wide about this fantastic new opportunity.

This issue brings together some critical questions in our field addressed by a diverse set of authors from Britain and Europe. I hope this won't always be the case, and the International Association of Mission Studies Quadrennial Conference that is happening in Sydney in July will no doubt help, but it is interesting to have a full set of articles addressing questions of ecclesial futures in the western world, all gathered in one place. There are significant overlaps and interactions between the articles as they are presented here; use of the metaphor 'pioneer'; how disciples are formed and grow into leadership; the forces ranged

against such personal and communal maturation; the importance in all this of embodied spiritual practices (and therefore neurotheological insights into the how the right hemisphere of the brain can help us) which all adds up to a very different understanding of 'salvation' from that which we inherited from our immediate forbears.

The first article is a collaborative piece between four reflective practitioners in the UK and Germany, Ben Aldous, Luke Larnar, Adrian Schleifenbaum and Rajiv Sidhu, who have crossed cultures and sometimes borders in their learning and practice of mission. It addresses the question of the aptness of the metaphorical term 'pioneer' for what happens when new worshipping communities or 'fresh expressions' of church are formed. This is contentious ground, but a journal like ours must not shy away from such questions – and indeed if anyone would like to offer an article defending the term in response I would gladly consider it. I have often wondered about this metaphor, not least since visiting the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Centre near Baker City in Oregon which showcases what is perhaps the origin of the term in modern era. Alongside the colonizing question within the pioneer metaphor which both the authors here and the Interpretive Center fully address – what I learnt there was the communal nature of the movement of tens of thousands of highly vulnerable women, men and children to a new life on the Oregon trail over decades; many of them never survived the journey. Whereas we, I think, rather imagine the pioneer much more as those who originally 'blazed the trail' in some individualistic and heroic fashion. All metaphors need to be 'taken and broken' for us to find their truth and their limits, and the four authors find 'pioneer' wanting on several counts. They also helpfully offer an alternative in the biblical notion of 'pilgrim'. Time will tell whether this might stick or other alternatives be taken up.

James Butler in the next paper, which rather asks to be laid alongside the first, assumes the metaphor and label of pioneer when researching what is happening in the field amongst 'lay pioneers' in the Church of England i.e. those grassroots people who do not receive ordination but find themselves nevertheless starting and leading fresh expressions of church. Equally critical of the 'organization' and how it has responded unhelpfully to the grassroots nature of the emergence of lay pioneers, I also wonder whether his critique of the unidirectional nature of what has been happening and the deficit nature of how lay pioneers are understood supports the critique of the label 'pioneer' in the previous article. Just as pioneers tend only to flow in one direction and assume they are to fill a space that is largely empty, so Butler discovers in several reports and documents an assumption that laity need 'resources, equipping and training' in a one-way flow from the centre to the edge. Returning to the

founding document of fresh expressions, the *Mission-shaped Church* report of 2004, Butler calls for a ‘mutually enriching relationship’ between these grassroots practitioners and their organization and outlines some principles for what this might look like.

The next three articles all started life as presentations at the 2021 online gathering of the International Research Consortium which was loosely hosted by the UK membership. We held a fascinating and wide-ranging ‘Open Day’ conversation on ‘missional discipleship’ with several more papers than those that have made it into the journal – though this is the reason they are all UK-based. I deliberately start with the contribution from Naar Mfundisi-Holloway, who works with the Salvation Army in Britain and is part of the Zambian diaspora. Naar has conducted a small qualitative study amongst women leaders in UK-based African diaspora churches. What strikes me, as editor, is both the overlaps and the sharp differences with the questions that James Butler was raising about formation of leaders in the previous article. Especially suggestive to me is the assumption from Mfundisi-Holloway that what these women require is discipleship and mentorship as well as, at some level, basic training (e.g. one of the research participants knows she needs to discover how to conduct a baby’s dedication service). Perhaps if we framed all ministerial formation, of whatever kind and for whatever end, as discipleship this would have radical implications for the way we go about it. The participants show that their reliance on the Holy Spirit and an entrepreneurial outlook within their networks means they more often than not find the formation they know they require from those around them. Nevertheless, the routes these women took into leadership have many gaps too, not least in contextualizing their mission and ministry in the UK beyond their own communities. Mfundisi-Holloway therefore offers some helpful suggestions and signposts about how these gaps may be filled.

Nick Ladd in the next article also connects in interesting ways with James Butler’s work – since the question of lay formation is also one he starts with. Nick shares with us some important aspects of his doctoral research in a single congregation which was on a journey towards a missional way of being church. Nick ably demonstrates what I have come to realize is a deadening and even ‘crusting-over’ of the fire of love for God and neighbour that occurs in western Christians within their churches over time. It is not that connectivity is not at all possible, just that the culture and behaviours that are learnt over time seem to shut down any initial enthusiasm and motivation for growth and maturation beyond a certain level. And the answer isn’t, as it seems to be in some places, more of what I have come to call ‘high-energy discipling’, which ultimately also exhausts and even burns out its adherents. Ladd’s research subjects, going on the missional

and spiritual journey, move outwards from an individualistic framing of Christian faith inherited from modernity. He shows how intersubjectivity is formed through appropriate spiritual practices which negotiate the space between the self and the other, especially in public mission; this is how ongoing maturation in community occurs. The traditional 'communal vehicles' such as homegroups simply are not sufficient to carry the complexity of the public nature of faith in a missional church. A new framing of these groups was required to carry forward the vision of the church now described as 'Sharing Life'.

It is not a big step forward then to imagine that once the churchy crust that has covered over the fire of God in a Christian has been broken open, joy may ensue! Mike Harrison places joy at the centre of his article since joy is also at the heart of the life of the Trinity of love. Drawing on such diverse sources as neuroscience, neurotheology, the long Christian tradition and contemporary writers such as Dallas Willard and Jim Wilder, Mike shows how joy ensues when we intentionally cultivate 'relational loving attachment' with God and which then flows out naturally into our other relationships. Moving away from the behaviours and assumptions of modernity about right belief through doctrinal assent two particular spiritual practices are outlined here, following Jim Wilder: 'Interactive gratitude and Immanuel journaling'. What is worth noting in this article is that the practices are both personal and communal as well as being simple rather than simplistic – as all good spiritual practices are. That the work of finding an ecclesial future for the western church is found in particular simple spiritual practices is surely to be celebrated and welcomed – especially in a journal that could easily become caught up in theory over practice.

In fact, the final article in this issue underlines much of what has already been said and picks up the importance of embodied spiritual practices in the contemporary Church. However, Dejan Aždajić from the Freie Theologische Hochschule, Gießen in Germany starts with the wider question of how salvation plays out in western world. He offers a very helpful overview of the state of the 'secular age' and where the disconnects are in how churches engage in contemporary society. He is clear that we must move away from just words in the head to engaging with whole person, and in particular the body. Such a move also brings us very much into the *here and now* of the present moment, which is of course where prayer and spiritual practices take us – and where God is available to us, thus underlining the point Mike Harrison was making. In addition, just as Nick Ladd showed, salvation, if it is anything is both a personal and a communal event and process and Dejan underlines this aspect too. Participation in intersubjectivity, as Ladd put it, is also key for Aždajić's understanding of how good news can be lived out.