Communal maturation and missional discipleship: A congregational study[1]

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Abstract

Individualization exercises pervasive power in the modern western church, generating an isolated and privatized approach to discipleship and mission that has been attended to extensively over the years in attempts to foster

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1. This article is based upon a thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of Doctor of Practical Theology in December 2020.

"whole-life" discipleship. My doctoral field work in 2015–17 was with a single Church of England congregation that had adopted an outward-looking missional process which disrupted this individualization and challenged people to a personal and communal journey of change in which the public life that they began to share with people in their wider community shaped both their personal and communal maturation. This journey was fuelled by shared communal practices which in turn generated new forms of communal life to express the congregation's developing public Christian identity. This research demonstrates both the challenges and the potential of forming communal identity in an individualized culture. Moreover, when mission is undertaken with openness to the other, a profound interdependence between communal maturation and missional discipleship is revealed.

Setting the scene, personally

From 2001 to 2009, I was minister of a relatively young (mostly 20s and 30s) congregation in an English university city. Outwardly successful, it was a typical programme church: large Sunday services, with a strong emphasis on creativity and excellence, mission and ministry led well by paid workers with volunteer teams, and small groups where people banded together to create a sense of relationship and belonging that was hard to find at a large Sunday service. The majority of people lived their faith in a separate world to the rest of their life: the most perceptive of them wanted this to be different, but did not know how to achieve this.

In response to this situation, the vision we developed was for mid-sized communities that would challenge people to take responsibility and ownership for ministry and mission, involving more people in using their gifts rather than passively consuming church life. The groups would be big enough to develop a ministry and welcome to a wider community, but small enough for people to feel a sense of belonging.

During this period, a woman in her forties – whom I would have counted as a mature Christian, someone to whom others looked for spiritual support and mentoring – came to me to say that in order to continue her own journey of growth with God she felt she needed to leave the church as she could not find what she needed with us.

I remember my feelings of disappointment and shock, and I questioned why she could not continue to grow by investing herself in the mid-sized community of which she was a part. But, at the same time, I had to admit that this large evangelical congregation was not the easiest place in which to explore complexity and change in one's life with God – however much I wanted it to be.

I had hoped that the journey that we were taking would be one of personal and communal growth and I deeply believed that it could be – but at the same time there were things that I sensed, but could not quite see, that made this trickier than I had imagined.

My discomfort with this situation was often submerged by busyness whilst never quite leaving me alone. What would it take to form Christian community that was outward looking and yet could be such that people might be able to make complex journeys of personal transformation within them? I had always been committed to forming such Christian community, whilst recognizing that community life can be both friend and foe to such development. I wanted to understand better how to foster communal maturation and this is what led me to my doctoral research project at Birmingham University.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND THE RESEARCH QUESTION

I considered that my questions could not be addressed through theory alone but needed to be grounded in personal and communal lived experience. I wanted to explore this with ordinary lay Christians, attending to what they said and how they lived. I believed this would best be achieved through an ethnographic study, which I began in September 2015 with an Anglican church in a suburban setting in Nottingham.

The church had a congregation of 70–90 adults and 10–20 children across two Sunday services. The ministry had been evangelical for the previous 35 years. A good number of the congregation had been formed in this tradition, but the spirituality of the church as a whole was more varied than the label might imply. At the beginning of a guided missional process that they entered in 2012, the congregation was invited to choose pictures and metaphors that they felt best described them; they saw themselves first as a spiritual "filling station" for individuals and then with a mission to the community beyond the church. The vicar expressed to me his weariness with the programmatic approach of the church – something that resonated with my own experience.

I participated in a wide range of church and community events, activities and meetings – formal and informal – attending to the way they spoke and

lived and to the stories they told. I was guided in this by Hopewell's symbolic interactionist approach – allowing the stories they told and the symbols that shaped the stories to illuminate their world view and ethos (1987: 28–39).

As well as participating in their life for two years, in the first year I conducted a series of focus groups with most of the adult congregation around themes of growth and development and followed that in year two with a number of one-to-one interviews where the questions were more focused in the light of the unfolding story. I also ran a community survey and one-to-one interviews to discover whether the wider community shared the congregation's sense of a changing relationship between the two.

In the course of the study, I ran focus groups with leaders to explore emerging themes with them and then again at the end with as many of the congregation as wanted to attend. I returned in 2018 to run a focus group exploring further development in the congregation's journey.

I coded the data from focus groups and interviews and correlated this with thematic analysis of my field notes. Alongside this detailed analytical work, I also employed narrative analysis to allow me to attend to the emotions, relationships and power dynamics of the interactions.

Though two years was a substantial period of time for me, it was short in relation to the story of a church. So I felt that stories and commitments in relation to growth and development might arise more quickly if I researched a church that had opted for a journey of communal change. This influenced my choice of church as I opted for one that had entered such a process with Partnership for Missional Church (PMC). PMC is a process of communal spiritual accompaniment designed to enable Christian congregations to form partnerships with their wider communities within the mission of God (Keifert, 2006; Rooms and Keifert, 2014). It does this through employing spiritual practices that encourage listening, partnership and hospitality with God and the wider community (Ladd, 2021: 101–102 gives more detail). Though this was a missional process, it was the aspects of community formation and practice that drew me to PMC in the first place. It was one of the serendipities of the project that it revealed the interdependence of communal maturation and an approach to missional engagement which takes seriously the agency of the other – hence this article.

When I spoke to people in the church, I used words like growth, change or development. I felt that asking people about their "maturity" would be akin to asking them about their humility – it would make them introspective and cautious – whereas I wanted them to be free to tell their stories. It was then up to me in my theological reflection to make the connections with processes of maturation.

> The aims of the research project were encapsulated in this question:
>
> What are people's understanding and experience of change and development when their church journeys with the *Partnership for Missional Church* (PMC) process?
> What light might this shed on issues of maturity through community?

To summarize: the stories of the congregation's personal and communal journeys was the focus, the PMC process was the catalyst for many conversations and maturation was my reflective and reflexive question.

I took a narrative approach to analysis and interpretation. This allowed me to draw the findings from the stories of my participants – both in substance and feeling. What emerged were two stories or, rather story and counter-story. The story was about a journey outwards towards the wider community and the formation of public Christian identity based on partnership and hospitality with the other – divine and human, both proximate and distant, which shaped the way they shared their faith and formed community and was grounded in a democratizing approach to learning and a turning of church inside out. The counter-story was reactive to this, holding on to an "expert-driven" approach to knowledge as the key to growth and a commitment to bringing outsiders in to the church – in principle if not in practice. I will tell these stories and the conflicts between them in future writing. My focus here is on the way in which this journey outwards shaped their maturation both personally and as a community.

Overview of the argument

One of the most arresting findings of the research was the pervasive power of individualization – even when attempts at a more communal practice were being made. Individualization fosters an isolating and privatised approach to discipleship and mission – one which is closed to the other who is different, creating a chasm between privatized fellowship and public witness. Taylor's concept of the "buffered self" is important for understanding this as a cultural norm (2007: 37–42).

The missional impulse of the journey outwards towards the other was the way to enable change in their culture as people formed relationship and community in public space. This journey proved both challenging and unnerving

and took great courage. To make such steps involved a personal journey of individuation and not everyone was willing or able to do this.

To make any progress at all required that the journey was grounded communally. Personal change was dependent on and embodied by communal transformation in two ways:

- ◆ It was communal practices that enabled the personal journey towards the other in the public space.
- ◆ People found that they needed to create new "communal vehicles" to embody their new identity and narrative and to keep them accountable to a new way of being in the public space.

This led me to conclude that Christian maturation is shaped through engagement with the other in the public space, involving a subtle interplay of the personal and the communal. It was the impulse of a non-colonizing missional approach which prompted the engagement with the other that was the prerequisite for such embodied communal maturation.

Individualization

Conceptualizing individualization

Ulrich Beck summarizes individualization as "how one lives becomes the *biographical solution of systemic contradictions*" (1992: 137). Our propensity to look for personal solutions to systemic problems in all walks of life, not least in the church, blinds us to the cultural and communal nature of profound change. Our default response is the assumption that individuals carry both the responsibility and the potential to create change in their own lives and that the task of formation – however this is perceived – is theirs alone.

Historically, individualism has taken different forms. In the early modern period, the commitment to rationalism generated an instrumental individualism in which "rational mastery" is understood in terms of "instrumental control" (Taylor, 1989: 149). Instrumental reason objectifies the other and from here it is but a short step to use the other as the object of one's subjectivity – "a solipsistic concept of self whereby the embodiedness of the other is something to escape, possess or control" (Irigaray, 2000: 30–39).

However, the romantic reaction to rationalism generated a new shape to the individualism, without abandoning other forms. Taylor (2007: 473) describes this as "expressive individualism" in which the tendency to use people for one's

own ends is overlaid with an almost moral imperative to form oneself through one's personal and private choices and relationships; something he describes as "the ethics of authenticity" (Taylor, 1991: 29).

This expressivism is set within the wider parameters of instrumental control, what Taylor describes as the "buffered, disciplined self" (2007: 476). In contrast to the "porosity" characteristic of earlier ages, he argues that the "buffered self" is a boundaried and autonomous self, grounded in disengagement; a mind-centred personhood, which is self-referential (2007: 25–54). Such "disengagement" may not be "hospitable to a sense of community" (2007: 42).

This reading resonated with the data from the established patterns of church life in my research context, where I observed the tendency to use the other in the process of one's own formation. This should not necessarily be understood as a cynical act, more a cultural norm or expectation. Furthermore, the swirling currents of individualism in contemporary culture, make it extremely difficult for Christian communities to form public identity with the other who is different in their wider communities – something that was a characteristic of the communal life of the church.

Individualization in practice

How did this manifest itself in the research context? I ran a series of focus groups with the existing home groups to explore their understanding of growth and development and their engagement with the PMC process.

Members understood the purpose of the home groups as a means of developing their personal learning and knowledge as revealed in this group discussion:

E: More recently we've shared the leading; each of us have taken one of the sessions and led it. I think that's a massive step forward for people who are just not used to doing that.

They felt that in this approach each one has a chance to prioritize their learning:

JJJ: I think we should probably have "knowledge" because there is no point in any of it, unless you know what it's all about.

MMM: Your growth. You've got to grow in the knowledge.

GGGGG: Yes. You've got to.

They also saw them as places of mutual support for personal formation – especially in the challenges of life – a kind of therapeutic individualism. One person said:

GGGGG: I've been through some really tough times. And if it wasn't for these guys, I probably wouldn't be here today. It was so tough and if it wasn't for when I found friends within this group … and they've supported me and they've helped me.

Of 55 comments about home groups:
- ◆ 24 were about mutual support.
- ◆ 21 were about learning and prayer.
- ◆ 2 were about the wider church.
- ◆ 4 were about disappointments with the home groups.
- ◆ Only 4 had any reference to the wider community.

Members would in theory welcome new members, but because of the inward-facing and privatized nature of the groups, none had welcomed new members during the last five to seven years, bar one person in one group very recently. They saw these groups as safe spaces and some were honest enough to say that they did not want new people because it would disturb the trust that they had developed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people on the outside of these groups within the wider church told me that they found these groups cliquey and inaccessible.

Interpreting this through the lens of individualization suggests that the groups existed to support people's needs for personal development and emotional sustenance. They gathered primarily as a group of individuals drawing on each other for support and strength. The bounded nature of a group of "buffered selves" is such that there was not enough sense of community to risk the penetration of those boundaries from unknown others.

When it came to outward focus of PMC, as I listened to the home groups it felt as if this journey was going on somewhere else – and they were either watching, resisting or ignoring it. Three of the groups were united in their opposition or passivity towards PMC and had almost no advocates for the process in their midst. Two of the groups were more positive and had individuals who had played a genuine part in the missional journey. However, even here, the process had made little impact on the group as a whole and people who were strong advocates of PMC practices in one-to-one interviews were concerned not to "rock the boat" within the group.

One of the most common ways of theorising this is Fowler's approach to faith development and what he describes as "stage 3": synthetic-conventional faith in which he argues we find and form our identity through dependence on significant relationships – conforming to the expectations and judgments of others. Fowler associates this with teenage years, but he admits that people may be processing what he calls "stage 3" in their 30s and 40s, something which leads many to be suspicious of the idea of "stages" if not towards the description of stage 3 that he offers (1981: 151–73).

Fowler argues that the weakness of this stage lies in the internalisation of others' perspectives for the sake of group identity (1981: 173). If this were all that was going on, then more open, porous groups would develop naturally as people grew out of the need for group think. The theory of individualization adds to Fowler's analysis a dimension which suggests that rather than being shaped only by the group, individuals create a group that protect the vulnerabilities of the buffered self from the unsettling other. Arguably, what Fowler is describing is less a stage of development and more an observation of what communal life looks like in an individualized culture. This certainly pictures well the character and relationships in the home groups. The groups defended their private world strongly in order to sustain their boundaries towards the other.

The journey outwards

Catching the imagination

In my doctoral thesis, I argued that, as a starting point, maturation in Scripture is at the very least communal as well as personal and that it is also other-centred in relationship both to God and people – something that becomes attenuated in a culture where a buffered self is the default pattern. However, Smith contends that porosity is the ontological nature of human beings and that "the reified Western ideal concept of the individual … has alienated us moderns from our 'essential species-being'" (2012: 60). If this is the case, then it is to be supposed that it would be possible to engage the imagination with a vision that challenges the buffered self of modernity – and this proved to be the case in my research context. Alongside the established, privatized life of the church, many (including a good number of home group members) were on a journey outwards to their wider community, which deeply engaged their heart and imagination. The following was spoken with energy and excitement by a church council member:

> If you had asked us at the beginning to find someone to talk to in the community we would have found it really difficult, but now we are falling over them.
>
> (Field Notes: 8–14.09.15)

Entering uncharted territory

PMC works with a number of what it calls "disruptive missional practices", which focus on attention to the other as subject, whether that other is God, or Scripture, or the human other – both proximate in the congregation and more distant in the wider community.

All of these practices involve the disrupting of privatized and individualized spiritual life. Dwelling in the world, for example, involves attending to the wider community and noticing the people that God brings across our path who we sense might be people of peace (a concept drawn from Luke 10.6) – people that we don't know well but whom we sense might share something of our values, vision and aspiration for the community where we all live. Having discerned this, the next step is to initiate a one-to-one conversation in public space – not to make a new best friend, but to discover a possible partner in the mission of God.

When they were first introduced to this practice, members of the congregation were paralysed by it and struggled even to make the first steps towards such conversations: it felt like entering uncharted territory – like the encounter with the giants in the Promised Land – "a land that devours its inhabitants" (Numbers 13.32-33).

Subsequent research on this practice has revealed the same uncertainties (Ladd, 2021). People spoke about the fear of their reception and their wariness about approaching people; one person spent three weeks of anxious anticipation before summoning up the courage to speak. She commented that she was "not a person who went out an talked about my faith a great deal". Another spoke of realizing that their faith "existed in a private space and not 'out in the street'."

Anxiety about entering public space is reported consistently in the research and pictures what it feels like for people to challenge the cultural norm of the buffered self. Living in such a privatized and individualized culture means that steps towards the other in the public space are fraught with anxiety and uncertainty and need to be handled with care.

In PMC, communal missional practices disrupt individualization through the invitation and challenge to attend to the "reasonably friendly-looking stranger" whether in the church as we read Scripture together or in the wider community as we risk initiating a conversation with a person of peace.

The stranger is a source of anxiety in our culture – sometimes for good reason, often for no reason at all. One church member encapsulates this:

RRR: Oh my word, some people aren't that confident that they can go and find a friendly-looking stranger, and how do you know they're friendly, anyway? Just because they're in the church, don't make them friendly, does it?

That is the embodiment of the buffered self!

The impact of instrumental and expressive individualism and the "buffered self" leads me to the conclusion that our cultural approach of using people in the task of personal formation is also a defence against the vulnerability of true engagement with the other. If maturity has always involved the ability to meet the other who is different, it becomes an even greater imperative in an individualized culture. Individualization leads to an attenuation of formation – whether this be using others within the church for our own formation or using those in the community as fodder for our evangelism. I am not saying that we approach this cynically as the language of "use" might imply, but that our individualizing approaches to discipleship and evangelism makes us blind to the potentially manipulative effect of this – something that is more than obvious to those on the receiving end.

A new way of being

Over the whole of the three-year PMC process, through listening to God and others, through meeting people of peace, through missional experiments with partners in the community, the church began to form a new sense of its missional vocation and identity. After much work together, the congregation articulated this as "Sharing Life with Jesus, with one another and with our communities", encapsulated as "Sharing Life".

This may not seem earth-shattering to the onlooker, but to them it was. It represented a move away from an instrumental approach of seeing others as the "targets" of their evangelism, which some saw as lacking in authenticity. Previously, their flagship missional activity was a holiday club – one person

described it as totemic – which absorbed a tremendous amount of time and energy throughout the year, yet which for many years had given people a sense that they were doing evangelism by bringing people into a church activity and putting on something for them.

It created a deep sense of community for those involved and so it took tremendous courage to question whether this really was having any lasting impact in the wider community and whether this was actually the way they, as a church, wanted to engage with that community. There was a huge struggle over this, which was still reverberating when I was with them. Was the calling to evangelise by bringing people into the orbit of the church or was it to form missional partnerships based on relationship and mutual spiritual discovery?

Their new sense of relational partnership with people led them to view people differently and to view mission differently – seeking to journey with their "partners of peace" in faith rather than impose something upon them. One congregation member put it like this:

J: I think, previously, there was a sense that the church and the world beyond the church were a bit polarised. I think we have begun to see the wider community, not so much as people who we need to evangelise, but people who we need to be partners with.

This is a bold journey for an evangelical church to take – but it is one that has borne fruit in terms of broadening and deepening relationships with their community and more experiments in missional partnerships.[2] I received this comment from a member of the village's Community Group:

AAA: It's very different to anything I've experienced before in 45 years. I've never seen a church so actively involved in creating a sense of belonging without having to be religious – left to choose to believe. Believing in community – God working in community – rather than having to be a believer.

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2. There is a wider question about the place of speaking in evangelism as well as listening. The place of this is implied in the use of Irigaray's idea of the third space – co-creation implies contribution by both. However, to see mission in terms of listening and partnership is such a huge shift for a Christendom church that this was their focus during the time I was with them. I have explored the question of the place of personal witness in the context of mutual and shared witness to the presence and activity of God elsewhere (Ladd, 2021), but there is room for further research on this with churches who have adopted a partnership approach to mission.

The interplay of the communal and the personal in the journey of maturation

Personal formation

Many people in the congregation followed a journey with the "other" in the wider community that led them beyond instrumental and expressive individualism to a more open and relational approach in which they came to understand mission less in terms of imparting what they already knew and more in terms of a shared spiritual journey of discovery in which they learnt to be differentiated enough to take seriously what others brought, whilst not being afraid to share their own insight. At the beginning of their PMC journey, an external interview team had pictured them as a well-defended castle – something which caught their imagination. A long-term member commented:

H: Right at the beginning they discerned that our church [had] a bit of a fortress mentality, and we didn't relate terribly well to those outside. There had been in the past, a sort of "them" and "us" between the church and community.

They engaged in some imaginative reflective journeys together called "balloon rides". And as they drifted over the parish envisioning a new world this is what they said:

> People imagined that in the future, because of increase in relationships and partnerships, the boundary between inside and outside church would become increasingly blurred. The Community would see "us" as part of "them" as opposed to "them and us". "We're doing this" would be owned by a greater mix of people.

Irigaray's work can help us to see why this can be construed as a journey of personal maturation. She argues that the male-dominated approach to the world treats all relationships as objects to a single subject, leading to the silencing and possessing of the other and the "reduc[ing] of the feminine to a passive object" (2000: 23). By contrast, intersubjectivity results from the embodied encounter of two subjects in which their generic distinctiveness, their story and personhood is respected. There is a mystery to the other which is not to be violated or controlled, but protected on a journey in which identity and mutual knowing is formed through relationship (2000: 17–29).

This journey to intersubjectivity involves an attentive effort, which she describes as the movement from "sensation" to "perception". "Sensation" sees the other as an object. "Perception" is a deliberate choice to listen and not just to look. It is a journey in which we refuse to allow the relationship to be reduced to a single subjectivity, refuse to appropriate the other, but allow them to be "other" in embodied relationship (2000: 40–47). Furthermore, this journey of openness to the subjectivity of the other is one in which we must be prepared to guard that subjectivity in ourselves and in the other. The goal is not fusion but rather "a relationship between two subjects, the objective of which is to leave to the other his or her subjectivity" (2000: 51). This leads Irigaray to develop the idea of a "third space" – a silence in which there is room for genuine attention to difference, to the history of each, not least to the party whose history has most consistently been unheard (2000: 62–67).

Though Irigaray grounds her work in the objectification and silencing of the feminine in western culture, it is also possible to see the impact of the "monosubjective" in communal relationships in a congregation. She recognizes, if not develops, the implications of her approach to cultures and ethnicities (1999: 156; 2000: 57).

This move towards mutual, intersubjective relationships is a bold and risky one in an individualized culture with its grounding in the buffered self. Nevertheless, this was a personal journey for some in which they left behind the closed communal structures of their home groups, which they increasingly realized could not sustain the journey they wanted to make. This is akin to Fowler's stage 4 (1981: 174–98) which involves a level of individuating (I prefer this to individuation) – which is well articulated in research on spiritual development from a psychodynamic perspective (Rizzutto, 1979: 41; Brokaw and Edwards, 1994; Hall and Brokaw, 1995; Hall et al., 1998; Hall and Edwards, 2002; Simpson et al., 2008).

There was a personal journey of maturation to be made in my research congregation in engaging with the other in public space – leaving behind both privatized spirituality and individualized approaches to mission. This is psychologically and spiritually challenging – and it needs good support. I want to argue that processes of communal maturation are central to that support.

Communal formation

Two factors proved significant in providing the communal formation that enabled personal and communal movement outwards in relational mission.

First, it was the practices that were introduced to them over the three-year PMC process; and secondly it was the new "communal vehicles" (as I termed them) that they created in order to support their new missional journey in public space.

Communal practices

Shared communal missional practices gave them the structure and support they needed to make their personal and communal journeys of change; the vicar used the word "scaffolding" to describe this supportive role. The practices that PMC introduces are deliberately disruptive of privatized community and the buffered self. Rather than imposition of or education for change, PMC follows a diffusion model in which people – influenced by one another – journey from awareness and interest in changing their practice through evaluation and experiment, hopefully to adopt new ways of being in relationship with each other and their wider community (Rogers, 2003; Keifert, 2006: 39–59; Rooms and Keifert, 2014: 20–24).

Discussing and reflecting on communal practices was central to people's conversations with me in interviews. For example, there were 60 positive comments about the practice of Dwelling in the Word – a practice of reading Scripture that privileges the voice of the other, something which began to give them confidence in their own understanding. Here are different reflections from two home groups:

TT: A new way of studying scripture which is much more equable and democratic and so people listen to one another.

C: [I] did not want to do Dwelling in the Word, hated the idea for lots of different reasons Partly it's about the preaching always comes from the front, because they've got the training, they've got the experience, why would I take it upon myself, where's the learning in that? Partly, it's about a sort of learning disability; [it] took a lot of conversations in the background, saying, "Okay, well actually, I've got the same thing you have, so we're on a level playing field, that's fine."

The same practice generated 88 negative comments.

RR: So, if you just give somebody a piece of Scripture and they look at it and think, "Well, I'm not sure I've got anything. I can't see anything

that I can say to Fred Bloggs here." "Actually, that's helped me." So therefore you can feel embarrassed.

NN: [We're] frightened to make a mistake, frightened of misinterpreting what [we've] read, being incorrect, and then being hauled up for it.

Conflictual debate is a sign of diffusion and evidence of a maturing process in which people take responsibility for and own their views. It is a further mark of maturation when people gave give room to the thoughts and feelings of others and meet together in what Irigaray describes as a third space.[3]

This picture of diffusion is evidenced to a greater or lesser extent in their discussions of the other communal practices. These practices gave them a way to engage in the public space and form relationships with "reasonably friendly looking strangers" – as PMC puts it – who became their people of peace and partners in mission. Some members of the congregation embraced this with growing enthusiasm, whilst others remained cautious and suspicious.

New "communal vehicles"

Those who were embracing this more intersubjective relationship with their wider community began to recognise their need to ground these practices more in their communal life together. During Lent 2017, a number of the congregation took part in a series of meetings to explore how they might make their new sense of public engagement more secure in the church's life. Gradually they felt their way to the need to create a new kind of small group in which their new vision of public Christian life could be embodied and in which they felt they could be accountable to one another for their journey with this; they called them "Connect Groups". I described these as new "communal vehicles". Three such groups were formed.

In reporting their experience with this, they noted that it helped them

- ◆ to be supported in and accountable for their vocations as public Christians;
- ◆ to become a porous community – welcoming new people, especially those on the fringe of church life;
- ◆ to "share life" in ways that went beyond individualised community to something more holistic and communal.

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3. There is not space here to discuss this particular journey with conflict and difference at greater depth here; it will be the subject of a later article.

They saw these groups as a way of normalising relationship with the other and having a consistent practice of welcome. One lay leader described it like this:

κ: Because you just share what you do … You become intentional about spending time with people and the people you think God's calling you to. We've got a couple coming along who we didn't know their names. NNN went … "I've said you're welcome to come to the group but I don't know their names from Adam …" I said, "What are your names? Do you want to come this week?" And they started coming, and they are on the periphery of church.

The interplay of the communal and the personal

What their journey outwards with the other demonstrated was that this individuating journey is not the *leaving behind* of community as Fowler supposes, but rather the *re-forming* of community and the creating of new *"communal vehicles"* that can carry the new narrative identity of public mission and in which people can find support and accountability for a new way of being. The established home groups could not enable this because they were formed by a vision of privatized, individualized discipleship which created bounded as opposed to porous sets in order to protect what was seen as an environment of safety from the other.

Individuals needed to make a personal journey of maturation away from this closed vision of community – something which required a challenging engagement with individuation as Fowler proposes. But they also needed their communal life to enter a journey of change in order to support and sustain this new vision of life. They needed new communal vehicles to embody their new identity and narrative and in which to be accountable to others for their new public vocation as Christians. Without this journey of communal maturation – grounded in the engagement with disruptive communal practices – the personal transformation would, I suspect, have been short lived.

Conclusion

Now to return to where I began with the person who felt she needed to leave the church in order to grow. What was missing here both for her and for the church was a parallel communal journey of maturation which would have enabled

her personal journey of change. This journey involves an intersubjective relationship with the other and the impetus for this comes from a non-colonising approach to missional engagement, which sets the stage both for communal and personal transformation that goes beyond the self-focus of an individualized culture. The centrality of communal maturation to this lies in the fact that it is through communal practices that individuals are drawn into engagement with the other and to a public identity in the wider community where God is already present and active – thus drawing ever closer to the call to love both God and neighbour and to seek first the Kingdom of God.

By making this intersubjective journey with the other, my congregation member would have both been part of the church's missional journey, but also by engaging with difference could have found a context in which to explore the complexity of her own changing perceptions of life and faith. It would also, I believe, have helped that somewhat conservative church to become more hospitable to complexity, uncertainty and provisionality. On such an intersubjective missional journey with the other, the interplay of personal and communal maturation becomes a genuine possibility.

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