

Olsen, Steen, 2020.

Jacob's Ladder: Missional Church in the 1970s.

St. Marys, Australia: SA & RL Olsen.

ISBN-13: 978-06-4899-680-4

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“ONCE UPON A TIME,” there was a Christian community in Adelaide, Australia called Jacob’s Ladder. Unlike most new Christian communities in that time, Jacob’s Ladder was midwived by very young, inexperienced Christians engaging in a street ministry centered, initially, in a coffee house. The coffee house was at the top of a flight of stairs, hence Jacob’s Ladder.

Some things about Steen Olsen’s book encouraged me to read *Jacob’s Ladder* as a fairytale. Reading it as a fairytale allows distance for the teller and those told. I am a friend of Steen’s and needed some distance from the book and the teller. I realize that using the fairytale genre can sound like I think the story is not true. I do not mean that at all. Some fairytales limit the kinds of truth claims to nostalgia or a 1960s Disneyland retelling of a fairytale. Such a fairytale would not meet the interest and purposes needed for using *Jacob’s Ladder* for

purposes of Ecclesial Futures. However, fairytales can allow for multiple layers of meaning, meaningfulness and truth claims, especially through nostalgic realism. *Jacob's Ladder* uses nostalgic realism. Much more of the truth to be had from it comes from interpreting it as a fairytale.

By way of nostalgic realism, *Jacob's Ladder* invites the reader interested in Ecclesial Futures a chance to find a useable future in our past. In particular, *Jacob's Ladder* allows a retiring generation to tell its story to younger generations without pretending to just present the facts or that contemporary circumstances are not in important ways different. Quite to the contrary, the nostalgic realism of *Jacob's Ladder* allows the present reader an insight into the mythos, the social imagination, and the shards of the metanarrative that made Jacob's Ladder possible and that led to its demise. I find by this approach that it then provides enduring insights for contemporary work on ecclesial futures.

Some of the obvious insights.

The chief actors in this fairytale are young, very young, naïve, inexperienced adults. I remain amazed what the young can accomplish that as an older, experienced person would not even try. These young adults worked the streets, took up conversations with persons who would simply never be attracted to a local church. Rather than initially see themselves as the hosts, they sought to be those hosted by the street folk. They listened with the expectation that God was up to something in these people's lives. They discerned God's movement in the relationships they developed. Over time they formed new kinds of households and communities. Some worked and some didn't.

They were remarkably naïve about sex, power and money. As someone who has spent years studying and consulting with congregations, I have learned sex, power and money drive much of the life of Christian community. As the early monastic movement learned, it was necessary to take three vows: chastity, poverty and obedience. No matter how we might shape our ecclesial futures, the remarkable spiritual discernment of naivete and wisdom with respect to sex, power and money remains.

One of the greatest strengths of the narrative of *Jacob's Ladder* is the supporting evidence from diverse persons, organizations and periods in the life of this local church community. Not everyone has the same story to tell:

1. The narratives do not provide a seamless sense of community development.
2. Different perspectives make for clear lines of conflict without reducing the conflict to simple resolutions.
3. The enduring failures of established, inherited church and this fledgling ministry to find ways forward remain common. I think of the

challenging work of 'Fresh Expressions' and the inherited church in the United Kingdom.

4. The critical place of spiritual practices of prayer, listening, reading and worship.
5. The power of and the remarkable upspringing of the arts: drama, music, dance, graphic arts etc. I find this evidence especially confirming the insights of the importance of the expression of the aesthetic in our lives as central to forming local churches.
6. Perhaps because this is a "Lutheran" local church, the place of Scripture and theology stands out. Be that as it may, communities require a shared narrative and Christian community grows well out of a biblical narrative. Further, some reflective moments are necessary if a community is to learn anything. No one learns from experience alone but only from experience reflected upon and articulated. This narrative gives ample examples of learning from experience.

This last point of action/reflection learning leads me to a most obvious note: the author of this fairytale is himself a part of the tale. Imagine Ella telling Cinderella. Steen Olsen tells the tale of Jacob's Ladder. He draws from a myriad of relationships, evidence, memories, original texts and plausible narratives. He brings the wisdom of someone who becomes a bishop, teacher and church-wide director of mission. He kindly tells a tale that makes himself and others uncomfortable: nostalgic realism. He hints at darker realities but does not shame or blame.

As a friend of Steen, I had my doubts that I was an appropriate reviewer of this book. Hence the need to get some distance through the conceit of a fairytale. Be that as it may, I advise you to read this book, retell its tale, and gain insight in this past for ecclesial futures.