

Beholding: recovering “right brain” apophatic spirituality for the local church in mission

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses missional spirituality, that is, what spirituality, individual and corporate, is appropriate and fruitful in churches which seek to participate in the mission of God. The paper engages with neuroscience around how the right and left hemispheres of the brain offer two ways of attending to the world; Iain McGilchrist asserts in *The Master and his Emissary* that left brain attention

has predominated especially in Modernity. Two Christian responses which utilize these truths about the brain are critically examined, one from an American, broadly Evangelical school of thought and the other from the Anglican Solitary, Maggie Ross. Ross' recovery of the apophatic stream of Christian spirituality via the right brain of "Deep Mind" is preferred without dismissing other approaches. The article delineates the "unintended consequences" of seeking silence before God who is, including the gift of "beholding" and how they connect to what is required of missional churches. Some brief suggestions are made as to what might be done to enhance the practice of silence in local churches.

Keywords: Christian spirituality; Apophatic; Missional: Church; Neuroscience

INTRODUCTION

The question of the relationship between Christian spirituality, both individual and corporate, and how the local church¹ participates in the *missio Dei* is a very live one. I come to this question as both a spiritual director and a consultant to churches in my work with the Church Mission Society. In writing a book on the theology of spiritual direction I articulated a fractal connection I discern between spiritual direction and the missionary task of the church (Chatfield & Rooms, 2019: 157-64). Beyond my own work in spiritual direction I have to say I haven't been that impressed with recent contributions to this question such as the collection of essays in Finn & Whitfield (eds), 2017, which left me feeling there has to be a deeper engagement with the topic. This article is a small contribution to the conversation.

As an Anglican priest of the Church of England I have increasingly valued the belief that, while remaining a Protestant body, my Church is both reformed and catholic – with the emphasis, in the second half of my life, on the catholic and the sacramental. This isn't some partisan commitment as these things are often portrayed. Rather, I have been drawn into enabling churches to become missional, and I have a growing sense that the future of the Western church is dependent on the long Christian tradition before the Reformation. As my

1 I employ the term "local church" in the title of this article and throughout as an umbrella term for any Christian worshipping community that is embedded in its proximate geography and community – sometimes called the "parish". In the article church without a capital letter refers to such entities alone and Church to the wider denominational body or institution (which may or may not include its local manifestations).

Lutheran colleague in creating missional churches, Pat Keifert is wont to quote from Jaroslav Pelikan that “tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (Pelikan, 1984: 65). This article develops my writing about the connection between spiritual direction and the church in mission and the spirituality of leadership in such churches (Rooms and Keifert, 2019). In this article I take a step back into the ancient *via negativa* of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and their successors from the fourth century onwards before placing that alongside current thinking in neuroscience. I will then examine two schools of thought about how to employ neuroscientific thinking in Christian spirituality and discipleship, before coming to some initial implications of this work for the local church in mission.

This paper² therefore develops a “turn to the tradition”, as we might name it, in my own spiritual journey since, for over ten years now, I have been seeking silence in prayer inspired by the Carmelite tradition, in such giants as Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross. And while many other traditions are available, I trust it contains a challenge to readers to mine the riches and resources that we have at our disposal from our forefathers and mothers in order to be the church faithfully in our own day.

BACKGROUND: WHY SPIRITUALITY MATTERS IN MISSIONAL CHURCHES

Ever since the work of Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch in the late twentieth century it has been clear that the Western, so-called “mainstream” churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have been in the midst of a paradigm shift. In the world around them and in their theology of mission there have been massive changes that accompany the end of the modern, colonial era since around 1950. The well documented numerical decline of such churches is at least in part attributable to their inability to change their behaviours and culture to meet the world as it is in the *here and now* as opposed to the world as it was seventy years ago. They have become vulnerable even to death, because they have

2 The writing here began life as a paper at a meeting of the *International Research Consortium* in Adelaide, Australia and the *International Association of Mission Studies Conference* in Sydney, Australia in June-July 2022. I am grateful to those who commented on it in those places. Another shorter version was a contribution to a Festschrift book of essays to be published in 2023 in South Africa in honour of Frederick Marais.

increasingly lost the ability to embody their faith in the incarnate one publicly in the neighbourhood (Walls, 2002: 30).

David Bosch (1991) for the Protestants and Steve Bevens & Roger Schroeder (2004, 2011) for the Catholics presented the concept of *missio Dei* as the required paradigm shift in theology which is brought forth by the concomitant paradigm shift in the world. This is the understanding that God is mission and therefore missionary by very nature and being, crossing boundaries in creation and redemption. Such theology turns upside-down the inherited understanding of how missionary work occurs under conditions of modernity – and also the powers that came with State-Church acting during Christendom. Thus, to turn to some well-coined phrases, “it is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world but the God of mission that has a Church in the world” and the task of that Church is therefore to “find out what God is doing and join in”. A note of caution here however, again from a “Catholic” systematic theology perspective, for, as Alison Milbank (2020:18) points out Christians do not live outside of God and God’s life but rather inside the eternal overflow of God’s love. Theologically this is termed participation and, while there is much more to be said on the subject (Davison, 2019) it does further underline that human agency in mission is likely limited to “getting ourselves out of the way” of God, as we shall see rather than thinking that it is still somehow down to us and our singular effort to “join in”.

Reception of the *missio Dei* has been rather slow on the ground and not uncontested in the academy, yet it is beginning to filter through to church bodies and particular worshipping communities and as such is now shaping their imaginations and behaviours (Clark et al., 2010). Even on the ground however there is new evidence emerging that it is openly resisted and brings conflict and contestation (Hardy, 2022). For me this is more evidence for the spiritual nature of the task of participating in the mission of God – it goes very deep into the church’s core beliefs and practices. I have written elsewhere of six practical and behavioural shifts that are illustrative of the church turning inside out in this way (Carson et al., 2021: 101–15). Some practitioners and scholars have called this movement the *missional church*, where the missional is about the formation of Christian community around God’s mission in the world – though the term is not without its difficulty and contestation too. The key word here is *formation*. Missional church is about how the “doing” of the church is wholly derived from its prior “being”. The being of a missional church is focused on how God calls, gathers, centres and sends it into God’s world to participate in God’s mission there. Ultimately therefore becoming a missional church is first and foremost a *spiritual* task. There are two ways to understand this better.

First, following Williams (2020), we can state that mission arises from a life of prayer with the emphasis in that prayer on the mutual gaze between lover and the beloved. Such a stance removes anxiety (at least about the big picture of how God holds all things, including a declining church) and leads Christians naturally into mission:

Mission is an invitation to live in a new world. It is not recruiting people for a manifesto or a programme ... just as prayer, serious prayer, seems to begin in looking in wonder, in the gaze of astonishment, so with mission. What is this new world where things are so different? What is this new world where depths we hadn't imagined are uncovered and made visible? (Williams, 2020:14-15)

Another way of looking at this is that if local churches are to adopt the *missio Dei* as a way of being, the core skill, or in biblical terms gift, involved in “finding out what God is doing” is that of *discernment*. We might think of discernment alternatively as “paying attention”, being able to notice, to see – as Jesus demonstrates to the religious leaders of his day in John 9. Discernment is also clearly a spiritual task, one which too is grounded in prayer.

This article works towards presenting a rather hidden and forgotten stream of Christian spirituality which is directly connected to the ability to pay attention in the *here and now* of any moment and arises from contemplative or mystical prayer in silence. It is supported by the long Christian tradition, stretching back to the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the fourth century onwards, of the apophatic way or *via negativa* where words for God and in prayer run out in the face of the One who simply is. Somehow the ability to remain present to God in silence is directly related to the ability to notice the presence and activity of God at any other time and therefore participate in the new world that God's presence and activity is always creating. In the biblical and Christian traditions there is a rather forgotten way of “paying attention” that is grounded in the “paradox of intention”, and draws on this negative or apophatic stance which states that trying to reach God can only be done so by letting go of the intention to do so. Perhaps this is also the case in mission – if we engage in mission in an anxious, even frantic desire for results we are most likely to be disappointed. In order to understand more how a recovery of the apophatic might work for us in creating missional churches we turn to neuroscientific research on the human brain.

THE RIGHT AND LEFT BRAINS – “THE MASTER AND HIS EMISSARY”

Research into the functioning of the human brain has been magisterially presented by Iain McGilchrist (2018 [2009]).³ McGilchrist is somewhat of a polymath in that he works at a high level across many disciplines which include neuroscience, psychiatry, psychology, philosophy and even the occasional excursion into theology. In doing so he models for the reader what he is explicating which, to do a great injustice to the book of nearly 600 pages (of which more than 100 are notes and bibliography), states that the human brain is divided into quite distinct left and right hemispheres. It is not that left and right hemispheres *do* different things, as scientific studies have shown that most brain functions occur in both hemispheres. Rather they have distinct, what I would call epistemic functions which are related to the evolution of animal brains from birds. Birds need to pay close attention to small specks of food (left brain) and have a bigger, even whole or rounded picture of the world around them that contains predators, others in the flock and potential mates (right brain) (2018 [2009]: 27). The two halves need to be kept largely separate in how they *attend* to the world and this has remained pretty much the case throughout the course of evolution. However, there is, it seems, particularly in humans, an optimal relationship between the left and right brains for flourishing which is constantly under threat because of the way the left hemisphere operates.

McGilchrist (2018 [2009]: 14) employs a metaphorical fable from Nietzsche to convey the precarity of the relationship and hence the title of his book. A good and benevolent leader (the “Master”) is inevitably effective at growing his influence over lands and requires representatives (the “Emissary”) in the burgeoning fiefdom to see to the day to day work. Equally inevitably one day an Emissary realizes they do not need the Master and attempts a hostile takeover. Both are required but their relationship has to remain asymmetrical for life to continue to flourish across the lands. Thus, McGilchrist sets himself

3 While not uncontroversial, McGilchrist’s work has continued with a further massive two-volume extension of his thinking published in 2021 as *The Matter with Things*. These volumes contain, amongst other things, a first principles argument for the existence of the sacred in the universe. Critiques of McGilchrist tend to revolve around accusing him of a supposed right-brain tautology which cannot be argued against. Such critique ends up, in my view, also being tautologous. What is without doubt is the increasing acclaim for his work, witnessed by his keynote speech at the AI World Summit 2022 – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgbUCKWCPMA> accessed 9 November 2022.

the double task of showing how the different brains offer different qualities of attention or “seeing” of the world. He demonstrates how the left brain has tended over the course of (at least) Western history to dominate – resulting in its current virtual hegemony in the post-modern period. Understanding the importance of defining what attention is, is vital here – it “is a *way in which*, not a thing; it is intrinsically a relationship, not a brute fact. It is a “howness”, a something between” (2018 [2009]:29, italics original).

The differences in how the divided brain pays attention are key to understanding McGilchrist’s argument. They have a double effect in that they not only change how we see the world, but they also affect the world itself (2018 [2009]: 5) – the nature of how we see reality and even truth. The left brain *divides* and categorizes, it objectifies the world, sees things without relation to each other, only as separate entities; it reaches out to grasp the world, take power and rule over it; things have utility for the left brain whether they are animate or inanimate. The right brain on the other hand sees from the whole, understands all things as connected, allows things to simply be what they are and attends to the in-betweenness of the self and any Other with which it is in relationship. It is not difficult to comprehend, then, that the ability for much of what happens in spirituality, and particularly apophatic contemplation, resides in the right-hemisphere brain. Nevertheless, left-brain “linearity” has predominated over the past few centuries, thus marginalizing the gifts that mystical work can bring. McGilchrist’s work has been picked up by Christian thinkers and writers over the past decade or so and I wish to introduce here at least two approaches spirituality and missional church life that arise from this new understanding of how our brains pay attention.

AMERICAN EVANGELICAL NEUROTHEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

First a group of American Evangelicals⁴ draw deeply on McGilchrist and other neuroscientific sources as well as the American philosopher and Christian author Dallas Willard. They develop a renewed understanding of discipleship and Christian formation (for example Wilder, 2020 and Wilder & Hendricks, 2020). These works are related to the relatively new field of “neurotheology”

4 It turns out, perhaps not unsurprisingly, that all these writers are male, which I note does skew my bibliography somewhat.

with authors crossing over from medical neuroscience into theology and spirituality such as Curt Thompson (2010) and Andrew Newberg (2016 [2010], 2018).

Let us examine more deeply the work of Wilder and Hendricks, who are indeed concerned with Christian character formation, maturity and discipleship in community, especially when, in their experience, spiritual “growth” seems to plateau and even become very stuck after an initial burst of energy and light.

Wilder and Hendricks locate the most fruitful possibilities for character formation in the right brain since this is where, as we have seen, relationality to the other is attended to (2020: 22). They also point out that much of the function of the right brain is “preconscious” (2020: 21) and therefore not susceptible to cognitive training which is how much discipleship formation in the church proceeds. This is important since it leads directly to the employment of spiritual practices in relational community for growth. Spiritual practices are habit forming over time and shift behaviour in much more subtle ways. The argument goes something like this.

Character formation arises out of “loving attachment to Jesus” (2020: 41), which makes theological sense in the light of the summary of the Law which is to love God and neighbour (Mark 12:29-31). The emphasis in the Christian life is therefore placed upon “attachment love” or *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible and *agape* in the New Testament. From such attachment arises relational joy which is described as “what we feel when we are with someone who is happy to be with us” (2020: 56) and which again is located in right brain attention. Such notions are clearly related to how we learn healthy or secure attachment in infancy following the child psychologists Winnicott and Bowlby (for example see Winnicott, 1991 [1971]). Such is the strength of belief here in attachment joy that it even leads the authors to overturn that Evangelical shibboleth of the division between the first and second persons of the Trinity on the Cross as Jesus dies which plays out in many contemporary hymns and worship songs. Rather the authors claim that Jesus “never lost touch of His Father’s face shining on Him as He was tortured and humiliated” (2020: 60, capitals in the original). Character is formed by focusing on increasing the capacity of the Christian community to exhibit *hesed* and joy by “training” the right brains of members with various exercises (2020: 187ff.).

In another suggestive development such joyful attachment allows a phenomenon Jim Wilder names “mutual mind” or intersubjectivity as occurring via the right brain between people (Wilder, 2020: 33). I suspect this is related to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (2002 [1992]) concept of “flow” in the positive

psychology movement's study of happiness, which is not unrelated to the theology of joy we are discussing here and Polanyi's notion of "tacit knowledge" (Wilder, 2020: 40). All of which raises the possibility of finding a mutual mind with God which further results in the joy and peace of being seen by the divine (2020: 49).

Wilder connects with the practice of mindfulness (2020: 37) as a precursor to prayerful attachment with God which is helpful, but perhaps because of a fear of meditative practice that does not sit before an Other (2020: 38) he will not lean into contemplative prayer or any sense of the apophatic. He seems largely unaware of the paradox of intention which we referred to above and the "*nada*" or "nothing" on the ascent of Mt Carmel in the writings of St John of the Cross.

What we might call the Wilder school introduces fruitful spiritual practices designed to "train" the right brain in order to grow joy and character, which Mike Harrison has explicated helpfully (2022). Yet I cannot help but feeling, especially after finishing the *The Other Half of Church* that Christian discipleship for Wilder and his colleagues remains a programme based on a certain kind of (even gendered) activism which could lead to ultimate disappointment under the paradox of intention. The practices recommended in these books largely remain cataphatic and therefore do not go quite far enough for me. I wonder whether the left brain emissary has asserted itself and gained the upper hand once more. I believe we must turn to the apophatic in order to actually find the wholeness that Wilder and his like are seeking.

THE RIGHT BRAIN, APOPHATIC "BEHOLDING" AND THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

Therefore, we turn to Maggie Ross, an American Anglican solitary based in Oxford, and her two-volume work on silence (2014, 2018). Ross almost joyously utilises McGilchrist to make a claim about how the suspicion and even loss of the apophatic in western spirituality is directly related to the hegemony of left brain attention. Ross engages with McGilchrist's understanding of the epistemic difference in how the two halves of the brain function from the very start. She offers a schematic diagram (2014: 36-7) for this in relation to her definition of contemplation as "a specific disposition of attentive and responsive receptivity" (2014: 75) in the Christian tradition. There is a sense in which apophatic practice has always employed the human right brain – it is simply that now, from neuroscience via McGilchrist, we have the evidence for it.

It is worth noting here that silence in apophatic prayer is not the technical absence of sound, but a disposition in the one who prays to be solely present, without distraction, to God who is ultimately unknowable. I would suggest this is a simple, yet highly nuanced approach to Wilder et al.'s understanding of attachment to God. Ross' schematic shows the proper relationship between left ("Self-conscious Mind") and right brain ("Deep Mind") attentiveness for optimal functioning. Ross summarizes this relationship thus:

Most people [*we might say Western people*] are trapped in the virtual and noisy world of self-consciousness (left side of diagram). For the mind to function optimally, it must be recentred in the deep mind (right side), restoring circulation between the two epistemologies so that ordinary life draws on its wellspring of silence and transfiguration. Then experience is understood as provisional and is continually submitted to silence where it is transfigured. (2014: 36)

The self-conscious mind on the left side of the diagram is "governed by the paradox of intention" which Ross believes is the key to undermining its hegemony. The deep mind can be accessed only by apophasis which describes by double negation in unknowing, "it is not that, and it is not even not that" (2014: 69) thus coming to know God, whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere. In the middle of the two kinds of mind is a liminal in-betweenness where the connectivity happens. The first two "threshold/effects/phenomena" noted here are attentive receptivity and beholding, which are no doubt connected to Wilder's attachment love, as we noted above.

Before we continue, a note about the use of the word "experience". Ross, along with much of the Christian tradition, is very wary of speaking of (or in fact having) "spiritual experiences". This is not to deny that they happen or cannot draw us closer to God, but the simple truth is that any experience is we have is ours and therefore by definition cannot be God. As Ross states in relationship to the master of the deep mind or right brain, in contrast to the self-conscious emissary of the left brain, "when self-consciousness is suspended there can be no experience" (Ross, 2014: 78). Here is another departure from the Wilder school. Newberg (2018: 259-78) has a chapter entitled "Escaping the prison of the brain: Mysticism" which addresses throughout so-called mystical experiences. Newberg seems unaware of any critique of experience in the context of spirituality which drives what I would understand as a non-question about whether we can escape our brains. Our brains are a given, as is God; what is

simple but profound is the space between them when placed in proximity in silent prayer.

Ross devotes a whole chapter in her second book to beholding (2018: 128-36). Ross thinks that the word behold is “arguably the most important word in the Bible” (2018: 129). It is the first word God speaks to Adam (Gen. 1:29) and the last word Jesus gives to the disciples (Mt. 28:20) and occurs over 1,300 times (2018: 132). However, many more recent translations elide the meaning to “remember”, “see” and “know” thus offering more evidence for the dominance of left-brain attentiveness in modernity.

In beholding Ross states that again the paradox of intention applies – it cannot be made to happen. Etymologically it is related to grasping (“getting it”, we might say, or having a “light bulb” moment) thus, “one *holds* or *grasps* by *ungrasping*: in beholding the analytic conceptualizing faculty is relinquished” (2018: 129, italics in the original). Here is yet another departure from Wilder, since while we are not far from “mutual mind” here, in fact there may even be an equivalence, Ross would understand such moments as gifts to be noticed rather trained for and sought out. I suggest there is a connection here with the practice of *visio Divina*. If *lectio Divina* is reading the inspired text along with God, *visio Divina* is seeing or perhaps better, imagining the world as God’s creation along with or even as God sees it. This takes us directly to the development of the imagination through poetics, music and art.

Beholding is a “covenant” word and the beholder therefore, “faces outward, self-forgetful, engaged, and contiguous with the community of the beheld; beholding is receptivity and engagement” (2018: 130). I don’t know of a better description of a missional stance from within the people of God, the church, not least because “beholding is a living, ongoing recapitulation of the self-emptying en-Christing process of Philippians 2:5-11” (2018: 133). It is also a public act which stands over against the privatisation of religion in modernity (see also Chatfield and Rooms, 2019: 163). Elsewhere Ross writes of the importance of understanding the Christ hymn as encapsulating incarnation, transfiguration and resurrection where trans-figuration is exactly what happens when the deep mind becomes involved in beholding. With beholding a new set of possibilities erupts in the *here and now*. What happens is a “shift of perspective, turning inside-out and upside-down” (2018: 134). And here we return to where we started with Rowan Williams’ definition of mission as discovering the possibility of a different world.

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SEEKING GOD IN SILENCE AND THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

At this juncture, as we conclude the article, I want to bring together the threads of what we have been learning. That is, what is the effect, or the fruit, of utilizing our God-given right-brain way of attending to its full capacity and engaging our Deep Mind through the apophatic practice of silence in relation to the mission of God? We need to delineate its consequences and ask how those effects are helpful in missional churches alongside what might be done to enhance the practice of silence. But before we do that some caveats are in order. First let the reader not take away from this work that the cataphatic and cataphatic ways of praying are of little use. What we are about here is a re-ordering of how the two halves of the brain function, rather than advocating for some equally awful binary opposition of left and right. Second, silence in the whole sweep of Christian history comes in various forms some of which are deeply antithetical to the purposes of God in the world as Diarmaid MacCulloch has wisely demonstrated (2013). Silence in the face of evil, especially when perpetrated by the Church, is not what we are engaging with here. And finally, we have to remember the advice given by Abba Moses to a new hesychast entering the desert to pray, “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything” (Ward, 1975: 139). That is, it is the repeated and habitual entry into silence, which is enough in all its utter simplicity, difficulty and ultimate profundity, that is required. The English mystic text *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2001) calls this a “naked intent towards God”. Given the paradox of intention which is ever at work in seeking after God, God’s presence and activity, fruitfulness emerges properly as an unintended consequence of the practice of silence. The practice is both an end in itself and a means to an end since it has a deep and lasting effect.

Let us then gather together some of these unintended consequences. We can work here with Ross and place alongside her the descriptions of the effects of a deliberate entering into silence by Sara Maitland (2008) when she took herself off to live alone in a remote place. I think it helps here that Maitland does not become a silent recluse for overtly Christian purposes (e.g. as part of any religious community), thus she is able to describe what happens in her with reference to a whole range of other sources. Her work is a properly interdisciplinary, even, we might say, secular and scientific examination of the subject. Perhaps it combines her right and left brain in helpful sequence.

Seeking silence is by definition an embodied practice, as Ross says, “The mind’s work with silence and its effects involve the entire bodied person” (2014: 45). Maitland notes the “extraordinary intensification of physical sensation”

(2008: 48) with all her senses and feelings become more available to her. Such intensification occurs in the *here and now*. Silence before God is about being present in the moment, on the theological principle that God is always where we are, not where we imagine we ought to be (usually in some self-conscious nostalgic past or idealised future). Presence to the reality of the here and now alongside embodiment are vital signs of the members of a missional church. They are able to be the change they wish to be, fulfilling Newbigin's description of the local church as the hermeneutic of the gospel, being God's people who "believe it and live by it" (1989: 227).

Maitland notes what she calls "disinhibition" arising quickly in her new silent state (2008: 52) and she relates this to a lack of self-consciousness (in Ross' terms the left brain is losing its hegemony) and in Jungian terms having the *persona*, or with Freud, the superego taken away. Such disinhibition can go in several directions, but when placed in a theological frame I am drawn back once again to the Christ hymn in Philippians and the *kenosis* of the Christ which Ross noted was also directly related to the gift of beholding. I once heard (I forget the exact moment) Bishop Gordon Mursell, then Bishop of Stafford in the Church of England, call this phenomenon being "unselfed". An important distinction needs to be made here since Ross thinks it is very dangerous to speak of the destruction of the self. Rather by self-forgetfulness which arises in silence the "me" that gets in way of God can be "parked" as I sometimes put it, or laid aside so that, in Ross' terms again – transfiguration of the whole of us can happen. Another way of putting this according Bishop Wolfgang Huber, is "free, creative self-withdrawal" (quoted in Keifert & Rooms, 2014: 14). As corporate bodies missional churches have raised levels of good conflict since something vital is happening and there will always be resistance to such new life (Keifert & Rooms, 2014: 15). This heightened conflict can only be dealt with if enough members have learnt how to lay aside their own self-conscious desires, and stay silent until they can speak from their innermost hearts where God resides. In my work of consulting to churches we call this a "floated conversation" as part of corporate spiritual discernment. It is truly beautiful when it happens, as it ebbs and flows with the movement of the Spirit.

We have noted the predominance of anxiety in the contemporary church which reduces its capacity to deal with the very things it is anxious about – a vicious circle. Whereas being before God in silence is the antidote to that anxiety. In silence we become connected to the "ground of all being" which in turn grounds us and develops in us, from Family Systems Theory what can be termed a "God-centred self-definition" (Rooms and Keifert, 2019: 15). Self-definition in God is what allows us to focus on God's presence and activity

and not be distracted from it by fighting or fleeing from those resisting it. And the result of that state of being is the opposite of anxiety; joy. Here we are in full agreement with the Wilder school. Two of Maitland's reflections are based around the emergence of joy during silence (2008: 62, 74) and we have already referred to Harrison's work on the subject (2022). I would add here that fun is part of, if not limited to being joyful. This has been my experience of people who are liberated from anxious church activity into having fun, finding out what God is up to and joyously taking part.

While Maitland does not specifically refer to a heightened sense of sight, we did hear of other senses being enhanced and we might extend that to seeing. We have already referred to the possibility of *visio Divina*. According to Ross this is because silence leads to *transfiguration* (rather than transformation, which she dislikes as it implies a change of being) and the subsequent "beholding" which changes our perception of reality (Ross, 2014: 98). The result of such transfiguration is a new openness and receptivity to the other which welcomes the receiving of hospitality (Keifert & Rooms, 2014: 16-19) and a reversal of the inherited one-way flow of church (Barrett, 2020).

Given its efficacy, therefore as we have demonstrated here, how might an emphasis on practicing silence and the apophatic be integrated into the life of churches? The individual and corporate seeking of silence both in private prayer by some (I don't believe this needs to be for absolutely everyone, though I would recommend it for leaders however they come to it as there are many paths) and public worship, as we have demonstrated will de-centre the "selves" of the membership over time.

At least two practical suggestions flow from this, though space limits other suggestions. Ross has created and road-tested a "contemplative Eucharist" (2018: 100-27) which can take up to four or five hours since it includes long periods of silence. This is not to be a very regular occurrence but one can see how it would create the conditions for intentional silence in weekly or even daily public worship. In fact, if a church's regular worship does not contain periods of silence longer than a few seconds, its missional engagement may be seriously lacking. That is, if a corporate body of Christians cannot hold silence together for any significant length of time they are unlikely to be able to last long on a journey to be missional. The spiritual practices that become habits in missional churches (Keifert & Rooms, 2014) contain the possibility for learning to be silent in community. Other specific, intentional groups gather for just this

purpose such as the Julian Meeting and the World Community for Christian Meditation.⁵

Further, if there are to be Christians exploring apophatic prayer they are going to need support from good spiritual directors. I referred in the introduction to my practical theology treatment of spiritual direction (Chatfield and Rooms, 2019) and, as sometimes happens when writing I realized there is a connection between the discernment that occurs in spiritual direction and the corporate discernment of the *missio Dei* in missional churches. Indeed, one might be a “fractal” or microcosm of the other – they are the same shape and only differ in scale. In fact, missional church may simply be spiritual direction scaled up (2019: 162).

CONCLUSION

I have long believed that the Christ hymn in Philippians describes the shape of Christian discipleship (e.g. Chatfield and Rooms, 2019: 72) and mission for both the individual and the church. The depths of the cross that we are called to take up in discipleship (Mark 8:34) cannot be plumbed without apophysis, without engagement with the practice of silence, without the gift of beholding which arises from within that very silence. We have to give up our anxious activity, embrace our vulnerabilities, even looking the “death” of the Church in the face, if we are to find resurrection. If we attend to God’s presence and activity, the *missio Dei* in the world in this way, waiting for the surprises that beholding bestows upon us we have a new missional future and world that we can live into and embody.

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5 See <https://thejulianmeetings.net/> and <https://wccm.org> accessed 9 November 2022.

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