

## BOOK REVIEWS

# **Benac, Dustin D. 2022. *Adaptive Church: Collaboration and Community in a Changing World***

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Reviewed by James Butler

There have been a good number of books which reflect on the changes in church seen over the last couple of decades in the development of fresh expressions, missional communities, missional church and pioneering, but few books have explored the wider networks and the enabling of these new communities and churches. This is exactly where Dustin Benac's book *Adaptive Church* focuses. Through careful and extensive qualitative research with two such "hubs" in the Pacific Northwest of the United States of America it identifies how they enable the imaginative environment for adaptive change to occur. The focus on this region, made up of the states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho, is because of its post-religious landscape. In the midst of changing social and religious commitments Benac identifies a history of religious entrepreneurship in the region and in this book he explores what this atmosphere of innovation and entrepreneurship can reveal about the future of church in the United States. He frames the organizations he looks at as ecclesial adaptations which can help churches to navigate the complex situations they find themselves in within contemporary culture.

The book is made up of four parts and each of those parts has two chapters. The first part has chapters introducing each of the organizations, which Benac refers to as "hubs"; chapter 1 looks at the Office of Church Engagement and chapter 2 introduces the Parish Collective. Part 2 looks at organizational structures with chapter 3 identifying the primary challenges facing the hubs and their developing collaborative approaches. Benac then turns to explore his idea of hubs, distinguishing them from a megachurch or denomination, and exploring the webs of connections they make. Chapter 5 opens part 3 with a practical theological account of the hub's aim of "reimagining church". He then offers a "theological redescription" of the work of these

hubs by engaging with Bonhoeffer and Luke-Acts in chapter 6. Part 4 develops the account of practical wisdom looking at the way different modes of leadership complement each other in bringing about organizational change. Chapter 7 is perhaps the most important in terms of contribution presenting an expansive typology of leadership providing a framework for churches to think about the different skills, gifts and collaboration required for adaptive change. The final chapter looks to the future of church, exploring the “possibilities beyond certainty” and the way these hubs help to sustain these possibilities.

The key word within the book is “adaptive” with Benac drawing on and developing Ronald Heifetz’ theory of adaptive change as his lens for understanding the practice of the hubs. Heifetz discusses two types of challenge: technical, where the problem is known and the obstacle is primarily resources; and adaptive, where the problem and solution are unknown, where the obstacles are often the received values and practices and where the change needed is structural and systemic. They require more imaginative responses and an ability to explore new possibilities. Benac gives the example of the question “What is God up to?” as one which invites new imaginative possibilities. In reading the hubs through this lens of adaptive challenge and change he provides a fresh way of engaging with these new churches and communities, and the ways these “hubs” can support and enable change.

I was particularly drawn to part 3 where he engages with imagination and develops a pneumatological account of church and adaptive change. He expands Dykstra’s account of ecclesial imagination showing how the practice and outlook of these hubs extend the account of ecclesial imagination to include the wider community connections made by churches across these hubs. Following this he engages with Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* and Luke-Acts to describe how church has always faced adaptive challenges and has changed. Benac describes his work as “redescription”, making implicit connections between the practice of these hubs and the theological accounts. He sees Bonhoeffer and Luke-Acts as demonstrating the kind of adaptations that are happening in these hubs. Through them he identifies the significance of the church as a theological entity and the work of the Spirit in adaptive change. He uses these sources to offer a theological rationale for the adaptive church he is calling for, a church which “creates structures for connection, belonging and possibility”. This could be helpfully developed further by drawing more fully on the theological insight from practice to push these accounts further in into developing an ecclesiology of adaptive church.

The turn to leadership in part 4 develops a “practical wisdom” for the adaptive church describing leadership in six modes of being with. In helping hubs, like the

ones in the study, to respond to adaptive challenges, this chapter is key. It provides practical ways in which the diversity of leadership can be recognized in an interconnected way. Benac's focus is on cultivating the conditions for imagination and adaptive change, and how they can take root and grow.

While I find the theological accounts in part 3 fruitful for my own thinking there is scope for integrating them more fully into the practical wisdom section of the book. I found myself asking what difference these accounts of imagination and the Spirit made to the leadership model proposed. I also would have liked an account of why leadership was the focus of the practical wisdom, particularly given that in my own experience of these kinds of churches and communities it is often lay and focused on the quite ordinary and everyday nature of faith. Perhaps this highlights the difference between the US and UK contexts and demonstrates that although there is much that is helpful in this book, there is always some work to be done to make the connection and adaptations between contexts. All that said, I found it a stimulating and enriching book, one which challenged my thinking and provided helpful concepts to explore the ecclesiology of such communities. For those looking for an ecclesiology of church drawing on these new communities, this book provides rich starting points for developing such an ecclesiology weaving together helpful ideas of adaptive change, imagination and theological redescription. For those working in the kinds of hubs, networks and organizations that are the focus of the book, the practical wisdom and conceptual frameworks developed here will provide important and enlightening ways to reflect on and develop their work. I think this book and the work of Benac more widely is making a welcome and generative contribution to the development of church in post-religious contexts in the US and Europe.

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