

## BOOK REVIEW

# **Cray, Graham. 2024. *On Mission with Jesus: Changing the Default Setting of the Church***

Norwich: Canterbury Press  
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Reviewed by Michael Herbst

What is the context of this book? Twenty years ago, the Church of England published a report entitled *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004). Unlike many other church reports, this document received significant response. By 2024 some 21,000 copies had been sold, and the reception of the missional theological theses continues to this day – not only in England, but also in mainland Europe. In essence, the report was about understanding and appropriating the missional mandate of the church anew in the face of major social changes (and thus the decline in church life), admittedly not primarily in order to stabilize the church. No “church-shaped mission” was propagated, in which one would immediately sense the church’s own interests. Rather, the church is depicted as an instrument of divine mission, sent to the people so that as many people as possible can share in the gospel.

The report’s central suggestion as to how this should be achieved seems almost counter-intuitive: Even in the decline of church life, we do not need *fewer* churches, but *more* churches, above all *new* churches, admittedly not copies of the existing local churches, but missionally vital churches that are deeply contextualized in the diverse social environments. Not one specific type, but many different types of church: for young people, in cafés, in socially deprived areas, at schools, in companies, for target groups that have been difficult to reach, not least for families who want to explore the Christian faith together. These “fresh expressions of church” should not only be tolerated, but encouraged and supported.

The working group responsible for the report was chaired by Graham Cray, then Bishop of Maidstone, and later the “Archbishop’s Missioner and Team Leader of Fresh Expressions” (2009 to 2014), i.e. the holder of a high-ranking staff position

that accompanied and promoted these new forms of Christian church formation in England. Now, 20 years after *Mission-shaped Church*, the retired Anglican theologian has published a theological foundation for the report. This book is not a practical-theological study of old and new forms of church, but a very fundamental attempt to gain a basis for a missional self-understanding of the Christian church from the Bible.

His starting point is sober: he begins by attesting to a kind of ecclesial arthritis in his church, a lack of flexibility in the face of the missional challenges it has been facing for some time (12). Its “operating system” is geared towards self-preservation and not mission. In contrast, Cray wants to remind the Church of its fundamental purpose of being an instrument of the *missio Dei*. He recalls the fundamental convictions of *missio Dei* – which has now become the mainstream of mission theology – albeit in such a way that he attests that the Church has at best understood in theory that God is a missional God who involves the Church in his work for the healing and renewal of the world and humanity (35).

This critical analysis is followed by one of the core theses of the book: At the centre of the missional challenge is the task of calling people to follow Christ and to encourage them to live as disciples in lifelong fellowship with Christ or to practise it with them. Discipleship is always lived in community with others and leads the individual directly into participation in mission. This explains the title that Graham Cray gave his book: *On Mission with Jesus*. So far, however, the topic of “discipleship” (53, with a bonmot from Dallas Willard) has been the great “omission” with regard to Jesus’ “commission”. This is fatal, because mission can be summed up as follows: “Mission is replicated discipleship” (56).

The following chapters are biblical reflections on mission: using the Acts of the Apostles, for example, Cray shows how Christ drives his mission forward through the Holy Spirit, and how he repeatedly surprises, challenges and sends the emerging Christian community beyond previously existing boundaries. It is particularly impressive how he retells the story of the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10) and portrays the Holy Spirit as the driving force behind this crossing of the boundaries of the gospel, which was surprising for all sides. It is important to him that for the first Christians, the Christologically interpreted Scriptures contextualized by the Holy Spirit (79) play a central role. This thought is stressed in the entire book: if the church wants to follow the Spirit of God and recognize and discern his actions and guidance (i.e. practise “discernment”), then it needs to engage intensively with the Bible again and again.

This is how the church takes shape: “mission-shaped”. Here, the author uses 1 Corinthians 9 (among others) to demonstrate what this means for the church to establish

itself in changing contexts and becoming accessible. For this place, the church must then follow Jesus anew and “incarnate” itself. Such incarnation is not simply adaptation, it also includes the call to repentance. And Jesus is “the given”; the church cannot let go of this. In everything else, however, it must die like the grain of wheat in John 12 in order to bear fruit. This also means renouncing one’s own traditions and preferences in order to help people in this given place to grasp and embrace the gospel. This fifth chapter in particular breathes the spirit of the Anglican movement of “fresh expressions of church”. Such “incarnated” churches could be a foretaste – no more and no less – of the Kingdom of God.

Graham Cray then takes up another biblical track by illuminating the minority status of the Christian community biblically – similar to Stefan Paas in *Pilgrims and Priests* (2019) – primarily through references to the Epistle to the Hebrews and 1 Peter. Perhaps Christians today hear this with a deeper understanding: Although the church of Jesus is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, it is often a minority and suffers opposition. Christians are pilgrims, “resident aliens” in a world alienated from God. A nice punchline is Cray’s reference to Christians being *paroikoi*, resident aliens, in 1 Peter. This is quite far removed from our understanding of *parochia* (153). However, being foreign and resistant should not lead to withdrawal from the world. With the terms “subversive engagement” and “involved distinctiveness”, Cray shows the tension under which congregations stand as minorities, as the pilgrim people of God: committed to the common good, but characterized by strikingly different values and attitudes.

Towards the end, Cray asks how the church can succeed in making Jesus “visible” in its environment and not making him “disappear” (166–7). To this end, Christians must embark on a journey towards more “Christlikeness”. According to Romans 8.29, this is our direction in life: to be transformed into the image of Christ. In this way, the bishop can once again get to the heart of his intention. He has repeatedly emphasized worship and mission as the two fixed points for the congregation formed from disciples who are “on mission” with Jesus. Now, towards the end, he makes it clear once again: “My purpose is not to demean worship compared to mission, but to relocate our primary instincts about the church from meetings (for whatever purpose) to a movement in mission” (173). And this movement will produce diverse church forms that are highly contextualized and yet share one goal: that people become disciples (179–83). Each of these churches combines a high degree of resilience (with deep roots in Christ) with an equally high degree of flexibility or agility when contexts change and the mode of how the church is on a missional journey with Jesus has to change again.

Thus Cray's reflections culminate in a practical-theological conclusion, which also explains the specific, biblical retelling style of this book: "So if the missionary Spirit is both the illuminator of Scripture and the leader of the local mission, then the attentive reading of Scripture, as a corporate discipline, is vital for the local church's participation in that mission" (191). This is then essentially part of listening, with which the specific missional approach of the "fresh expressions of church" always begins (and which is its inner centre throughout): Listening (to God and the context), serving, building community, inviting people to follow Jesus, developing a form of church appropriate for that place – and starting again from the beginning (195–6). Certain "habits" will then characterize the disciples on mission with Jesus: they will be good news bearers, boundary breakers, grateful guests and generous hosts, cross bearers, disciple makers and Jesus dwellers (199–204). The church that will emerge will be defined by its centre and not by its boundaries (210, following Paul Hiebert: a "centered set" and not a "bounded set"), because the movement of the disciples towards the centre, towards Christ, is its essential characteristic – and the church "on mission with Jesus" invites everyone to this movement.

In the long series of books on mission and the church, Graham Cray's well readable volume does not stand out for its original new insights into church development. Nor does it offer readers an academic debate with many pros and cons (and lots of footnotes). Instead, the Anglican bishop once again presents a plea worth reading for a self-critical examination of the church's and congregations' own operating system and a missional readjustment. And reading the chapters slowly and being exposed to the biblical narratives about the cross-border mission of Jesus, this rereading can transfer the dynamics of the *missio Dei* anew into the reader's own operating system.

## About the Reviewer

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