

BOOK REVIEW

Foulger, Will. 2023. Present in Every Place?: The Church of England's New Churches, and the Future of the Parish

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Reviewed by James Butler

Will Folger is an ordained priest in the Church of England and a theologian. He has been involved in church planting, has led the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research at Cranmer Hall, Durham and is currently vicar of a Church of England church. This book engages with the often polarized debates around church in the Church of England and of the significance of place. Folger proposes that if you can get past the polarization in the discussion of parish and Fresh Expressions what you actually find is a common commitment to place, although often expressed in quite different ways. Locating himself much more in the church planting and pioneering camp, he recounts his surprise at how much he agreed with the questions and critiques of the likes of Alison Milbank, Andrew Davidson, Marcus Walker and the Save the Parish movement. However, he found their proposals somewhat baffling. By exploring the debate, the common commitments and the way place is understood more broadly, he tries to distinguish between the commitment to parish and place, and the structures of parish. To do this he turns to language of vocation. He argues that if instead of defending parish in terms of the current structures and rather seeing it as a commitment to a vocation to be present in the particular place, then there actually quite a lot of common ground between those who want to “save the parish” and those committed to church planting and Fresh Expressions. I have heard Foulger described as an apologist and interpreter for church planting and Fresh Expressions, and he is clearly someone who wants to locate himself in the middle of a polarized debate, encouraging reconciliation and a renewed vocation to be present in place.

The book itself is made up of an introduction and four chapters. It begins by looking at the understanding of place, particularly the way it was disrupted and brought to the

centre of discussion by the *Mission Shaped Church* report. Foulger unpacks the way in which it was welcomed by some and rejected and criticized by others arguing that at the heart of the discussion is a concern about place. Chapter 2 seeks to develop ways to disagree better, asking what it means to be faithful tradition drawing on the work of Alisdair MacIntyre, specifically that it is not about appropriation or rejection but rather about the negotiation and debate, one might say discernment. In this way faithfulness to the parish might well be critique of the parish as it currently is, not simply needing to be more confident in it. Chapter 3 dives more clearly into the account of place, exploring place from a variety of other academic disciplines before focusing on the story of the Good Samaritan as a theological bridge into a renewed vision of vocation to place. Chapter 4 argues that proximity is not enough, and what is needed is intentionality – both from parishes and from church planting and Fresh Expressions. It is this intentional move to be present in a particular place that Foulger identifies as the difference between those who successfully engage in a place, and those who end up living in proximity to place.

The book is based on Foulger's doctoral research, although those wanting a careful account of his qualitative research, thick descriptions and thematic reflections on data will be disappointed. This appears to take that earlier work, which it refers to at various places through the book, and build on its themes and conclusions rather than engage in its nitty-gritty detail of actual churches. Given that his argument is about the particularity of place, I would have liked to have heard more of the nuances of how this plays out in particular contexts. The book, however, appears to take the broad findings and focus them in such a way to critique, develop and extend the discussions around Fresh Expressions, church planting and parish. This is a welcome development, and it is excellent to have fresh, theologically engaged reflection and critique into a somewhat entrenched subject. I agree with Foulger that the overly simplistic framing offered by some around the parish being about place, and Fresh Expressions and church planting being about networks and particular subcultures is a misleading binary, which has little reality in practice. He makes a strong case that place is actually at the heart of the commitment both to parish and to church planting and fresh expressions, and his language of vocation and the Church of England's call to be present in place is one which deserves attention. It would be great to see it seriously taken up by both sides of an, in my view unnecessarily, polarized debate, as a way of finding common ground.

Where I would like to offer a critique of Foulger is around his language of intentionality. This is a buzzword in the Church of England, the Anglican Communion and beyond at the moment, and needs some more detailed unpacking. His use of Nicholas Healy's work to justify his turn to intentionality does not do justice to Healy's

argument. While Healy wants to make the work of the Triune God central to the turn to practice, and give a clearer account of the Spirit as the one who gives Christians their intent, Foulger's use of intentionality draws him into a focus on human will and action. This move inadvertently sidelines, at least in the way it is written, the work of the Spirit. While I struggle to share Foulger's suggestion of a way forward around intention – I think a much more complex account of human participation in the work of the Spirit in mission is required – I do very much value Foulger's careful exploration of place, his distinction between presence and proximity, and his surfacing of and turn to the language of calling and vocation (which of course gives plenty of scope for an account of the triune God who is doing that calling). I therefore recommend the book, as one which is offering theological tools to move past an unhelpfully and unnecessarily polarized debate in the Church of England.

About the Reviewer

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References

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