

BOOK REVIEW

Olsworth-Peter, Ed. 2024. *Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church*

London: SPCK
ISBN: 978-0-281-08938-3

Reviewed by Jack Barentsen

For many churches and city networks, denominational structures no longer offer the life-sustaining support necessary for congregational vitality. Instead, churches and their leaders find themselves in an increasingly complex world of churches, communities, organizations and networks. This comprises different denominational churches, different forms and styles of church, various forms of chaplaincy, and Christian activism. The ecosystem has changed.

Olsworth-Peter guides us in a practical overview of this new ecosystem, visualizing it with a dozen or more helpful graphs. Tellingly, the author was ordained in the Anglican church precisely in 2004, the year of this church's famous *Mission-Shaped Church* report. Thus, he started his ministry journey at a time when traditional forms of church were already under stress, and widespread experiments started with what was at first called "Fresh Expressions" and has since blossomed into a wide variety of initiatives. His book presents a living picture of what is now called a "mixed ecology of church".

The term "ecology" denotes natural systems of symbiosis, and has become a metaphor for other worlds. The introduction reflects on the two piers of Brighton, the one rusting away with rarely a special occasion, the other flourishing with shops, entertainment and tourism. Neither pier fulfils its original purpose in the fishing and shipping industries, but each has adapted more or less successfully to the ever changing ecosystem, where connectivity is the key to life and flourishing.

In five chapters, Olsworth-Peter extends this metaphor to church contexts. The first chapter explores the "why" of a mixed ecology. Earlier metaphors were more functional, "blended church" and "mixed economy", while "mixed ecology" points to a diversity of life forms, where the key is connectivity and exchange of nutrients and protection. An ecosystem supports many species that could not survive without it.

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the growth of these ecclesial ecosystems. Already the early church manifested such an ecology, with liminal communities, simple structures and adaptive leadership. This parallels contemporary developments, with new forms of church appearing next to traditional forms. Hence, Olsworth-Peter distinguishes between church planting as attractional, and pioneering as contextual. He works out a theological basis with five guest authors, and consists of five themes: reconciliation, community, difference, creation and self-giving.

The co-existence of all these forms, communities and organizations is the topic of Chapter 2. An ecosystem houses producers and consumers. There is biodiversity and interdependence to maintain balance, absorb waste and nourish life. Participating in a mixed ecology is like a journey, which the author describes in six phases: noticing the other, offering oneself, gathering with others, seriously connecting, collaborating and co-creating.

Although this journey is easily depicted as a continuing cycle, different inhabitants of an ecosystem are at different points in their journey and move at different speeds. The author describes various patterns of collaboration and co-creation, each featuring its own network within the larger ecosystem.

Chapter 3 then outlines what it takes to inhabit a mixed ecology, distinguishing seven sacred spaces or “habitats” that help understand how churches relate to their environment: cell, chapel, chapter, cloister, garden, refectory and library – words that are perhaps familiar in an Anglican context, but may need more explanation for other contexts. This picture of inhabiting is further elaborated by analysing different starting points (incomer or citizen) and dwelling patterns (resident or commuter), and different postures (abiding, innovating, enabling). Each step is graphically illustrated, which is helpful when using the book as a practical handbook, but might otherwise be quite overwhelming.

Chapter 3 continues with the practice of enabling other leaders as a vital quality of ministry. Such leaders develop an attitude of openness and awareness within themselves and in others, creating spaces to collaborate with potential and emerging leaders. This practice, Olsworth-Peter believes, facilitates a move from “multi-church” to “inter-church” where entitlement and power are replaced by “humility, sacrifice, grace, and so forth” (101).

Leading a mixed ecology then becomes the focus of Chapter 4. The typical questions of leadership are explored, why (goals), what (forms), how (methods), and where (places) – but now with elements from the above descriptions of mixed ecology. This produces the recognition that there are many leadership charisms for a mixed ecology. Familiar ones are the parish priest, lay pioneer, and contextual chaplain. Others include the founding starter, community entrepreneur, advocate and innovator.

This results in a mixed ecology of leadership, which in turn requires reflection on the structures and focus of ministry training, which Olsworth-Peter himself worked with in various training sessions. The ultimate goal is a sense of co-creative leadership, combining duplication and collaboration to see growth.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on how to shape a mixed ecology, interpreting the needs of the ecosystem in terms of vision: how to cast it, support it, embed it, implement it, and how to nourish and protect it.

Every chapter includes “talking points” along the way and “discussion questions” at the end. The book presents itself as an explorative and practical handbook of mixed ecologies of church. Such ecclesial ecosystems can be mutually enriching with good levels of biodiversity and a variety of leaders. The author shares his rich experience in coaching, educating and training with a broader audience. Much of this ecosystem seems to take place with the institutional support, the larger umbrella of the Church of England, although it is broader. Yet, that kind of denominational support is surely helpful to nourish and shape these ecologies.

This represents a significant challenge for many churches and city networks across Europe, where often there is no single denominational system that is capable of providing this umbrella. This will require churches, workers and visionaries of many kinds to move away from competitive to more collaborative modes of serving our cities. It requires a generous ecumenism where we move beyond tolerating each other, or cooperating pragmatically, to acknowledging God’s work through the Spirit in the other – the other who is recognized as gift to ourselves (and we to them), to learn and grow into greater Christlikeness as we serve our cities.

About the Reviewer

Jack Barentsen, Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology (specialization: religious leadership), Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium; Institute of Leadership and Social Ethics. Contact: jack.barentsen@etf.edu