

## BOOK REVIEW

# **Paul Bradbury, Isabelle Hamley and Andy Smith (eds). 2025. *Being the People of God. Missional Ecclesiology for Uncertain Times***

London: SCM Press  
ISBN: 9780334066422

Reviewed by Patrick Todjeras

*Being the People of God* is an ambitious and wide-ranging edited volume that seeks to reimagine Anglican identity, mission, and ecclesiology for a rapidly changing post-Christendom landscape. Emerging out of ongoing work within the Church of England to articulate a renewed theological vision for worship, witness, and pilgrimage, the book gathers theologians, bishops, parish practitioners, and pioneers. The result is not a single thesis but a textured mosaic – a multilayered attempt to describe what it means for the Church to inhabit its vocation amidst cultural flux, institutional fragility, and surprising signs of life.

## **The Vision and Structure of the Book**

The editors organize the volume around three interlocking identities of the Church: Being Worship, Being Witness, and Being Pilgrim. This triadic structure is already the first signal of the book's theological ecology: church life is not reducible to gathered worship or to social engagement or to individual spirituality. Rather, these dimensions belong together in a dynamic relationship that mirrors the Trinitarian movement of gathering, sending, and accompanying.

Each of the three major parts blends theological essays with empirical "On the Ground" case studies, creating a rhythm of conceptual reflection and contextual embodiment. This combination is one of the book's primary strengths: the reader is not left with abstractions but encounters real parishes, church plants, estates ministry, cathedral life, ecological conversion projects, and the stories of Iranian Christian migrants navigating identity and belonging.

Part I, "Being Worship", explores worship not as a liturgical technique but as the primary way the Church is caught up into God's life. Several chapters

highlight worship's formative power: disciples are not primarily produced through programmes but through a community shaped by doxology, Eucharist, and mutual interdependence.

A particularly striking chapter is "The Tender-hearted Community – Why Inclusion Means Interdependence", which reframes inclusion beyond diversity management toward a theological anthropology of shared vulnerability. Worship becomes the school of a community in which all members – disabled, neurodivergent, elderly, young – contribute to the church's doxological wholeness.

The case studies ("Being Worship in the Parish"; "Life, Death and Resurrection in Church Planting") ground this vision in everyday ecclesial practice. They illustrate how worshipping communities wrestle with decline, experimentation, and the ambiguities of renewal. The theological claim implicit here is notable: worship is not an escape from reality but the heart of Christian resilience.

Part II, "Being Witness", shifts the focus to mission in a late-modern, increasingly fragmented, and globalized society. A chapter on "Being Witness at the End of Modernity" is central: it argues that the inherited paradigms of the English parish system – geographically fixed, culturally assumed, institutionally stable – are no longer adequate. Instead, mission now unfolds amid mobility, multicultural cities, and the diminishing plausibility of Christianity.

Two themes stand out:

- Mission in a global city highlights the complex identities and migrations shaping London and other urban centers. The chapter recognizes that the Church of England is no longer a monocultural institution but part of a polycentric Christian landscape, increasingly influenced by diaspora communities.
- "Being Witness to the Edges" attends to socio-economic marginalization and estate ministry. The authors resist romanticizing "the edges", instead giving voice to the profound challenges of trauma, poverty, and community fragility.

Again, "On the Ground" case studies enrich this section: ecological conversion ("Awakening from Earth Amnesia"), pioneering on outer estates, and navigating contextual mission in shifting landscapes. These contributions remind the reader that witness is less a strategy than a posture of presence, attentiveness, and long obedience.

The third movement, "Being Pilgrim", introduces a spiritual and eschatological lens. To speak of the church as "pilgrim" is to situate Christian life within uncertainty and hope. Several chapters stand out:

- "Being Pilgrim in the Cathedral" explores how ancient spaces can become sites of hospitality for seekers and tourists, without reducing worship to cultural consumption.

- “Being Pilgrim in the Shadow of Empire” engages critically with the Church of England’s entanglement in colonial histories, calling for postcolonial repentance, truth-telling, and the reshaping of ecclesial practices.
- “Being Pilgrim into the Unknown” articulates an ecclesiology of uncertainty – a deeply honest recognition that institutional trajectories are unpredictable, and that faithfulness may require relinquishment.

The closing case studies (including the journey of Iranian Christian converts) are powerful reminders that pilgrimage is not only metaphorical. Many Christians in the UK now live literal pilgrim identities marked by migration, displacement, and vulnerability. Their presence challenges the majority church to rethink belonging and the hospitality of the people of God.

For readers of *Ecclesial Futures*, this book offers significant contributions:

- A narrative ecclesiology: The book resists abstract systematization. Instead, it allows ecclesial identity to emerge from lived stories, contextual experiments, and theological reflection. This fits well with the journal’s interest in practical-theological futures rather than idealized blueprints.
- By combining scholarly essays and practitioner narratives, the volume mirrors the complexity of missional leadership today.
- The book assumes – rightly – that the Church of England is no longer culturally centred. Its proposals stem from a minority-aware, missionary posture rather than nostalgia for institutional privilege.
- The inclusion of estate ministry, ecological conversion, and migrant Christian stories situates the future church not in strategies but in honest encounters with contemporary social realities.
- The book’s ecclesiology is marked by modesty: the church is on a journey, not in control of its future. This resonates with emerging research on ecclesial improvisation, learning communities, and adaptive ministry.

No edited volume can do everything, and several limitations are worth noting. While rich in narrative insight, some case studies would benefit from clearer research method descriptions (sampling, data collection, and limits). The volume is deeply rooted in Church of England structures. This provides depth but limits broader ecumenical applicability, especially in global South contexts. Given the post-pandemic shifts in ecclesial life, digital mission and hybrid belonging receive little attention. The diversity of contributors is a strength, but readers may wish for a more tightly woven theological integration in the concluding sections.

*Being the People of God* is a thoughtful, theologically substantial, and pastorally honest contribution to contemporary Anglican ecclesiology and missiology. It neither denies the fragility of current church life nor succumbs to despair. Instead, it offers

a hopeful, grounded, and often moving exploration of what it means to worship, witness, and walk as God's people in a liminal age.

For practitioners, the case studies will spark imagination. For scholars, the theological reflections offer fertile ground for further research. For the wider missional conversation, the volume exemplifies a church seeking not to preserve an institution but to rediscover its vocation.

## About the Reviewer

Patrick Todjeras is Director of the Institute for the Research on Mission and Church in Austria. Contact: [patrick.todjeras@i-m-k.org](mailto:patrick.todjeras@i-m-k.org).